A NOTE ON BABUR’S LOST FUNERARY ENCLOSURE AT KABUL

Although mausolea form an important part of Islamic architecture, there is a tradition in Islam that it is better to be buried under the open sky. This does not necessarily mean that the tomb has to be accessible to everyone, however; even in the rural areas of Sind or Baluchistan, tombs can be found secluded and protected by primitive walls, piled up cobblestones, or even heaps of thorny branches. And, of course, enclosures may also be made from brick or cut stone and provided with a gate and mihrab.

Babur, the founder of the Mughal Empire, was buried in a tomb under the open sky surrounded by a funerary enclosure in the Bagh-e Babur near Kabul. This kind of burial, however, was rather unusual for a great ruler. According to tradition it was Babur’s own wish to be buried in this fashion, and certainly this kind of burial suited Babur’s personality, for he had loved the open air and the gardens of Kabul. Babur’s burial at Kabul had also taken place at a difficult time, when the construction of a great mausoleum would have been out of question for political and practical reasons.

But apart from these explanations of Babur’s burial, we still have to study Babur’s tomb and funerary enclosure in the context of Islamic art history. Since the enclosure itself has not survived, we have to rely for this purpose on a small print (6.5 x 8 cm) of a sketch, drawn by Charles Masson in 1832 and published in a book on his travels in 1842 (fig. 1). On this sketch one side of the building is depicted as having a screen raised on a plinth with arched openings filled in with grillwork; the arches are crowned by a floral motif, and rosettes are inserted into the squinches. The arched openings are framed by vertical and horizontal ornamental stripes. In the middle of the screened wall is a gate slightly higher than the wall. It is closed by a double-winged door, one wing of which is broken, thus permitting a glance into the inside, where ornaments similar to those outside are visible. There seems to be an inscription in the upper part of the frame of the gate, and on the right-hand side some remnants of a decorative parapet are visible on top of the wall. The building, although obviously in a poor state of preservation, reveals fine workmanship in stone carving: high walls with lavish jali-work and relief decoration.

Given the fact that the enclosure no longer exists, and we are able neither to enter nor walk around it, how much more information can we possibly obtain from this sketch? Is it possible to derive the design of Babur’s enclosure, extrapolating from any model or any tradition in design which is known to us? Has this enclosure had any impact on other buildings in Islamic architecture, and if so, in what way?

First, we may sum up the facts known to us. Babur is buried on the fourteenth terrace of a garden called Bagh-e Babur on the slope of the Sher-darwaza mountain, southwest of Kabul. The enclosure, which still surrounded his tomb in 1832, when Charles Masson visited the place, no longer exists, though some remnants of it were seen in the garden and in the Kabul Museum in 1972.

According to the sources, Babur died in 1530, and was first buried at Agra. He was still in there in 1539, but shortly afterwards his mortal remains must have been transferred to Kabul, where he was already buried by 1544.

In 1607, Emperor Jahangir paid a visit to Kabul. There he ordered some calligraphic inscriptions to be added to Babur’s tomb as well as to the tombs of Babur’s son Mirza Hindal and grandson Muhammad Hakim, both of whom were buried near him. Jahangir was accompanied on this visit by Ruqaya Sultana Begum, his aunt, who had come to visit the tomb of her father, Mirza Hindal. When, in 1626, Ruqaya Sultana Begum died in her turn, she was buried on the fourteenth terrace of the Bagh-e Babur, and Jahangir ordered a platform (chabutra) to be built there.

Shah Jahan, who visited Kabul for the first time after his accession to the throne in 1639, ordered the tomb of Ruqaya Sultana Begum, who was his great-aunt and had brought him up, to be surrounded by a marble screen. He also ordered a mosque to be built in front of Babur’s tomb, on the thirteenth terrace of the garden, which was completed in 1646, when Shah Jahan visited...
Kabul for the second time. There is no evidence in the sources available that any work was done on Babur’s tomb itself during the reign of Shah Jahan.

In 1832, Masson has written of Babur’s tomb:

The tomb of the great monarch is accompanied by many monuments of similar nature, commemorative of his relatives, and they are surrounded by an enclosure of white marble, curiously and elegantly carved. A few arghawan-trees, in the early spring putting forth their splendid red blossoms, flourish, as it were, negligently, about the structure. The tombs, for the truth must be told, are the objects of least attention in these degenerate days. No person superintends them, and great liberty has been taken with the stones employed in the enclosing walls.

It is only from this text and from the appended sketch (fig. 1) that we know about the enclosure that once surrounded Babur’s tomb. In 1842, a severe earthquake hit Kabul and caused considerable damage in the Bagh-e Babur.

In 1923–24 Bogdanov stated that the tombs of Mirza Hindal and Muhammad Hakim (and the tomb of a child) were situated on the east side of Babur’s tomb, and that the tombs of the three adults had stelae at their heads with the inscriptions ordered by Jahangir carved upon them. However, Bogdanov did not mention the enclosure described by Masson. Obviously, it no longer existed; probably it had been destroyed by the earthquake.

From the fact that Shah Jahan had ordered a screen to be built around Ruqaya Sultana Begum’s tomb, but not around Babur’s, we may conclude that, at the time of Shah Jahan’s visits, Babur’s tomb had already been provided with a screen or an enclosure. It seems reasonable to assume that this enclosure had been built at the time of Babur’s burial at Kabul.

Fig. 1. Charles Masson. Sketch of the tomb of Emperor Babur (enlarged). (Photo: from Charles Masson, Narrative of Various Journeys [London, 1842], 2: 328)