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THE LOTUS GARDEN PALACE OF ZAHIR AL-DIN MUHAMMAD BABUR

That place is at the end of a beaked hill, its beak being of solid red building stone. I had ordered the hill cut down to the ground-level and that if there remained a sufficient height, a house was to be cut out in it, if not, it was to be levelled and a tank cut out in its top. As it was not found high enough for a house, Ustad Shah Muhammad the stone-cutter was ordered to level it and cut out an octagonal, roofed tank. North of this tank the ground is thick with trees, mangoes, *jaman*, all sorts of trees; amongst them I had ordered a well made, 10 by 10; it was almost ready; its water goes to the afore-named tank. To the north of this tank Sl. Sikandar's dam is flung across; on it houses have been built, and above it the waters of the Rains gather into a great lake. On the east of this lake is a garden; I ordered a seat and four-pillared platform to be cut out in the solid rock on that same side, and a mosque built on the western one.¹

Intrigued by this passage in the *Babur-Nama*, in 1978 I searched for and located the site and remains of Babur's Lotus Garden. It turned out to be the most extensive example of his architecture known to survive. It had been considered lost; the last known reference to it was written about 1587 by Gul-Badan in the *Humayun-Nama*.² In January 1985 and again in 1986, I undertook the documentation of the site for the Archaeological Survey of India.³ It is beyond the scope of this paper to describe in detail the roughly twenty-three acres included in the documentation.⁴ The following is confined to the Lotus Garden palace and its influence on Mughal palace design with introductory comments on Babur's gardens in general.⁵

Babur is credited with introducing into India the paradise garden traditionally used by the Timurids as elegant camping grounds.⁶ Not merely settings for occasional enjoyment, gardens were Babur's preferred residence just as they were for his ancestor Timur (Tamerlane, 1336-1405). The Timurids' inclination for fighting was equaled by their enthusiasm for building, and during the century following Timur's death the forms and ornamentation of their architecture became ever more refined. The exuberantly tiled, glittering

cities of Samarqand and Herat with their green belts of great baghs were Babur's architectural ideal. Several of Timur's residential gardens in Samarqand were described by Ruy de Gonzales de Clavijo, the Spanish ambassador to Timur's court.⁷ Large enclosures with fragrant fourfold gardens, coursing water and brimming pools, plantations of trees with colorful pavilions scattered throughout became a Timurid tradition. Fruit trees were planted in profusion, and Donald Wilber, who has written with such authority and insight on Persian gardens, relates these Timurid enclosures to the Persian *bustan*, or orchard.⁸

In 1506, Babur spent forty days visiting his royal relatives in Herat shortly after the death of Sultan Husain Baiqara (1468-1506) who had presided over the city's golden era of prosperity and artistic achievement. At the time Babur was only twenty-three years old, but he had already lost his inherited throne in Fergana, won and lost Samarqand twice, and ruled in Kabul for two years. He was somewhat intimidated by the way of life he found there and disapproved of the morals, but he was a dutiful tourist. "Every day of the time I was in Herat I rode out to see a new sight";⁹ all were listed, but not described, in his journal. Fortunately, we can visualize what he saw from Terry Allen's thorough documentation and catalogue of Timurid Herat, which imparts a rare sense of place.¹⁰

The palace where Babur was lodged was set in a park in what was considered the most splendid quarter, with several magnificent ensembles of religious establishments. However, Sultan Husain's own Bagh-i Jahan Ara evidently had more influence on Babur. Allen regards Sultan Husain's "dispensing with the association of ruler's residence with the ruler's madrassah and khanaqah" as a break from Timurid architectural development in Herat.¹¹ Sultan Husain's model, close to the Samarqand original, was followed by Babur; he included a chapel mosque in his Lotus Garden and mentions similar mosques in other gardens



1. Former Timurid pavilion, showing watercourse passing through the building.

now lost, but he did not include a variety of religious buildings in his gardens.

Variations of Timurid baghs became Babur's main architectural interest and endeavor; he never undertook a major urban development. He did not build a new city at Kabul; he repaired, maintained, and somewhat enlarged the existing citadel and authorized the construction of a congregational mosque and repairs to public buildings, baths, a caravanserai, and dams. It was left to the later Mughals with their greater resources to revert to the Timurid practice of creating splendid new urban centers.

It was not simply a shortage of funds that directed Babur's creative energies toward gardens, however, but his character and interests as well. He was drawn to the natural world; his observations and descriptions of plant life and animals are far more detailed and

original than his comments on architecture. Much of his life was spent in the open on military campaigns living intimately with nature. Few of his Afghan gardens had any buildings. Like a nomadic encampment, when shelter was needed a colorful awning or tent could quickly be raised.

Most of Babur's Afghan gardens were dramatically located on hillsides with a sweeping view of a valley.¹² His genius for site selection was matched by his spatial sense; his gardens were steeply terraced with a strong central axis. Although Kabul's mountains provided endless possibilities for gardens, he was restricted to a palace for the severe winter months.

If he was disappointed by the flat terrain near Agra, the climate of Hindustan compensated for the lack of adequate garden sites by permitting him to live permanently in his gardens. A soldier first—and always—