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Background

Kabul, where Emperor Babur ruled for nineteen years, remained dear to him even after he established the Mughal dynasty in Hindustan. Babur was buried in Agra, but it was possibly his son, Humayun, who returned his body to Kabul while he was retreating from India after being defeated by Sher Shah Sur. He wanted to bury his father under “the open Kabul sky,” in his favourite garden, as Babur had desired.

Bagh-e Babur was only one of several gardens created by Babur and his successors, especially his great-grandson Jahangir, in the Kabul region. Yet it is the only one that has survived, due to the significance attached to the Tomb and Garden of the founder of the Mughal dynasty. Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan all made frequent visits and additions to the Garden. Jahangir added a platform to the south of the grave enclosure as well as a headstone, while Shah Jahan commissioned a mosque located west of the grave enclosure.

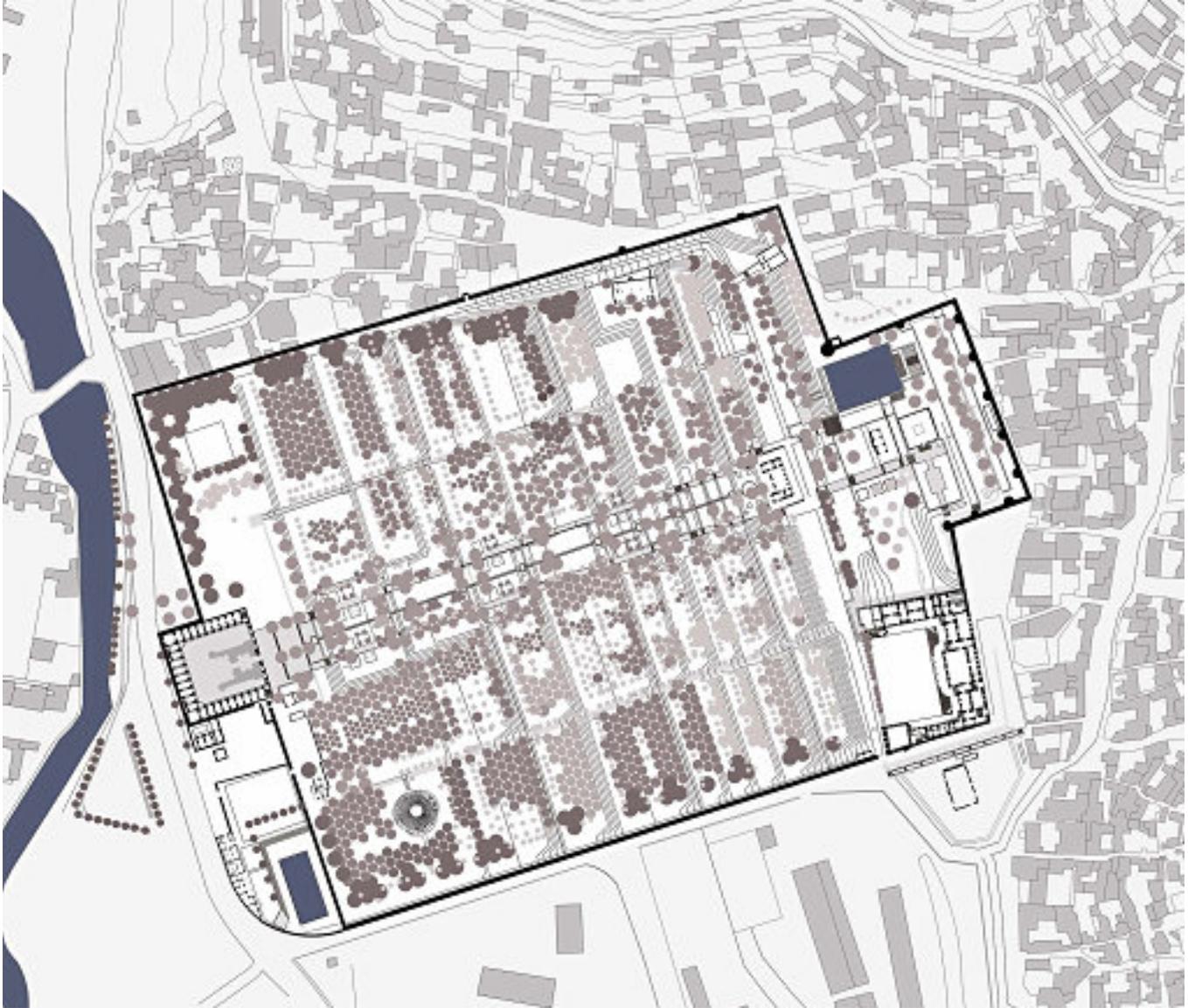
By the nineteenth century, with the end of the Mughal dynasty, the Garden had gone into decline, and for almost two centuries, with all traces of the marble grave enclosure having disappeared, scholars referred to the area as the “lost tomb of Mughal emperor Babur”.

The only visual documentation of this period is an 1832 camera lucida image shot by the famed traveller Charles Masson. Mid nineteenth-century photographs, such as one by Burke taken in 1879, show only fragments of the marble grave enclosure scattered in the vicinity of Babur’s Grave. For, as Masson had already noted: “...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...”¹ Having collected over 80,000 objects for the British East India Company, it is



2

- [1] Babur’s Grave once again stands within a marble enclosure “under the open Kabul sky” as the emperor had desired.
- [2] Original stone fragments of all the elements used in the marble enclosure were discovered during restoration work, including three from the arched gateways and one from the lattice screen.



3

 100 m

quite possible that Masson also helped himself to some of the marble fragments, such as the lattice screens – as he notes that others had done.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Afghan royals made several additions and alterations to Bagh-e Babur, which eventually became a municipal park, open to the public. During this period several additions were made to the area of Babur's Grave and these ranged from a 17.6-square-metre nineteenth-century arcaded masonry enclosure, to a twentieth-century concrete pavilion with a pan-tiled roof above a concrete slab.

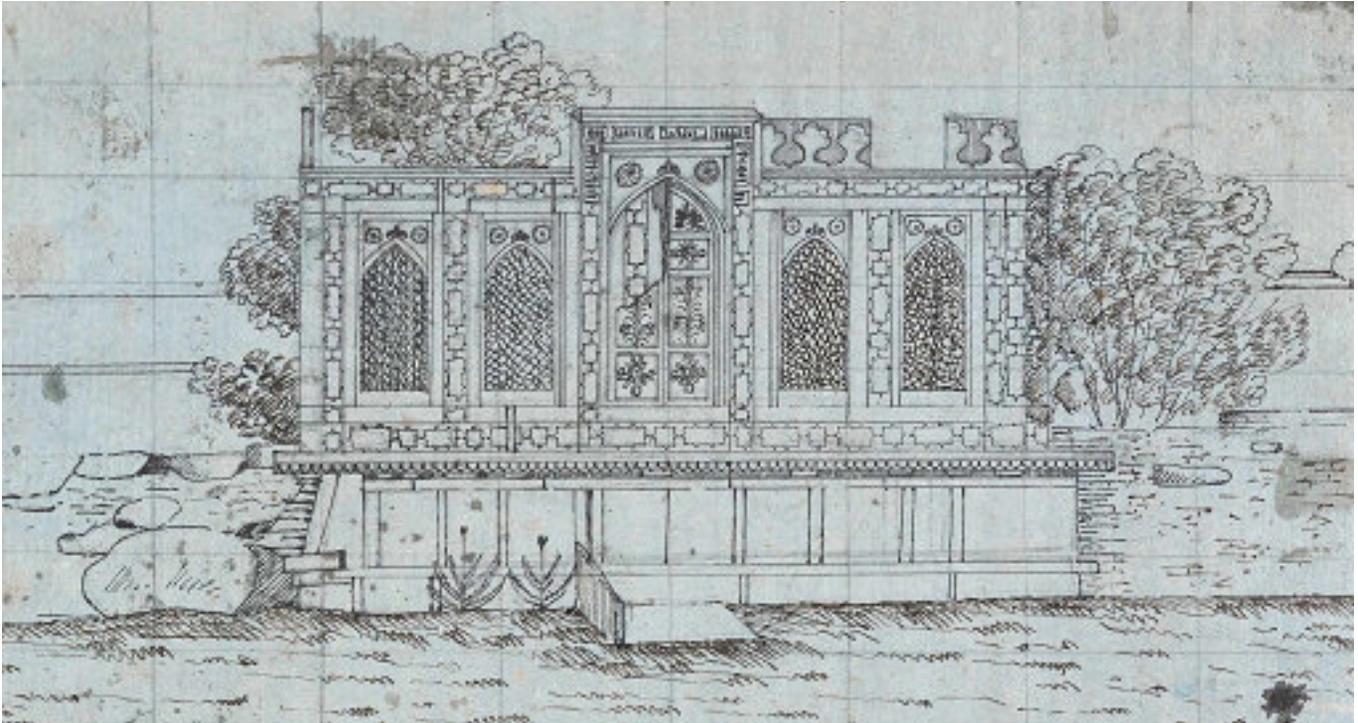
In 2002, when the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) initiated the Bagh-e Babur restoration, the emperor's grave stood covered by this concrete pavilion, then in ruinous conditions and requiring dismantlement. The terrace on which the grave enclosure stood was levelled with earth from the adjacent swimming pool.

Following the study of archival material, including the original Masson camera lucida image, sourced from the British

Library, three years of persistent surface archaeology in the Garden led to the discovery of twenty-four stone elements from the "lost tomb of Emperor Babur". These had been reused in paving for the Shah Jahan Mosque, in the foundations of a twentieth-century toilet built in the courtyard of the Queen's Palace, and embedded in retaining walls.

Fortunately, at least one portion of all the architectural elements used in the original grave enclosure was discovered: pieces from three entrance gateways; several parts of the *kangura* parapet; one piece of the moulding below the parapet; one segment of the elongated arches seen in the Masson image on either side of the entrance arch; several sections of the ornamental band with geometric patterns that framed the arches; and even a fragment of the lattice screen.

A study of the fragments revealed the accuracy of Masson's image as well as poor craftsmanship when compared with fragments from the grave enclosure of Ruqaiya Sultana Begum – commissioned by Emperor Shah Jahan. The poor craftsmanship



4

may have been the result of the limited time available to Humayun to allow his father a burial in keeping with his desires, as he fled to exile in Persia.

Conservation

With the discovery of the original camera lucida image, other archival material and twenty-four stone fragments from the original construction, the architectural details of the grave enclosure became clear to the AKTC project team. With the original Mughal designs now understood, and the realization that Babur's Grave enclosure was one of the most significant elements in the Garden, and possibly the reason for its survival over five centuries, the conservation effort aimed to restore the historic character of the grave precinct and dignity to the grave. It was agreed that the proposed reconstruction of the marble enclosure would capture the spirit of the original design without damaging what had survived below ground of the original and subsequent interventions.

With the available evidence, the 1832 camera lucida image and the results of surface archaeology, a strong case could be made to reconstruct the marble enclosure. The reconstruction, based on scientific evidence, would also reveal the cultural significance of Bagh-e Babur as a whole, while restoring the relationship between the emperor's grave, sitting at the high end of the Garden, and the rest of the Garden and later buildings. In

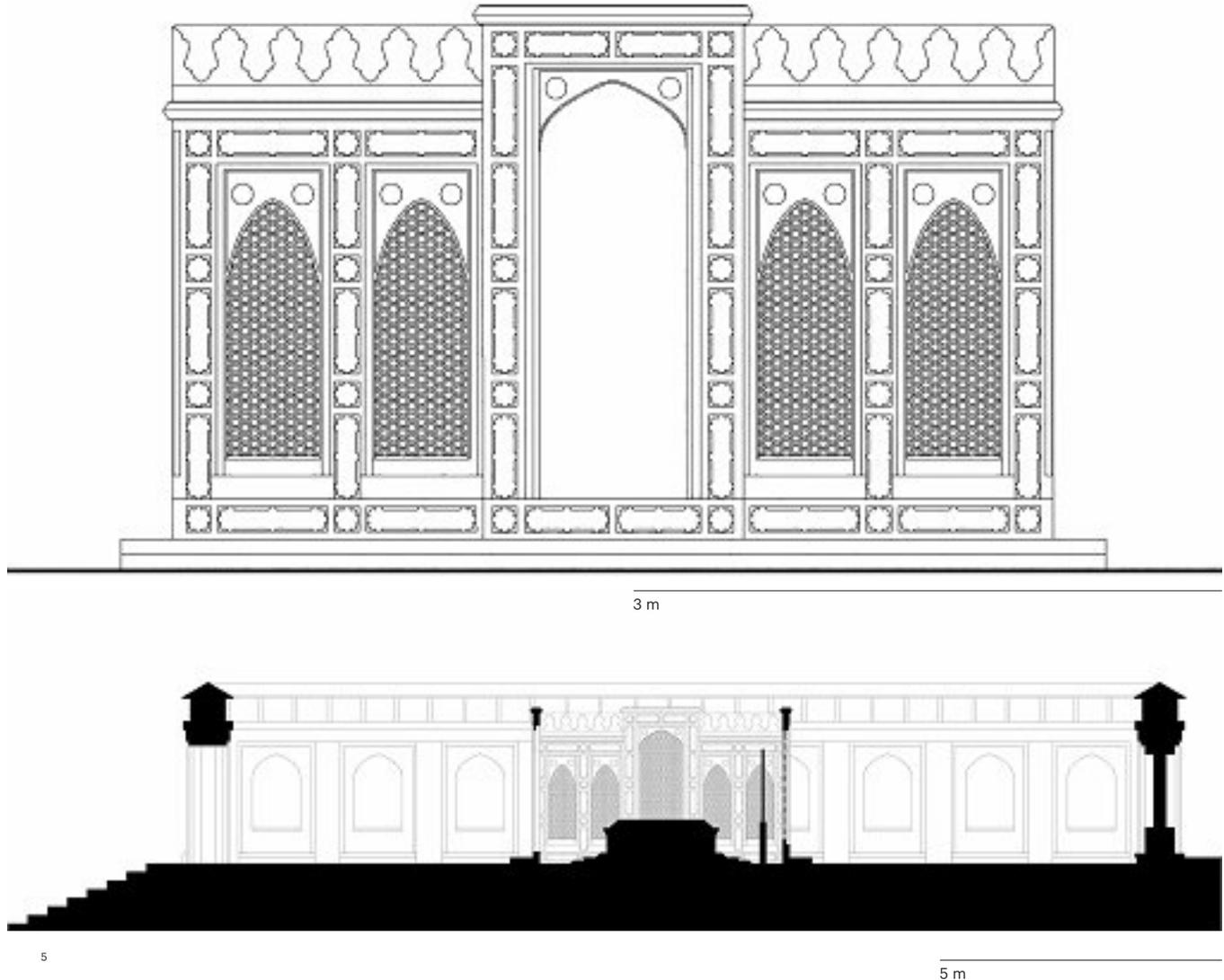
keeping with accepted international practice, the reconstruction is legible as 'new work' and clearly a major enhancement of the site. It was decided to display the twenty-four original stone elements, of great historical value, in the protected environment of the site museum.

The reconstruction proposal was peer reviewed and Sir Bernard Fielden, Director Emeritus of ICCROM, commented: "...[AKTC] outlines a major conservation project with great clarity. I hope the execution goes well and you get the support of the local stakeholders".² Professor Michael Petzet, the President of ICOMOS, further commented: "Babur's grave was a problem which from my point of view was hardly solvable. Thus I am really happy that you succeed in offering a possible solution with the reconstruction of the marble enclosure based on [the image of] Charles Masson and the discovered stone fragments – a solution which corresponds to the original spirit of the place and also protects the sanctity of the historical burial place. Consequently I can only agree with Sir Bernard's enthusiastic remarks on your proposals for Babur's grave precinct."³

Following the peer review and approval of the Afghan government's Department of Archaeology, the reconstruction commenced with the acquisition of marble from Shah Jahan's favoured quarries of Makrana in Rajasthan, India. It was agreed that this twenty-first-century grave enclosure would be carved by master craftsmen using traditional tools, building skills and

[3] Bagh-e Babur lies nestled on a hilly outcrop. Access is from the riverside, with Babur's Grave located on the upper terraces.

[4] In 1832 British traveller Charles Masson took a camera lucida image of the marble enclosure. A comparison of this with the fragments discovered revealed it to be very accurate.



contemporary craft traditions, allowing the ornamental motifs to be of high quality.

Architectural models – typically used by Indian craftsmen for centuries – were provided, as were 1:1 scale drawings to allow the craftsmen to take measurements. Each element was carved separately in Delhi, after which Afghan and Indian craftsmen worked together to erect the enclosure. In addition to traditional stone joints, stainless-steel clamps were used to fix the stones to one another.

Together with the marble enclosure and its southern marble platform, the 17.6-square-metre arcaded masonry enclosure was also rebuilt on its original foundations, respecting later additions as well as providing a layer of protection to the comparatively delicate marble screen enclosure. The southern half of the

terrace was also lowered to original levels, thus restoring the difference in grade of the immediate setting.

Babur's gravestone, seen in archival images to be a simple marble block but replaced in the twentieth century with an ornamental composition of a variety of marble tiles and onyx, was, however, left as found, in keeping with Professor Petzet's suggestion.

Similar documentation, archaeology and archival research were used as the basis for the reconstruction of Bagh-e Babur's 'central axis' on the Landscape Plan prepared by Mohammad Shaheer. The central axis had similarly been lost in twentieth-century alterations and further damaged during the prolonged war that Kabul has witnessed.

Babur, once again lies under the open Kabul sky, to which he returned only in death.

- [5] The marble enclosure now stands within a reconstruction of the 19th-century arcaded masonry enclosure – built on its original foundations. It is accessed by steps from the terrace that has been lowered to its original levels.
- [6] The marble enclosure reconstructed on the basis of archival and material evidence restores the dignity of Babur's Grave and respects the original intention of the Mughal builders for this most significant element in the Garden.

Endnotes

- 1 Charles Masson, *Narrative of Various Journeys in Balochistan, Afghanistan and the Punjab from 1826–39*, Bentley, London, 1842.
- 2 Sir Bernard Fielden, Director Emeritus, ICCROM, e-mail to the author, 7 September 2004.
- 3 Professor Michael Petzet, President of ICOMOS, e-mail to the author, 20 September 2004.

