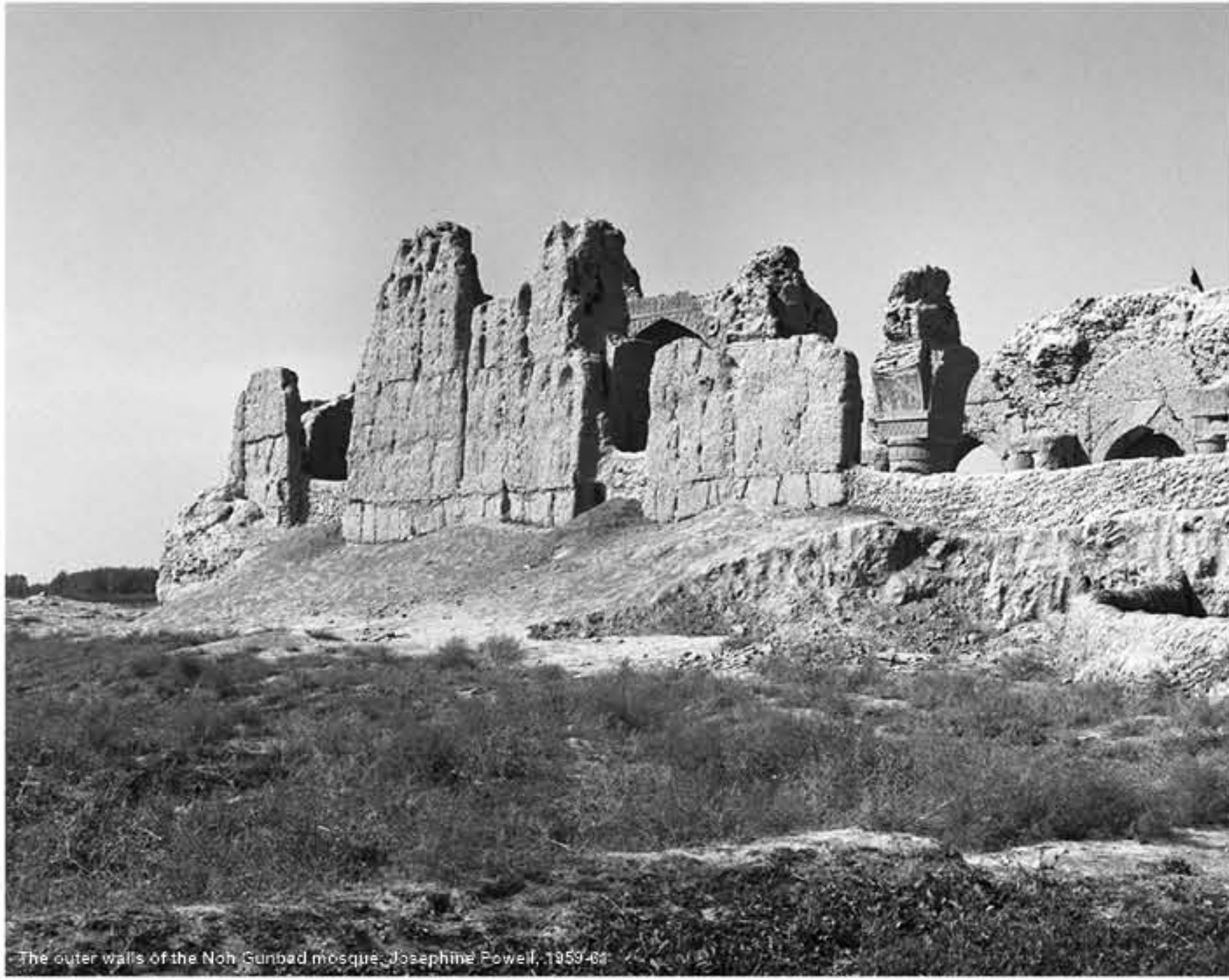




NOH GUNBAD MOSQUE, BALKH: HISTORIC BACKGROUND



The outer walls of the Noh Gunbad mosque, Josephine Powell, 1959-61



The Noh Gunbad is believed to have been built in the late 8th / early 9th centuries, Josephine Powell, 1959-61

HISTORY & CHARACTERISTICS

The Noh Gunbad Mosque is believed by many historians and archaeologists to be one of the earliest standing Islamic-era religious structures in Afghanistan, and possibly in the wider region. While scholarly opinions differ on the exact date of construction, there is general consensus that the mosque was built during the Abbasid era, between the late 8th and early 9th centuries. Historian Lisa Golombek, who wrote an article on the mosque in 1969, is widely credited with making the monument known to the outside world.

Located approximately 4 kilometres south of the centre of the Old Town of Balkh, the mosque and its remaining stucco decoration is a highly important and exquisite example of early Islamic-era architecture. Measuring approximately 20 by 20 metres in plan, the square mosque is located on a flat site near a large, shallow water reservoir flanked by a number of mature plane trees. The name Noh Gunbad (nine domes) is derived from the number of masonry domes that once covered the mosque. Significantly, the internal walls, columns and arches are decorated with exquisite stucco motifs, including well-articulated geometric and floral patterns that bear resemblance to contemporary buildings in Samarra, Iraq, which was the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate in the 9th century. Originally resting on sixteen columns - of which six were free-standing and the remaining embedded within outer enclosure walls - all of its nine decorated domes have since collapsed, covering the original floor with rubble containing important remains of plaster decoration.

Other remains of this 1,200-year-old mosque include large sections of the outer enclosure walls, within which three of the four free-standing circular columns, measuring approximately 1.5 metres in diameter, are connected by two perpendicular arches spanning more than 4 metres. The building was exposed to the elements for centuries, resulting in severe erosion of the structure and damage to the fine stucco decoration. It was not until 1972 that a large protective metal hanger was erected above the site.

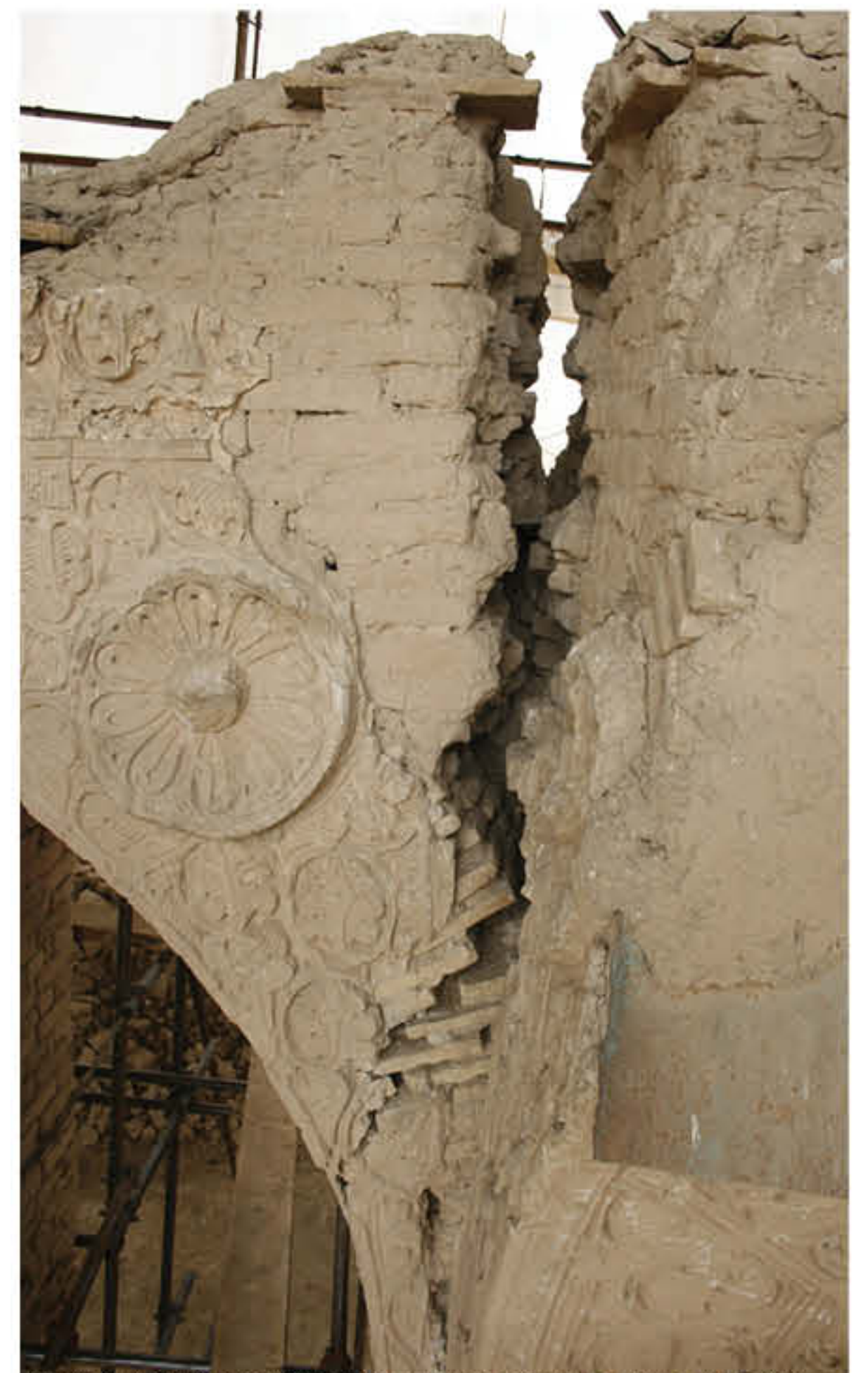
The building is known locally as the Mosque of Hajj-e Pyada, named after a small, inconspicuous shrine built outside its northern wall. Recognized as one of Afghanistan's most important yet least understood sites, and built at a time that marked the transition from its centuries-old Buddhist traditions to the arrival of Islam, the Noh Gunbad mosque has been described as an architectural Rosetta Stone – containing within its form and decorative elements the secrets of a lost transitional period of coexistence and cross-fertilization between diverse cultures and traditions. Preserving what remains of this building and enabling a better understanding of the site and its architecture is critical to understanding the history of the region and further establishing its significance as a place of great knowledge and cultural diversity, a crossroad of civilizations.



Detailed view of the Abbasid-era gypsum decoration, Josephine Powell, 1959-61



A temporary masonry wall built beneath the damaged arch to prevent collapse, AKTC, 2009



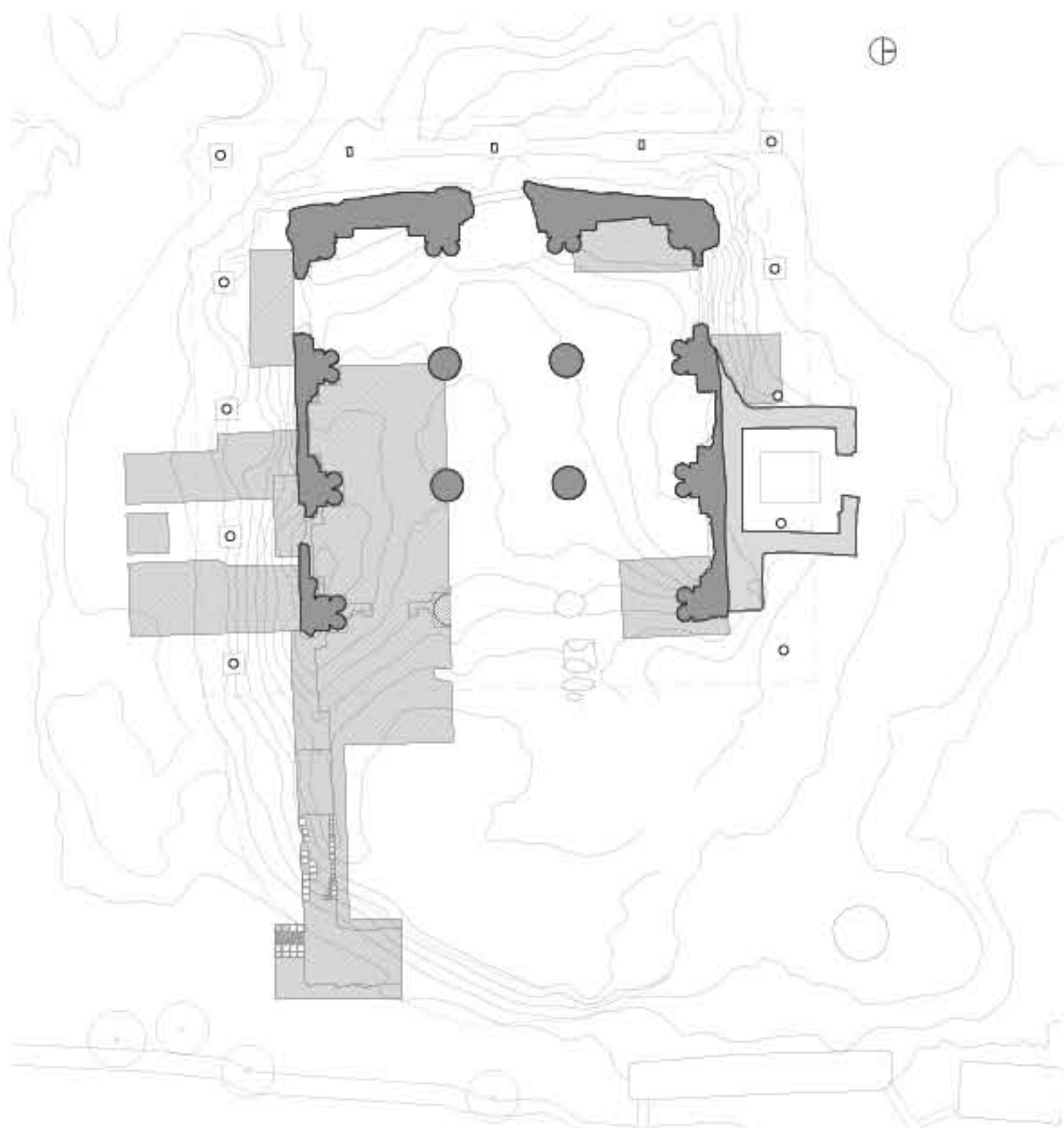
A large fracture had formed in one of the remaining arches of the mosque, AKTC, 2009



Cleaning the original floor of the mosque, which was buried beneath rubble, AKTC, 2016



Sections of stucco decoration unearthed during archaeology, AKTC, 2016



A plan of the mosque showing areas of recent archaeological excavations, AKTC, 2016



The first phase of consolidation and conservation works focused on the repair of the central arches, Simon Norfolk, 2016