

# Ansari Shrine Complex

HERAT, AFGHANISTAN

The shrine complex of Khwaja Abdullah Ansari in Guzargah, north-east of Herat, is both an important example of Timurid architecture and a popular place of pilgrimage. Having spent a life of contemplation and writing in and around the village, Ansari was buried here in 1089. Records suggest that a *madrasa* was established in Guzargah in the late twelfth century, and this was probably the complex reconstructed by Shah Rukh in 1424 and which now makes up the shrine complex.

The large courtyard of the *hazira* of Abdullah Ansari, with its arched *iwans* on the main axes and rows of study rooms between, takes a form that is more commonly associated with a *madrasa*. Both the main entrance arch and the high *iwan* that rises above Ansari's grave retain sections of fine glazed tile epigraphy and areas of geometric decoration. Some of the finest extant Timurid decoration in the region has been documented here as part of the limited intervention of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) in the complex.

Beginning in 2005, repairs were carried out to all roofs of the Shrine, which had been poorly maintained risking damage to the fragile internal plaster decoration in parts of the complex. During the course of this work, evidence emerged of alterations that had been made over time to the eastern *iwan*, which rises more than eighteen metres above the surrounding village. The removal of concrete that dated from the 1970s permitted a detailed structural analysis, on which basis a series of brick buttresses was constructed on the eastern side. At the same time, three vaulted rooms in the north-east corner of the complex, which were found to be unstable, were reconstructed on the same footprint as the original, using traditional materials. One of these rooms houses an intricately decorated basalt grave known as the Haft Qalam. It is foreseen that these spaces will in time be used to display important objects from the Shrine.

In order to facilitate the visits of pilgrims, original sections of marble paving were relaid at the main entrance. Incongruous aluminium doors were replaced with traditional wood, along with other doors leading on to the courtyard. To establish improved records, the historic gravestones that now fill this courtyard were methodically documented, prior to repairs and consolidation of the most vulnerable graves. Brick paving was also laid in key areas, to enable access and



Abdullah Ansari's tomb is under restoration in the complex courtyard and the historic gravestones have been documented.

Opposite page:

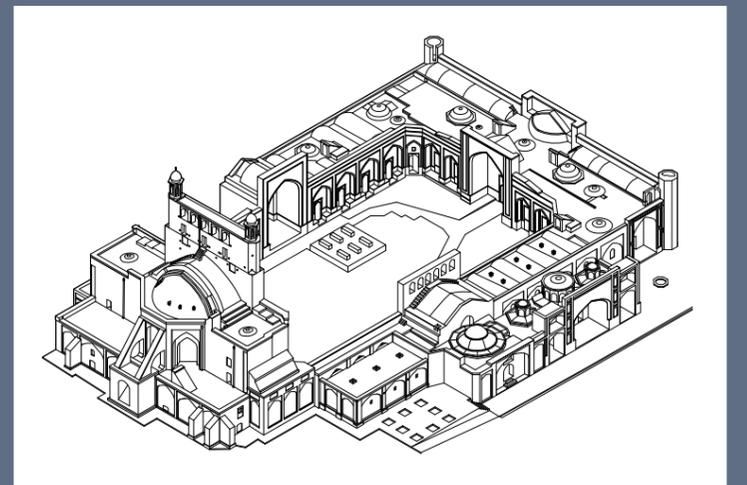
Above, the entrance *iwan* to the Shrine retains sections of fine glazed-tile epigraphy and areas of geometric decoration.

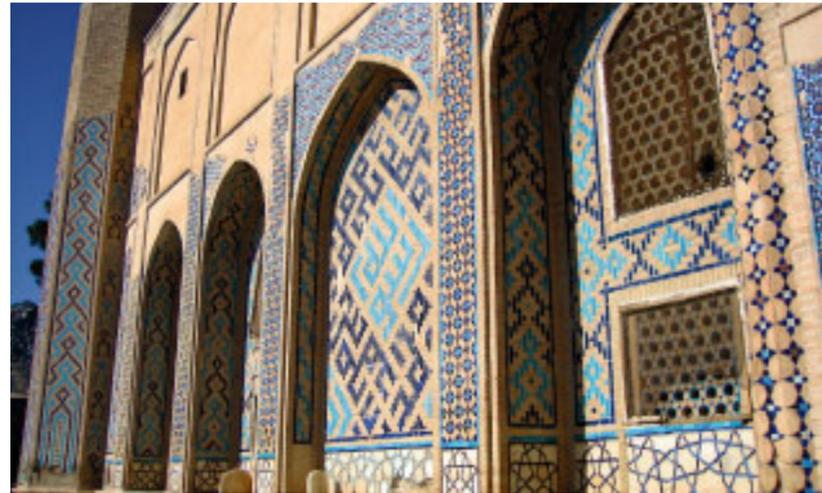
Below, an axonometric of the Shrine complex.



## Project Scope/Objectives

The restoration of the Shrine complex at Guzargah involved structural analysis, detailed surveys, roof repairs and landscaping, together with reconstruction and restoration to better enable pilgrim visiting and document the surviving Timurid decoration.

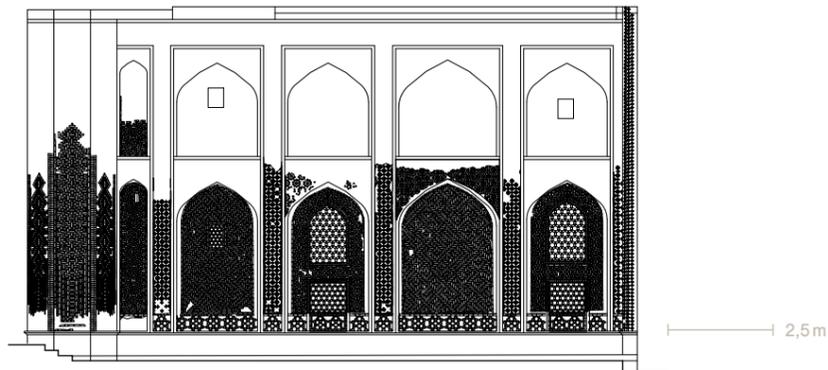




Left, work is being done on reconstructing the Haft Qalam room. The *haft-qalam* (seven pens) is a black marble gravestone marking the grave of one of Sultan Hussain Baiqara's sons. It refers to the seven styles employed in the decoration and design of the gravestone.

Above right, the fine detail of tile-work on the facade of the Shrine can be seen.

Right, a drawing of the tile-work.



Opposite page:  
The restored Namakdan Pavilion once again represents the structure its Timurid builders had intended and work is now being undertaken on landscaping a formal garden around it.

guard against the removal of historic stones when new graves are dug within the courtyard. Discreet external lighting that is regularly used at night for religious ceremonies has also been installed around the courtyard

Following a detailed survey of the existing structure, restoration work on the Namakdan Pavilion, which dates from the fifteenth century, was initiated in late 2005. The two-storey, twelve-sided brick structure, built around an octagonal central space, had been much altered and was found to be in a poor state of repair. Following repairs to the ribbed dome, a modern intermediate floor was removed, restoring the original double-height central space, where traces were found of a water pool and channel, which were subsequently reconstructed. In order to ensure the stability of the brick superstructure, a system of horizontal steel reinforcement was introduced at several levels of the Pavilion, in some places using the apertures that had originally housed timber ties. During the course of removal of modern plaster, traces of glazed-tile decoration were found on two external elevations, and have been restored. After more than four years of painstaking conservation, the Namakdan Pavilion again resembles the structure that its Timurid builders intended, while work continues on landscaping the surrounding area.

Among other works carried out in the Guzargah complex were repairs to the structure and roof of the Zarnegar *khanqah*, which lies to the south-west of the Shrine. The central domed space of this building retains fine painted decoration, entirely in deep blue and gold, with bands of complex calligraphy.



### Challenges

#### PROJECT RISKS

The principal risk in conserving the Shrine complex was in securing acceptance from the resident community and the many pilgrims who visit the site.

#### ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

The principal environmental challenge lay in the protection of the historic garden and graveyard, which risked being encroached upon.

#### BUILDING CONDITIONS

Poor maintenance of the Shrine complex resulted in the various buildings being in a highly vulnerable condition at the start of the works.

### Significant Issues and Impact

#### HISTORIC BUILDINGS/MONUMENTS CONSERVED

All significant historic buildings within the Shrine complex have been conserved, although there remains significant work to be done on the tile and plaster decoration.

#### COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT/PROGRAMME

All conservation work was undertaken in close collaboration with the *mir* of Guzargah and other community representatives, who played a critical role in facilitating the works.

#### VOCATIONAL TRAINING/CAPACITY BUILDING

Dozens of craftsmen were trained during the course of the conservation works.

#### CONTRACTING METHODS

With the exception of landscaping, all works were carried out with direct labour supervised by AKTC professional staff.

#### RELEVANT CODES/STANDARDS ADOPTED

All conservation work in Guzargah has been undertaken strictly in accordance with the relevant international charters and Afghan domestic law.

### Partners

#### PUBLIC PARTNERS

Ministry of Information and Culture.

#### PRIVATE PARTNERS

NGOs.

#### COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Mir of Guzargah, community elders.

#### Donors

Federal Republic of Germany.

### Authoritative Framework

'Memorandum of Understanding' between the department of Historic Monuments of the Ministry of Information and Culture and AKTC signed in 2005, covering amongst other things the conservation of the Shrine complex of Abdullah Ansari in Guzargah.