

CONSERVATION OF THE MAUSOLEUM OF SHAHZADA ABDULLAH IN KUHANDIZ, HERAT

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Through history, the cities and towns of Afghanistan have been hubs of commercial, social, and cultural activity, as well as sites on which political and military rivalries are played out. Urban centers experienced cycles of investment and destruction, as they were looted and laid waste, only to be rebuilt by new rulers whose control was challenged in turn by those who demolish or transform the legacy of their predecessors. During the 20th century, this process of urban transformation was part of efforts to realise the image of a “modern” Afghan state, both through planning measures and the construction of public buildings. Similarly ambitious visions are projected on the urban landscape by Afghan planners today, as they try to keep pace with the rapid growth of towns and cities over the past two decades. While the surge in urban investment tends to be portrayed as a sign of recovery, in the absence of coherent strategies or effective development controls, such growth poses a threat to important traces of the country’s history.

An initiative in Herat between 2016-18 aimed to address this erasure of history through conservation of a monument that has religious and social value for the population, as well as being of architectural importance. The works were implemented by the Afghan Cultural Heritage Consulting Organisation (ACHCO) in collaboration with the department for Safeguarding of Historic Monuments of the Ministry of Information and Culture of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, and the Association for the Protection of Herat’s Cultural Heritage. Financial support was provided by the US Department of State through the US Embassy in Kabul.

The monuments of Herat are

among the most recognisable images of Afghanistan. A source of great pride for Heratis, they serve as a reminder of the cultural achievements of their forebears. Many of these monuments were damaged during conflict that was sparked by an uprising in the city in 1978 and that lasted for more than a decade. The area of Kuhandiz, just north of the old city, was in effect a “no-man’s land” between the forces of the government and the armed opposition, and was thus particularly affected. It is thought to have formed part of the ancient urban settlement of Haraiva mentioned in Achaemenid inscriptions and earlier Indian texts from the late 2nd millennium BC. Along the north perimeter of what is now a cemetery are the remains of defensive mud-brick walls, while to the south, the man-made ridge on which stands the citadel of Qala Ikhtyaruddin, where excavations have yielded material dating from 8th century BC, defines the southern edge of the ancient settlement.

The urban fabric in the shadow of the citadel has been shaped by cycles of destruction, decline, and prosperity through its history. A thriving commercial centre in the 10th century, Herat was subsequently capital of the Ghorid sultanate, when defensive walls and a large congregational mosque



Fig. 1. View of Shahzada Abdullah Mausoleum from the west.



Fig. 2. Map of Afghanistan, with Herat in the west-central region.

were built. After destruction by the Mongols in 1221, the city underwent a revival under the Kartid dynasty, before becoming an important political and cultural center for the Timurid court, a position it retained for almost a century. Herat served primarily as a marginal military outpost for the Mughals in the 16th century, but regained strategic importance as the British and Russian empires vied for control of the region in the 19th century. It was not until 1857 that the region was designated as part of Afghanistan.

Its rich agricultural hinterland and location on an important trade corridor contributed to Herat's prosperity into the 20th century, with a new administrative center constructed in the 1950s outside of the walled city and commercial activity spreading beyond the traditional bazaars. The conflict that followed the 1978 uprising limited further development, with many neighbourhoods in the west of the city de-populated as a result. Along with other war-affected cities, Herat experienced some recovery and limited reconstruction took place after the fall of the Soviet-backed government in Kabul in 1992, only to revert to a state of stagnation during the Taliban administration after 1996.

Fig. 3. North wall of Qala Ikhtyaruddin.



Since the overthrow of the Taliban in 2002, the population of the city has increased rapidly, as refugees return and rural communities flee conflict in the adjoining provinces. This has put intense pressure on systems of urban management and public services, with growing demand for land. As the value of urban property has risen, Herat witnessed a surge in private speculative construction, the majority of which is unregulated. The impact of this “development” on sensitive areas such as Kuhandiz has been dramatic, with the area now surrounded by multi-story buildings.

One of two mausolea within the cemetery marks the grave of the great-grandson of Ja'far al-Tayyar, Abdullah bin

Mu'awiyya, whose rebellion against the Umayyad dynasty in Iraq caused him to flee east to Iran, where over time he gained control over significant territory. Killed in 746 CE (129 AH) during a visit to Herat, Mu'awiyya was buried at Kuhandiz. There are earlier references to a structure over the grave, but an inscription exposed during the conservation work bears the date 1461 CE (865 AH) and records that the mausoleum was commissioned by Sheikh Bayazid, son of Ali Mashrif.

As well as a memorial to Mu'awiyya, the mausoleum is a place for visitors to seek spiritual guidance and provides space for religious instruction.



Fig. 4. Traditional fabric of the old city.



Fig. 5. New construction beside Kuhandiz.



Fig. 6. Shahzada Abdullah dedicatory inscription.

The numbers of close-spaced burials around the building bear out how proximity to Mu'awiyya's grave is perceived to confer a sense of piety and distinction. It was the popularity of the site—and the poor state of repair of this and the later mausoleum of Shahzada Abdul Qasim nearby—that prompted surveys to take place in 2015. Certain assumptions made about the building at this initial stage proved to be mistaken and,

as the conservation work proceeded, the project team faced many a surprise. This account outlines what became in effect a process of “building archaeology” and what this tells us about the complex history of the mausoleum and its setting.

Fig. 7. Cemetery at Kuhandiz with historic walls and Musallah behind.



In addition to the physical evidence, historic photographs provided a useful reference in identifying alterations that had taken place since 1934, when Robert

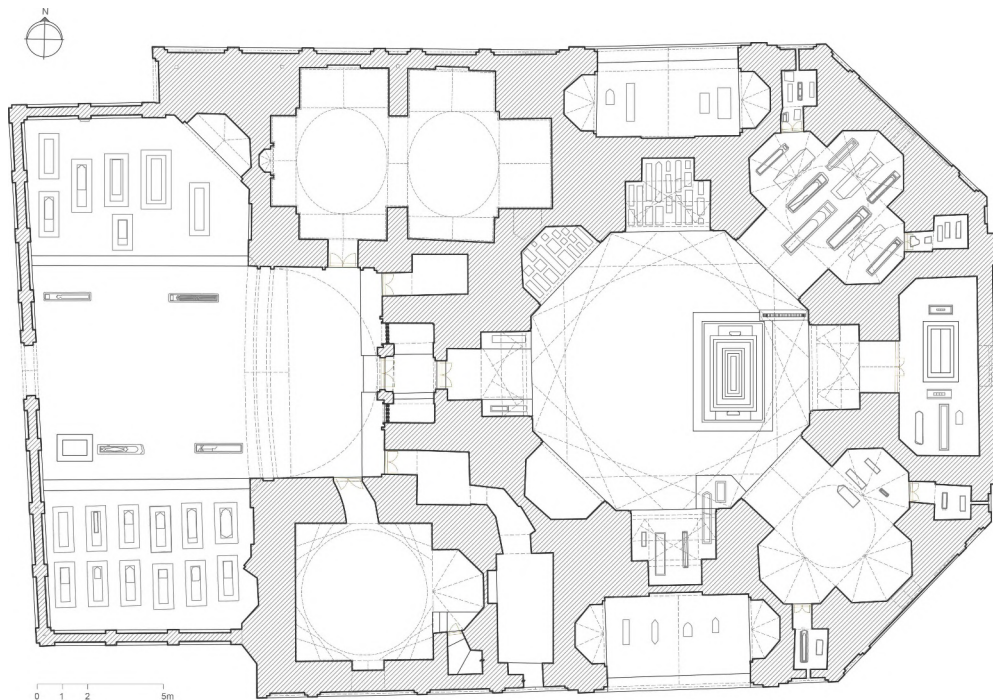


Fig. 8. Plan of Shahzada Abdullah Mausoleum.

niches on three sides, off which lead pairs of small chambers set into the brick masonry structure. The shallower *iwans* on the north and south axes are vaulted.

What the mausoleum may lack in architectural virtuosity, it makes up in the mosaic faience decoration that, judging from surviving sections in the west-facing *iwān*, would have been an impressive sight for those approaching the entrance. These blend Islamic and Chinese motifs, with glazed tiles set in plain fired brick in a manner that is characteristic of Timurid monuments. In the interior, a more

restrained scheme of mosaic faience forms a dado on the lower part of walls around the central domed space. The technique employed was to cut glazed tiles into interlocking shapes to form a pat-

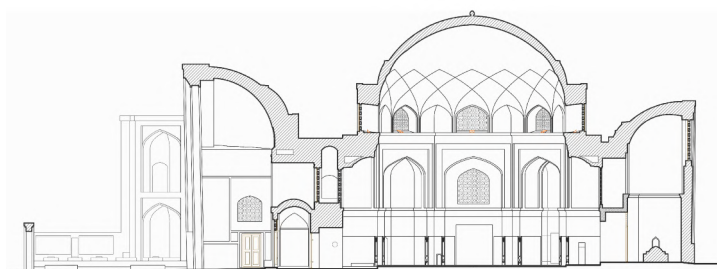
Byron visited the site. Subsequent photos by Lisa Golombek, Bernard O'Kane, Mehrdad Shokoohy, and Bernard Dupaigne shed light on the period between 1960 and 1993 and the damage the mausoleum sustained.

In comparison to other Timurid monuments in Herat, the mausoleum of Shahzada Abdullah is modest in scale. It is organized around a central dome (spanning 12.5 meters) that, unlike most religious buildings of the time, is not elevated and forms a subsidiary external element—although its interior is impressive. The mausoleum has full-height arched openings (*iwans*) on the external elevations on four axes. To the west, the largest *iwān* frames the main entrance, flanked by niches in a screen wall, only part of which has survived. Behind this wall to the north is a mosque, with a room for religious instruction (*khaneqa*) to the south. The east *iwān* (now walled-in) is flanked by domed internal bays on the diagonal with deep

Fig. 10. Preparing mosaic faience panel.



Fig. 9. East-west lateral view of Shahzada Abdullah.



tern in contrasting colours.¹ The shaped tile pieces were then placed edge-to-edge face down on a cartoon (possibly on paper) of the design, with a slurry of gypsum plaster then poured over the beveled backs of the tiles. Once the gypsum set, the panels would have been lifted and placed in position on walls or other surfaces.

The initial focus of conservation work was on the west elevation of the mausoleum, where structural cracks were visible in the semi-dome over the entrance. This area suffered significant damage during fighting in the 1980s, when the building served as a vantage-point for government snipers. The removal of layers of *kahgel* (earth and straw mix) from the semi-dome exposed a fragile structure of half-bricks laid in gypsum/earth mortar, apparently part of repairs hurriedly undertaken at that time. After taking measures to ensure the stability of the supporting arch of the *iwān*, the entire semi-dome was dismantled in stages and, having removed an embedded reinforced concrete beam, the original masonry at the springing was exposed. During its reconstruction, flat stone plates were laid at intervals within the supporting walls to provide an effective structural connection, with lengths of durable timber (*binowsh*) laid horizontally in places to add strength. Once the reconstruction of the semi-dome was complete, it was sealed with a lime slurry before application of a layer of lime concrete (comprising lime, fine sand,

¹ Laboratory analysis of a selection of glazed tiles indicated a body comprising a mix of stone paste (ground quartz obtained from sand or ground pebbles), glaze frit (a combination of pounded quartz and calcinated soda plant, heated until melted to clear glass) and clay. Glazes are alkaline, using soda (potash) to lower the melting-point, with tin or copper (for opaque turquoise, for example) pigments.



Fig. 11. Brick paving over reconstructed west iwān.



Fig. 12. Conservation of tilework on west elevation.

brick and charcoal dust, bulrush fibres mixed with water) that was manually compacted with rubber hammers over two days. Fired brick paving was then laid to form a durable roof surface. While historic photographs indistinctly show patterned decoration in the soffit of the semi-dome, no trace was found during these works of either plaster or tiles, indicating that the entire upper section of the *iwān* had been comprehensively re-built at some stage in the past.

Subsequent work at a lower level of the west *iwān* revealed that the original Timurid tile decoration within the arched opening extended to ground

level, before it had been concealed by insertion of a small entrance lobby in the early 20th century. This decoration suggests that the *iwan* had originally been open, for no evidence of fixings for doors or screens were found. Along with the east *iwan*, where tilework (to a different pattern) was also found at ground level, their enclosure represents something of a transformation from how the Timurid-era builders seem to have conceived the mausoleum.

Surveys revealed serious cracks in the mosque in

Fig. 13. Interior of mosque prior to reconstruction.



Fig. 14. West iwan decoration.

the north-west corner of the mausoleum, with historic photographs indicating re-building in this area in the 1960s or earlier. In order to assess the stability of the masonry structure, layers of earth material were removed from the roof. The large quantity of spent ammunition found buried in this material bears out accounts of the building being used as a vantage-point in the conflict in the 1980s, when vibration from artillery is likely to have weakened the brick structure. The discovery of fragments of a broken masonry arch suggests that the

structure had collapsed in the past. Removal of the internal plaster revealed evidence of major alterations to the layout of the mosque that may also have affected its structural integrity. Traces were found of internal openings on two levels, with an intermediate floor having been removed. It is unclear why this transformation was made; it is conceivable that the original builders envisaged another function for this space, only for it to subsequently be converted into a mosque, for which greater volume was felt to be necessary.

Despite having been re-built in the past, the outer walls of the mosque were unstable, requiring consolidation of the stone foundations before the two domes and supporting arches that span the mosque were dismantled and reconstructed following the original geometry. Again, lengths of durable *binowsh* timber were laid in the masonry at regular intervals to provide additional strength.

It was fortunately not necessary to undertake such drastic reconstruction on the central dome of the mausoleum, where repairs were limited to consolidation of brick masonry in the sub-arches around the drum, around which a ring of connected timbers was embedded in a brick masonry “skirt.” Following this, lime concrete was applied as described above, with a finish of fired bricks laid concentrically over the upper surface of the dome.



Fig. 15. Cleaning marble panel.

Subsequent investigation of other parts of the roof revealed that the other *iwans* had undergone significant repairs over time. On the north and south sides, the geometry of the vaults was badly deformed, and they were dismantled to the level of the springing and reconstructed, using specially fired bricks (matching the original size of 23 x 23 x 5cm) set in lime mortar. A less drastic intervention was necessary in the east *iwan*, where the arched opening had been closed at some stage by a full-height wall. The condition of the masonry required the wall to be dismantled, exposing a band of well-preserved mosaic faience decoration in the soffit of the arch, with areas of original fair-face brickwork on the lower walls. The removal of plaster from the inner wall revealed an area of mosaic faience in an unusual hexagonal pattern formed by parallel lines of dark blue tile slips with a series of star-shaped

Fig. 17. Detail of mosaic faience.



Fig. 16. Detail of mosaic faience.

tiles at the edges, set in a ground of smooth-fired bricks. Given the quality of this decoration, it is difficult to understand why it had been plastered over, except perhaps as a protective measure. Set into the centre of this wall is an intricate lattice screen, comprising small fillets of turquoise, blue and black glazed tile formed into ribs between octagonal openings. After documentation and cleaning, the screen was repaired, with fired brick elements introduced to replace missing sections of tilework.

As with the *iwans*, many of the secondary domes of the mausoleum were found to be deformed and therefore required repairs, with relieving brick arches introduced in places.

Inside the mausoleum, 36 gravestones were found under a layer of modern cement screed. While a few of these appear to mark actual graves (with the

Fig. 18. Detail of mosaic faience.



head facing north), others appear to have been laid at random. After documentation in situ, the latter group was re-located elsewhere in the building, with the agreement of the custodian. A number of marble elements around the base of Mu'awiyah's grave had insets that seem to have housed posts, as part of a balustrade. Several such posts were found discarded elsewhere, along with fragments of marble lattice panels (similar to balustrades at the shrine complex of Abdullah Ansari in Gazurgah). One intact panel was cleaned of modern oil-paint and re-installed beside Mu'awiyah's grave.

The removal of an incongruous modern steel and glass cover placed over the grave exposed a marble dedicatory inscription that was documented and restored. Drawing on evidence from early photographs of the mausoleum interior, a timber enclosure was installed around the grave that enables visitors to now see the inscription.

While much of the external decoration of the mausoleum had been damaged, looted or obliterated, the original mosaic faience dado around its central space survives largely intact. Extending for some 130 meters,² it is the most extensive area of Timurid decoration to survive in a single building in Herat and comprises three distinct patterns:

On the beveled corners of the central domed space are panels flanked by marble columns. Their pattern is of octagons with a central floral motif and alternating radial insets set in black and dark blue, separated by 16-sided stars with alternating gold floral motifs and a petal-like radial pattern.

In the reveals of niches on the four main axes is a pattern of interlacing octagonal motifs made up from turquoise bands around 12-sided black stars with a gold floral medallion in their centre, on a dark blue ground with hexagonal black elements.

In the diagonal niches around the central space and the secondary niches is a pattern made up of a lattice of black and gold rosettes surrounded by turquoise bands separated by cruciform cartouches in white on a dark blue ground.

Fig. 19. Pouring gypsum plaster behind unstable mosaic faience.



Fig. 20. Mosaic faience concealed behind plaster.

The condition of the mosaic faience panels varied considerably, with evidence in places of previous protective measures and repairs. Of the 88 panels on the dado around the central space, 49 required only cleaning and minor repairs, 17 required significant repairs or stabilization, with no tiles remaining in 22 panels.

Several panels had been affected by damp in the supporting wall, causing bulging and eventually disintegration as the gypsum bedding expanded and lost strength. These areas were dismantled and, where the original tile fragments could be retrieved, re-assembled in situ. Elsewhere, gypsum was injected behind the panel (in apertures left by missing tiles) to bond loose areas back to the supporting masonry.

No attempt was made to “reconstruct” missing sections using modern components, as it was not possible to match the original glazes. The sections of plaster in imitation of tilework have been retained, on the understanding that they are part of the mausoleum's history, with some areas repaired flush and left unpainted to distinguish them from earlier interventions.

The surface of all internal tile panels were badly

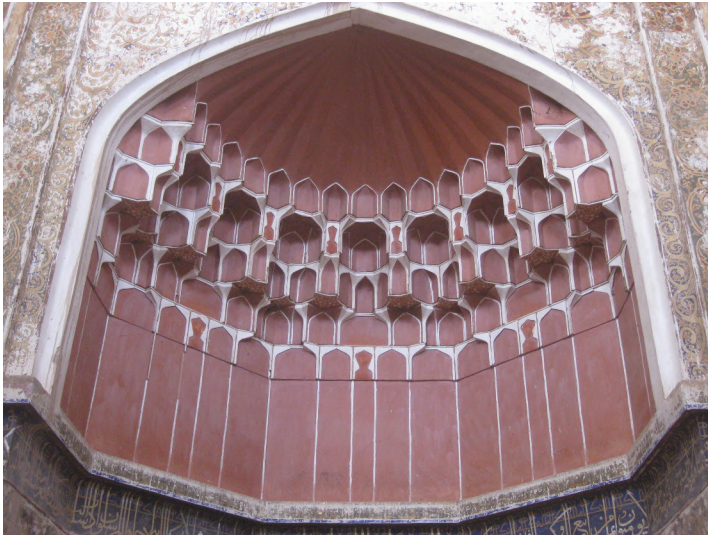


Fig. 21. Muqarnas in central bay.

discoloured due to an accumulation of dust and grime over the years. After a combination of research and trial and error, the manual use of damp sponges and soft tooth-brushes proved to be an effective technique for cleaning the surface without affecting the glaze or compromising the joints in the mosaic faience panels.

Each of the eight secondary bays around the central space of the mausoleum retains decorated plaster pendentives or *muqarnas* with two geometric schemes, which appear to be original. Repairs were carried out to damaged areas before being repainted with traditional ochre wash with white highlights, matching the original scheme.

The interior of the central space of the mausoleum, including the soffit of the dome, is decorated with paint applied to gypsum plaster. Traces of plain ochre plaster (as found on the *muqarnas*) under lower sections of the painted decoration

Fig. 23. New construction at north edge of Kuhandiz cemetery.



Fig. 22. Painted decoration on springing of central dome.

suggest that this is a modern alteration and that wall surfaces at this level may originally have been plain.

The painted decoration on the soffit of the central dome was found to be in poor condition, with large areas of loose plaster and some of the paint peeling off despite previous application of varnish. The materials and techniques used in this decoration suggest that it is a later transformation, and it is likely that the soffit of the dome was originally finished with plain ochre pigment as used on the *muqarnas*. A skim coat of pigmented plaster was applied to fragile areas of the dome where no decoration survives. Aside from detailed documentation and removal of accumulated dust from the surface, no further work was carried out on the painted decoration, whose fragile condition requires specialist restoration. Similarly, no work was attempted on the band of calligraphy below the

Fig. 24. Demolition of historic property in the old city.



dome springing that seems to be original but is now barely legible and has signs of repeated over-painting.

During the course of conservation of the mausoleum, investments were made in the wider environment at Kuhandiz, with pathways across the cemetery upgraded and indigenous trees planted to provide shade for the many visitors who come to pay their respects at family graves. The existence of these graves precluded archaeological excavation on any scale, but efforts were made to prevent illegal encroachments by those wishing to extend their property into the precinct of the cemetery. With few controls on new construction, the area is however now surrounded by multi-storey buildings that have irrevocably transformed the character of this historic site.

A similar process of transformation can be seen elsewhere in Herat; the iconic minarets, which are all that remains of the mausoleum of Sultan Husain Baiqara, are now barely visible behind new construction that hems them in on all sides.

Across the dense fabric of the old city that, despite extensive war damage, had largely survived until 2002, historic homes and bazaars and homes are being torn down to make way for new buildings whose scale and design pay little heed to the context. This surge in urban investments over the past two decades tends to be portrayed as a sign of recovery but, in the absence of coherent strategies or effective regulation, it poses a growing threat to the country's heritage. While conservation initiatives such as that at Kuhandiz may safeguard single monuments, the real challenge is to protect urban environments that are a critical part of Afghanistan's history.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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