

# Imperial Designs: Tales of a Gardening Prince

Intrigued by the memoirs of an obscure but plucky sixteenth-century Central Asian prince who shared her passion for gardening, **Deborah Dunham** spent three years tracing his life and travels and uncovering the history of his burial garden in Kabul

Photographs by **Nick Danziger** and **Deborah Dunham**



درختانی نار هم هست کردا کرد حوض تمام به برگه گزار



ما رنجما بسیار خوب می نماید چمنی باغ خوبی طرح شده و طرز



## FROM TIMUR TO THE TAJ MAHAL

Just how did an impoverished but enterprising prince born in the backwaters of the Ferghana Valley (present-day Uzbekistan) come to exert an influence over the fabled Mughal gardens of India? Answers may be found not only in descriptions from Babur's own lively memoirs, but also in the recently restored Bagh-e Babur, his twenty-six-acre burial garden just outside Kabul.

While the garden has been much altered over the last 500 years, it still resonates with the key features of Babur's aesthetics: well sited, with fine air, a view, symmetrically laid out terraces and, most importantly, running water. At the heart of this pivotal transition between the Timurid ideals of his forbears and the later Mughal gardens of his descendants in India lay Babur's affection for the landscape of his native Central Asia and especially for the mountains and waters of Kabul province.

## THE GARDENING EMPEROR

Zahiru'd-din Muhammad Babur (1483–1530) lived much of his life in gardens. At the age of eleven, he learned of his father's death and thus assumed his crown while sitting in a *charbagh* (quartered garden) in Andijan, then the capital of Ferghana. A lover of languages and poetry, Babur was a keen observer of nature, yet he also grew up to become a ruthless warrior. However noble his birth, his youth, it seems, was spent on the run. In *The Emperor Babur*, E. M. Forster observed:

*At the time that Machiavelli was collecting materials for The Prince, a robber boy, sorely in need of advice, was scuttling over the highlands of Central Asia. His problem had already engaged the attention and sympathy of the Florentine: there were too many kings about and not enough kingdoms. Tamurlane and Genghis Khan (the boy was descended from both) had produced between them so numerous a progeny that a frightful congestion of royalties had resulted along the upper waters of the Jaxartes and the Oxus, and in Afghanistan. One could scarcely travel two miles without being held up by an Emperor.*

## BABUR'S GARDENS IN AFGHANISTAN

Thanks to Babur's entertaining and amazingly frank memoirs, the *Baburnama*, we know that after many adventures and considerable hardship, the twenty-one-year-old eventually claimed Kabul as his kingdom in 1504, following years of wandering and uncertainty amidst shifting alliances and skirmishes with cousins, uncles and outsiders. There he thrived and built the base from which he eventually conquered northern India and established the Mughal Empire in 1526. Along the way he built gardens in which to live and entertain his men, ultimately choosing one of the most beautiful – Bagh-e Babur in Kabul – for his burial.

On a visit to his cousins in Samarkand in 1497, the elegance of the Timurid gardens had made a huge impression on the itinerant fourteen-year-old, even where their former grandeur was in decline. Babur's account of this visit provides us with a glimpse of his earliest notion of the ideal garden:

*For beauty, and air and view, few [gardens] will have equalled Darwesh Muhammad Tarkhan's charbagh. It lies overlooking the*

*whole of Qulba meadow, on the slope of Bagh-e-Maidan. Moreover, it is arranged symmetrically, terrace above terrace, and is planted with beautiful narwan and cypresses and white poplar. A most agreeable sojourning place, its one defect is the want of a large stream.*

While Babur did not possess sufficient wealth to express his aesthetic aspirations fully until the final years of his life, his visits to the gardens of his Timurid cousins not only inspired the development of an informed aesthetic but instilled in him a sense of responsibility for its dynastic transmission. Babur's awareness of his place in history was further borne out by his disciplined journal-keeping from the age of eleven until just shortly before he died at forty-seven.

Although Babur settled in the Kabul region, he wrote that during his life he never spent Ramadan in the same place twice. Constant movement was a necessity in times of shifting allegiances; gardens provided a safe, if temporary, haven from enemies as well as a place for Babur to bond with his men. Gardens were also a reward for loyalty, as suggested by the name Bagh-e Wafa ('Garden of Fidelity'), which Babur gave to a garden he founded near Jalalabad in 1508–09 to acknowledge the loyalty of his inner circle of nobles following a rebellion earlier that year.

*I laid out the Four-gardens, known as the Bagh-e-Wafa, on the rising ground, facing south. The garden lies high, has running water close at hand and a mild winter climate. In the middle of it, a one-mill stream flows constantly past the little hill on which there are four garden plots. In the southwest part of it there is a reservoir, 10 by 10, round, in which are orange trees and a few pomegranates, the whole encircled by a trefoil meadow. This is the best part of the garden, a most beautiful sight when the oranges take colour. Truly that garden is admirably situated.*

Besides the straight lines seen in the Garden of Fidelity, Babur also described how he applied Timurid geometrical ideals on a small project in Istalif, just outside Kabul:

*Few villages match Istalif, with vineyards and fine orchards on both sides of its great torrent, with waters needing no ice, cold and mostly*

### previous spread: BAGH-E WAFI

In a double-page manuscript from the *Baburnama* (c.1590), Babur appears on the right (in rich yellow robes dating from the more prosperous time of the painting some seventy years after his death) giving direction to a workman, while the garden's engineer peers over his planning grid. Spades fly as channels are dug and plants moved and re-planted where Babur prefers, in geometric order, as shown by the plumb line stretching across the upper half of the page

### left: BAGH-E WAFI

In a miniature from the *Baburnama* (c.1590), ducks play in the water tank, while gardeners sow seeds in the exquisite Bagh-e Wafa (Garden of Fidelity), which Babur founded near Jalalabad in 1508–09 to acknowledge the loyalty of his inner circle of nobles following a rebellion earlier that year

pure. There is a pleasant halting place outside it, under great planes, green, shady, and beautiful. A one-mill stream, having trees on both banks, flows constantly through the middle of the garden; formerly its course was zig-zag and irregular; I made it straight and orderly; so the place became very beautiful.

After straightening out the water flow, Babur installed a square tank and then commented on this pleasing combination of geometrical form and nature:

*I ordered that the spring should be enclosed in mortared stonework, 10 by 10, and that a symmetrical, right-angled platform should be built on each of its sides so as to overlook the whole field of Judas trees. If, the world over, there is a place to match this when the arghwans are in full bloom, I do not know it.*

A vision of Babur's ordering of springs into canals and squared pools may be gained not only from miniatures but also in the Bagh-e Babur today, where the remains of Mughal-period pools, recently excavated, are once more visible.

### FOUNDING OF THE MUGHAL EMPIRE

The timing of Babur's victory in India was important. Following the Battle of Panipat in June 1526, Babur's description of the heat and dust of 'disorderly Hind' in that year of drought clearly demonstrates his distaste for the torrid, flat Gangetic plain.

*One of the great defects of Hindustan being its lack of running waters, it kept coming to my mind that waters should be made to flow by means of wheels erected wherever I might settle down, also that grounds should be laid out in an orderly and symmetrical way.*

Babur's disciplined decision to remain in India, instead of returning to Kabul as he would have preferred, marked a crucial moment in garden as well as political history. In order to keep his men from returning home, Babur brought his garden-making skills to India. Shortly after the victory, he wrote:

*Khalifa also and Shaikh Zain, Yunas-e-Ali and whoever got land on that other bank of the river laid out regular and orderly gardens with tanks, made running waters also by setting up wheels like those in Dipalpur and Lahor. The people of Hind who had never seen grounds planned so symmetrically and thus laid out, called the side of the Jun where our residences were 'Kabul'.*

Besides the use of gardens for his personal enjoyment, their construction allowed Babur to imbue a foreign and inhospitable landscape with a sense of continuity with the past, while also offering immediate relief through the achievement of order along with the more familiar comforts of water and greenery.

Sadly, history did not provide an opportunity for Babur to elaborate on this legacy: he died in 1530, just four years after his conquest of India. He was buried in a garden in Agra, and it was not until about 1545 that his remains were finally laid to rest in his beloved Kabul.

### THE MUGHAL GARDEN LEGACY

Babur's ultimate influence on the later and better-known Mughal gardens was due not only to the first gardens he built in India upon arrival (like the Aram Bagh). We know that his offspring were also well-acquainted with his gardens in Afghanistan, ten of



which were mentioned in the *Baburnama*.

While it is true that the summer weather in Kabul was more pleasant than that in Agra or Delhi, records of regular imperial visits to Bagh-e Babur by the emperor's descendants are still impressive. Despite the effort required to move the royal entourage (thousands of people, on hundreds of elephants) more than 700 miles across mountainous terrain, Humayun, Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan all came to pay their respects at Babur's tomb several times. These regular encounters exposed Babur's wealthier offspring to the Timurid garden ideals, which they were able to perpetuate in India. □

**Deborah Dunham** worked on the history of Bagh-e Babur while completing an MA in Islamic Art at SOAS. She is currently a consultant with Cultural Innovations based in London, having previously worked on projects for the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, the BBC, Turquoise Mountain and the Royal Geographical Society.

### above: BABUR'S TRAVELS

Babur's travels from Central Asia to India, based on an original by James Wescoat, 1989. Large circles denote place names; small circles denote places with gardens

### right: ISTALIF

Babur, standing to the left in a blue scarf, orders the straightening of the stream at Istalif. Taken from the *Baburnama*, (c. 1590s)

### next spread: 19TH-CENTURY BAGH-E BABUR

Charles Atkinson's coloured engraving of 1842 showing the central water channel and pools in Bagh-e Babur







IMAGE COURTESY OF THE AGA KHAN TRUST FOR CULTURE (AKTC)

## CHRONOLOGY

- 1483** Babur is born in Ferghana, Uzbekistan.
- 1504** Babur conquers Kabul and begins to establish gardens.
- 1526** Babur conquers India, establishes Mughal Empire and begins building many gardens along the Jumna River.
- 1530** Babur dies in Agra and is buried there in the Aram Bagh garden.
- 1540s** Babur's son and successor, Emperor Humayun, orders Babur's remains brought to Kabul from Agra.
- 1581** Emperor Akbar's first visit to Babur's tomb is recorded.
- 1589** Akbar's second imperial visit to Babur's tomb in Kabul is recorded. Abd al-Rahmi's Persian translation of the *Baburnama* is presented to Akbar. Delighted with the results, Akbar orders his atelier to begin work on illustrations of the *Baburnama*.
- 1607** Emperor Jahangir visits Bagh-e Babur, accompanied by Ruqayya Sultan Begam (whose body now rests on the last terrace in Bagh-e Babur). He orders a tombstone inscribed for Babur's grave, which is still visible today. Enclosure walls (known as 'The Emperor's New Close' around all the gardens of Kabul) and a *chabutra* platform in front of tomb are built.
- 1638** At the same time that he was building the Taj Mahal in Agra, Emperor Shah Jahan visits Kabul and orders the complete restoration of Bagh-e Babur, the building of the marble mosque on the terrace below Babur's grave, the erecting of a marble screen and improvements to water reservoirs.
- 1646** The mosque in the Bagh-e Babur is dedicated, and a caravanserai is constructed in the lower garden.
- 1840s** Mughal Empire in decline. Charles Masson notes 'sad havoc and disorder' in garden even before the earthquake of 1842 topples the marble enclosure.
- 1880s** Abdur Rahman Khan orders renovations and improvements. The present pavilion, along with the Queen's Palace (named after Khan's third wife, Bibi Halima, to whom it was given as a residence upon his death), are constructed.
- 1920s** Nadir Shah transforms the garden into a public park. The small pavilion around Babur's tomb is built, as are a walled platform below the platform enclosing the old chinar tree, a swimming pool and an additional reservoir. The central flow is replaced by a series of flower gardens. Three fountains are built, terrace walls repaired and new trees planted.
- 1930-70** Various 'improvements' are added, including a large swimming pool to the north. A greenhouse close to the northern perimeter wall, new retaining walls and a road on the upper terrace are built.
- 1990s** The garden is a no-man's-land, infested by landmines and snipers. Pumps are vandalised, trees cut down.
- 1995** Water pumps are installed by UNHS Habitat, and new planting is undertaken by the municipality of Kabul.
- 2002** Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) steering group is

formed. Geomagnetic prospecting by ICOMOS is undertaken, as are excavations by the German Archaeological Institute. There is consultation with the community and preliminary planning.

- 2003–5** Ongoing restoration is led by the AKTC and other groups. The entire perimeter wall is rebuilt using traditional mud walling techniques; a 1930s addition to the tomb is removed and work undertaken to restore the tomb as it was in the seventeenth century; the Shah Jahan marble mosque is restored; terraces are levelled; 3,500 saplings (plane, walnut, apricot, cherry and pomegranate trees) are planted.
- 2005–6** Final improvements and presentation for re-opening include the replacement of the old swimming pool with a new facility outside the lower garden entrance; restoration of the Queen's Palace and the construction of the caravanserai with visitor facilities.
- 2007** The garden re-opens. Additional information on the AKTC conservation programme at Bagh-e Babur can be found by logging on to [www.akdn.org](http://www.akdn.org).

### THE BAGH-E-BABUR TODAY

Given Afghanistan's fate over the centuries, it is lucky that this lovely spot has been spared the worst. A few bullet holes remain, but the landmines have been swept, proper archaeological excavations completed and, thanks to work done by the Historic Cities Support Programme of the AKTC and a number of other organisations between 2003–07, this wonderful 500-year-old garden has recently been brought back to life. In addition to an extensive restoration of Babur's tomb and the surrounding walls, nearly 4,000 trees have been planted including plane, walnut, Judas and fruit trees (such as the sour cherry so beloved by the emperor).

Situated to the southwest of the old city near the Kabul River, and lying below the western slope of the Koh-e Darwaza, Bagh-e Babur today consists of an eleven-hectare walled garden containing fourteen terraces, a restored nineteenth-century palace, a renovated pavilion and a small mosque built by Shah Jahan at the same time as the Taj Mahal. Local residents enjoy picnicking here on Fridays, and when the city power goes out, children descend from the hills to collect water from the garden's pumps.

With shade and water, and in the fullness of time, these orchards, tall trees and grassy terraces will provide a welcome respite for Afghans as well as a permanent place of honour for the final resting place of Babur, one of Kabul's most famous and most important residents. □

#### **this page, clockwise from top left: BAGH-E BABUR**

A spring picnic beneath the fruit blossoms; the central axis of Bagh-e Babur during *Nauruz* celebrations in 2008; Babur's tomb, upon which is written the inscription *'If there is a paradise on earth, it is this, it is this, it is this'* in Persian

#### **next spread: BAGH-E BABUR TODAY**

The Bagh-e Babur from the Sher Darwaza mountain in Kabul today, showing the restored garden in its wider urban setting



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