

Evolution of the Tomb in Islamic Architecture*

by Shaukat Mahmood

The process of life and death on earth started almost simultaneously. Interestingly, the birth of man was not a biological process and the first death was not natural. It was an unnatural death, murder. For we learn from the Holy Qur'an that Adam had two sons, Abel (Abīl) and Cain (Kabīl). Abel was innocent and God-fearing while Cain was cruel, jealous and selfish. He murdered his brother, but then did not know how to get rid of the corpse. How to dispose of the dead body of his brother:

Then Allah sent a raven,
Who scratched the ground
To show him how to hide
The shame of his brother.
“Woe is me!” said he;
“Was I not even able
To be as a raven.”¹

Cain thus provided the prototype to mankind: how to murder and how to bury the dead. The concept of *qabr* or grave thus came into being. The same *qabr* turned into *maqbra*, (tomb, mausoleum, etc.). “Tomb” is *tumba* in Latin and *tumbe* in French.

The Holy Qur'an also refers to another incident involving a burial, the story of *Ashāb-i Kāhf* (Men of the Cave). But between the murder of Cain and the anecdote of the *Ashāb-i Kāhf* there stand the example of huge burial practices of the ancient Egyptians. About seven thousand years back (5000 BCE), Egyptians built stelae,² mastabas³ and pyramids for their dead, particularly the pharaohs. It is interesting to note that the ancient Egyptians, like Muslims, also believed in eternal life after death. “When we are living, we are in the middle of death and when we die, we begin an unending and interminable life.”

And about six thousand years back (4000 BCE), the ancient Chinese, too, built remarkable tombs. There is the famous cemetery of Xibeigang (pronounced “Hispei-kang”) this contains examples of Shang funerary architecture.⁴ In ancient Iran, we also have some important tombs, the most important ones of King Cyrus at

¹ Qur'an, Chapter V (al-Ma'idah), verses 27-31.

² An upright stone-slab forming a tombstone in Egyptian and Greek architecture.

³ An ancient Egyptian, rectangular, flat-roofed, funerary structure, and a superstructure with battered (sloping) walls, housing a burial chamber.

⁴ In Shang funerary architecture, the royal dead were buried in shaft graves 14 x 19 m (46 x 62 ft) in area and about 10m (33 ft) deep that were approached by a cruciform arrangement of ramps, with the principal access from the south. The burial chambers were constructed with a double lining of jointed timber. The chamber was covered by a painted and inlaid wooden canopy. This tradition of building canopies over graves exists in Islamic tombs also.



Figure 1. Tomb of King Cyrus at Pasargadae

Pasargadae, built about 530 BCE⁵ (figure 1), and the rock-hewn tomb of Darius at Naqsh-e Rostam, built in 485 BCE (figure 2).⁶

In pre-classical Crete, we come across only one example, the tomb of Agamemnon built around 1250 BCE.⁷ Classical tombs in Greece were not usually monumental. They were often in groups, the family precincts (*periboloi*).

Tombs were often decorated with sculpture. Monumental tombs belonged to foreign dynasts such as the rulers of Lycian cities in southern Asia Minor or the most famous of all Mausolous, ruler of Caria, a non-Greek region in the vicinity of Miletus. The tomb of Mausolous (also Mausolos, Mussolus, Mausollos) was grand in size and majesty (figure 3). The word “mausoleum” not only indicated the tomb of Mausolus, but became synonymous to all monumental tombs built later.⁸ The tomb at Halicarnasus (Halicarnosus) was amongst the seven wonders of the ancient world. Along with the pyramids, later on, a third tomb, the Tāj Mahal was also added to the list of the Seven Wonders.

Mausoleum not only became a generic term for monumental tombs, but also

⁵ The Tomb of Cyrus is a simple box-like structure, built of limestone 3.2 m x 2.3 m (10.6 ft x 7.6 ft), gabled and standing on a platform of six steps. It is typically Achaemenian in its use of large blocks, accurately cut and smoothly dressed. No mortar is used, but the blocks of stone have been secured together by swallowtail clamps of lead and iron.

⁶ The Tomb of Darius is situated 13 km (8 miles) north of Persepolis and is one of the four rock-hewn sepulchers of great Achaemenian kings there. Its façade, 18.3 m (60 ft) wide, appears to reproduce the south front of Darius’ palace at Persepolis (Takht-i-Jamshid), with four columns having double-bull capitals.

⁷ The Tomb of Agamemnon at Mycenae, Crete has stone masonry and stone lining of extraordinary quality. The building is also commonly known as the Treasury of Atreus. Its *dromos* is about 6 m (20 ft) wide, 36 m (118 ft) long, its side walls rise to a maximum of 13.7 m (45 ft). The chamber itself is 14.5 m (47.6 ft) in diameter and 13.2 m (45 ft) high.



Figure 2. Tomb of Darius at Naqsh-i Rostam



Figure 3. Tomb of Mausolus, ruler of Caria near Miletus

served as a source of inspiration and incentive to many kings who built tombs of great magnitude. Some monumental tombs were built above graves that had no structure on them originally, but the interned personalities commanded reverence and exaltation. In this regard, names of quite a few tombs can be mentioned: The Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem (figure 4),⁹ Tomb of St. James (figure 5),¹⁰ Tomb of the King in Jerusalem¹¹ Tomb of Zakariyyah (figure 6)¹² and the Tomb of Joseph (Yūsuf, the son of Ya‘qūb; figure 7).¹³

⁸ King Mausolus belonged to Caria. When he died in 353 BCE, his tomb, his Mausoleum was constructed by his wife, Artemisia at Halicarnassus (his capital). It was built of white marble and stood on a high rectangular podium containing the burial chamber, surrounded by a colonnade carrying a stepped pyramidal roof that supported a quadrigas (four-horse chariot).

⁹ The Church of Holy Sepulcher was nearly destroyed by fire in 1808; long rejected by the Christians, it was repaired by Russia, which carefully cultivates its connection with Asiatic Greeks; in consequence of this expenditure, the Greek monks have been put in possession of the most venerated part of this edifice. Inside in the middle, stands a small vase, to which the Greeks attach great reverence, regarding it as the central spot of the earth and calling it the “Navel of the World”.

¹⁰ “This is one of the four sepulchers in the valley of Jehoshaphat on the east side of Kedron. It is an excavated tomb with an ornamental portal. The façade exhibits two Doric columns, fronting the west, and raised about fifteen feet above ground level in the same ledge of rock. See, David Roberts, *The Holy Land* (Cairo: American University Press, 1999), 67.

¹¹ This remarkable tomb, strongly resembling those of Egyptian Thebes, is the first relic of the kind in the neighborhood of Jerusalem. Its present name has been long given by the Europeans, from a vague conception of its being the burial-place of some of the Jewish monarchs. From the elegance of its front and general beauty of its sculpture, it has been compared with the sepulchers of Petra and thus conjectured to have been the work of Herod. But the weight of evidence points to its being the tomb of Helena, Queen of Adiahara.

¹² The tomb of Zakariyyah is a square block of twenty feet on each side — the rock having been cut away around it so as to form an area in which it stands isolated. The body of the tomb is about eighteen or twenty feet high and is apparently solid. The sides are decorated with two columns with two half columns at the ends. The capitals of the columns are Ionic.

¹³ Among the relics associated with Biblical history of Nablous, the tomb of Joseph (Yūsuf) is an object of great veneration. It stands in the middle of a small enclosure at the eastern end of the valley that lies between the mounts Gerizim and Ebel, and not far from the well of Ya‘qūb.

The Christian story of the *Ashāb-i Kāhf* (without the spiritual lessons taught in the Qurʾān), as told in Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (at the end of Chapter 33), also contributes to our thesis. In the reign of the Roman Emperor Decius¹⁴ who repressed Christians, seven youths of Ephesus, who had embraced Christianity and were being chased by the soldiers of Decius (Gaius Messius Quintus Decius Augustus was Roman Emperor from 249 to 251. In the last year of his reign, he co-ruled with his son Herennius Etruscus until they were both killed in the Battle of Abrittus) escaped from the town and hid themselves in a mountain cave nearby. They fell asleep and remained asleep for some generations.¹⁵ When they woke up, they still thought they were in the world in which they had previously lived. They had no idea of the passage of time. But, when one of them went to the town to purchase provisions, he found that the whole world had changed. The Christian religion instead of being persecuted was now the state religion.

There is a controversy about the number of the sleepers. Some suggest they were three, some say they were seven. The widely accepted number is seven. When they died, they were buried in the same cave and an inscription was placed at the mouth of the cave. This inscription, it can be safely assumed, became their epitaph. The veracity of the cave and the inscription (epitaph) was checked by Caliph al-Wāthiq (842-846 CE) by sending an expedition to Ephesus.¹⁶

The civilizations of Western Asia (or Near East) which comprised countries and premises like Iraq, Iran, Syria, Armenia, Anatolia, and earlier, Media, Elam, Parthia, et al., also contributed towards tomb building. The Tomb of Cyrus, the powerful Persian King is one example already quoted.

The Romans, too, excelled in tomb building; they also introduced catacombs.¹⁷ The earliest of their tombs were partly built and partly carved in rock.¹⁸ Later, Roman tombs were more majestic and awesome like the rock-cut Tomb of El-Khasne, Petra and the Mausoleum of Hadrian at Rome.¹⁹

In Islamic architecture the tomb is called *maqbara* (also *maqbura*, *maqbara*, *mikbara*, *maqbar* and *maqbur*). The word occurs only in the Qurʾān in the plural form "*maqābir*".²⁰ Early Muslim historians provide little information about early cemeteries. Works of *fiqh* (Islamic law) refer only to prohibitions concerning

¹⁴ Darius ruled from 249 to 251 CE. He was a violent persecutor of Christianity. In Arabic, Persian and Urdu literature, he is known as Daqyānūs.

¹⁵ The Seven Sleepers went to sleep during Darius' time and woke up during the reign of Theodosius II, who ruled from 408 to 450 CE.

¹⁶ See, 'Abdullah Yūsuf 'Ali, *The Holy Qurʾān*, 9th ed. (Beltsville, Maryland, U.S.A., 1997), 709.

¹⁷ Catacombs were underground burial chambers built around the barrel of a well with descending stories.

¹⁸ The earliest Roman tombs were partly cut into the rock and then roofed by a ceiling course of flat-bedded stone. Examples of this kind survive at Cerveteri, the Regolini Galassi Tomb. The biggest concentration of rock-cut tombs is to be found in the Banditaccia Cemetery, Cerveteri; among them are the Tomb of the Cornice and the Tomb of the Reliefs.

¹⁹ See, Banister Fletcher, *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method*, ed. D. Cruickshank, (Oxford, 1998), 278.

²⁰ "That is until the time comes when you must lie down in the graves (*maqābir*) and leave the pomp and circumstances of an empty life. The true reality will then appear before you. Why not try to strive for a little understanding of that reality in this very life?" (Qurʾān: Sura 102, al-Takāthur, verse 2).



Figure 4. The Holy Sepulchre



Figure 5. Tomb of St. James



Figure 7. Tomb of Yūsuf (Joseph).



Figure 6.
Tomb of
Zakariyyah

tombs and visiting burial places.²¹ Ibn Batta and Ibn Qudāma tell us that the Prophet had forbidden prayers in cemeteries.²² Ibn Taimiyya reports that the cemeteries of Christians and Jews must not be located in proximity of Muslim cemeteries.

In his book, Ibn ‘Isākīr devoted a whole chapter to the cemeteries of Damascus²³ but he is primarily concerned with locating the tombs of the revered individuals who are buried there. Likewise, Maqrīzi has given an account of the cemeteries of Cairo (near al-Muqattam)²⁴ but his book primarily deals with the location of monuments, like mosques, palaces, *ribāts* and *musallās*.²⁵ Muslim cemeteries generally were established outside the city walls.²⁶ It will be recalled that Ibn Qudāma and Ibn Batta (op.cit., 80, 149) include cemeteries in the list of places unsuited for prayer, in the same manner as public baths, enclosures where camels shed excrement, abattoirs and rubbish dumps. However, for the majority of authors, and the consensus of believers, the cemetery is a holy place as it contains the tombs of individuals venerated in Islam: members of the Prophet’s family, the *Sahāba* (Companions of the Prophet), the *Tābi’ūn* (Successors of the Prophet), *awliyā’* (holy men) and *sālihūn* (pious people). Ibn Batuta and al-Makrizi, referring to the mosque of the cemetery of the Karāfa, call it the *Jāmi al-awliyā’*, and when al-Harawi mentions a cemetery, it is always in terms of the saints and righteous men buried there.²⁷ Special blessings are attached to these tombs. Every major Islamic city can claim the honour of possessing the tombs of such venerated persons, irrespective of the fact that several cities may boast of the burial-place of the same individual.

In the early days of Islam, graves enjoyed no special respect or sanctity. Even the graves of *shahīds* (martyrs) were not majestic. I have visited places like Badr and Uhad in Saudi Arabia where the first two battles were fought between the Muslims and the Kāfirs but there are no graves – the kind we have today in the form of a mound and a *kataba* (inscription) on the head side. The places where the *shuhāda’* are buried are flat with an ordinary stone lying at the head-side. No written word, no epitaph is to be found. However, after the tragedy of Karbala in 64 AH/683 CE special interest developed in the graves of the *shuhāda’* and the graves of the members of the Prophet’s family.

A person giving his life for the cause of Islam is called a *shahīd* or martyr and his status is the highest in the eyes of Allah. Instead of a shroud, he is buried in his own clothes without washing of the body. Martyrdom entails automatic annulment of all sin. “And do not call those who are slain in the way of Allah, ‘dead.’”²⁸

²¹ The practice of visiting graves is called *ziyarah*.

²² Lauost, *La Profession de foi d’Ibn Batta* (Damascus, 1958), 80, 149, and *ibid*, *Le précis de droit d’ Ibn Qudāma* (Beirut 1950), 21.

²³ Ibn ‘Isākīr, *Tarikh Madinat Dimashk* II, 5th ed. (Damascus: Munajjid, 1954), 188-92.

²⁴ Al-Muqattam, “City of the Dead”.

²⁵ Cf. Al-Makrizi, *al-Mawa’is wa’l-I’tibar bi’dhikral-khitat wa’l athar*, II (Beirut, n.d.), 424- 43, 451-53.

Some believe *awliya'* (holy men) also enjoy the same status after death. People who visited them when they were living visit their graves after their death to seek intercession (*shafa'*). Popular tombs are thus crowded with suppliants. During his lifetime, a saint exudes *barāka* (blessing) that continues to emanate from his grave. But, this kind of exalted reverence is discouraged; nevertheless, the practice has continued unabated and has turned into a *bida'* (a tradition not based on the

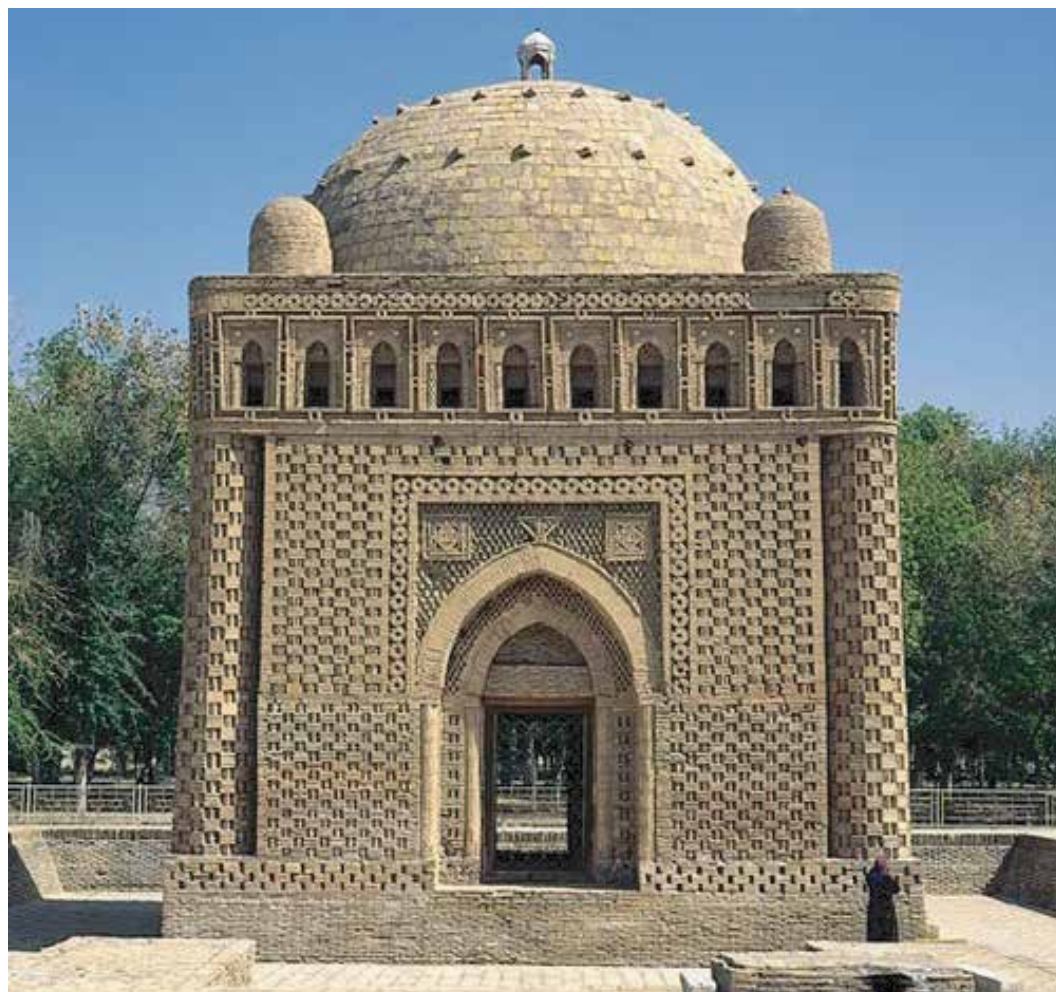


Figure 8. Tomb of the Samānids at Bukhāra.

²⁶ Muslim cemeteries were established, in general, according to a comprehensible urban logic. They are situated beyond the ramparts, close to the gates of the town: for example, in Damascus, the cemeteries of Shaykh Raslan near Bab Tuma, of al-Bab al-Saghir, of al-Sufiyya near Bab al-Jabiya, etc. (see, Kh. Moaz and S. Ory, *Inscriptions arabes de Damas, les steles funeraires. I. Le cimetiere d' al-Bab al-Saghir*, [Damascus 1977], 9 -13; in Mecca, the cemetery of al-Hajun, close to Bab Ma'la (see, al-Azraki, op.cit., II, 3, 81); Ibn Battuta, *Rihla* I, 330, Eng. trans. Gibb, I, 206-08; Ibn Jubayr, *Rihla*, Fr. trans., Gaudefroy-Demombynes II (Paris 1951) 129; in Medina, al-Baki', near the gate of the same name (Ibn Battuta, I, 286, trans. I, 179); in Baghdad, the cemeteries of Bāb Dimashk, of Bāb al-Tibn , of Bāb al-Harb, of Bāb al-Kunas, of Bāb al-Baradan, and of Bāb Abras (see, al-Khatib al-Baghdadi, *Ta'rikh Baghdad* I, [Cairo 1931], 120 – 7; J. Lassner, *The Topography of Baghdad in the Early Middle Age* [Detroit, 1970], 111-18; G. Maqdisi, *Ibn 'Aqil et la resurgence de l'Islam traditional* [Damascus, 1963]).

²⁷ Ziyārat, ed. and trans., J. Sourdel-Thomine (Damascus 1983-7), 33/76, 37/86, 74/166, and 76/172.

²⁸ Qur'ān, Sura II, *al-Baqarah*, verse 154.



Figure 9. Akbar's mausoleum at Sikandara

Qu'rān). It is believed that two angels Munkir and Nakīr visit the dead in the grave during the first night, so the vault should be big enough to allow the corpse to sit. Axial burial is a must. The body is laid horizontally and the face is turned toward Makkah.

As interest in tombs grew not only the *shāhīd* and *awliya'*, but kings and queens also began to build their tombs to enhance and maintain their glory even after death. The story of the monumental tombs begins with the tomb of the Samānids at Bukhāra (figure 8), built during the 10th century. Some of the tombs were left open to the sky irrespective of their large size. The motive behind this architectural paradox was the conviction that a grave not exposed to sky for rain and dew was unblessed, that is, the rain and dew were seen as a source of Allah's blessings. Akbar's mausoleum at Sikandara (figure 9) is open to the sky, though huge in architectural magnificence.

Another belief practiced by the rulers, king, emperors and princes was that grave containing the dead body should be of earth and not of any building material. This led to a new concept of having two graves, an original and an artificial one. For the original grave, a subterranean or underground chamber is created; this is approached generally by a bent passage. Above this underground room is built the main chamber of the mausoleum. It contains a grave too, but an empty one. This is called the cenotaph, while the original grave is the sarcophagus. A third aspect of the grave is the epitaph, the stone bearing the



Figure 10. Necropolis of Makli near Thatta



Figure 11. Tomb of Humāyūn

history and chronogram of the man buried there. The epitaph (or *kataba*) is always on the head side of the cenotaph. All major mausoleums in the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent are of this type. Another type of tomb is created much above the ground level and sometime as a tower-like structure. In the great necropolis of Makli near Thatta, Pakistan²⁹ there are several graves created above ground level (figure 10) and at Lahore, there is a famous tomb called *Serv wāla Maqbara* that contains the tomb of a Mughal princess at the top of a minaret-like structure.

Another notable burial in the Lahore area is the tomb of Queen Nūrjahān, the wife of Jahāngīr, the great Mughal Emperor. It is said that her body was neither buried underground nor over ground, but her corpse was placed in a beautiful wooden box and was hung in a subterranean chamber. At the upper level, a cenotaph was provided. In my childhood I visited this underground chamber, and saw the chains with which the sarcophagus was suspended, but the sarcophagus itself was missing. It is believed that the wooden box was made of sandalwood and was embedded with precious metals and jewels, and that the Sikh ruler of Lahore, Ranjīt Singh, out of his sheer greed, expecting a treasure inside, removed it.

The placing of tombs inside gardens became particularly popular in Iran and then, in the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent. It was an attempt to place the dead in the promised Garden of Paradise, on earth. The Qurʾān has vowed the faithful the benedictions of eternal gardens in several texts. In Sura 51, *al-Duriyāt*, verse 15, it is promised, “Surely the God-fearing shall be among the gardens and the fountains.” Another portrayal of the garden of Paradise is found in Sura 76, *al-Dāhir*, verses 5-6 and 12-22. Most pertinent of all these references is “a recompensate for their patience with a garden.”

There is also a conspicuous reference in the Qurʾān to the four rivers of Paradise: River of Pure Water, River of Pure Milk, River of Pure Honey and River of Pure Wine which shall not intoxicate the believer, but provide full taste and enjoyment (Sura 47, Muhammad^{sa}, part of verse 16). In Mughal gardens these four rivers either flowed towards the central unit of the garden or they flowed in the opposite direction, and thus transforming the whole garden complex into four gardens. This concept gave birth to the *chahārbāgh* or four-fold garden. Whenever the four emerging gardens became too big they were further divided into four, thus creating several gardens within one. In the garden of Jahāngīr’s tomb, we see four gardens laid out on the *chahārbāgh* concept. The tomb of Humāyūn has eight *chahārbāghs* (figure 11).

Mughal contribution to landscape architecture has been prodigious and invaluable. Gardens and *chahārbāghs* (figure 12) were laid out with exuberance. During the Mughal period, tombs held the pivotal place in the gardens particularly the *chahārbāghs*. In fact, many of their splendid gardens were laid around the tombs. It was due to these gardens (*raudahs*) that the tombs themselves came

²⁹ See, B. Ansari, “The Forgotten City of Sind,” *Pakistan Quarterly* VII, no. 4 (1956):21-28; H. K. Burki, “Mughal architecture in Lahore,” *Islamic Review* XXXIX, no. 12(1951): 26-28; and H. H. Cole, “Tomb of Jahangir at Shahdara near Lahore,” *Preservation of National Monuments* (India, 1884), 5.

to be wrongfully known as *raudahs* in India and Pakistan. Besides the *raudah*, the tombs of South Asia are also known as *mazār* from the Arabic word *mazāre'* means a farm full of plants and vegetation. Since the *chahārbāghs* were full of such elements, a tomb standing in the middle of gardens or greenery became known as *mazār*, but this term, like *raudah*, is also a misnomer.

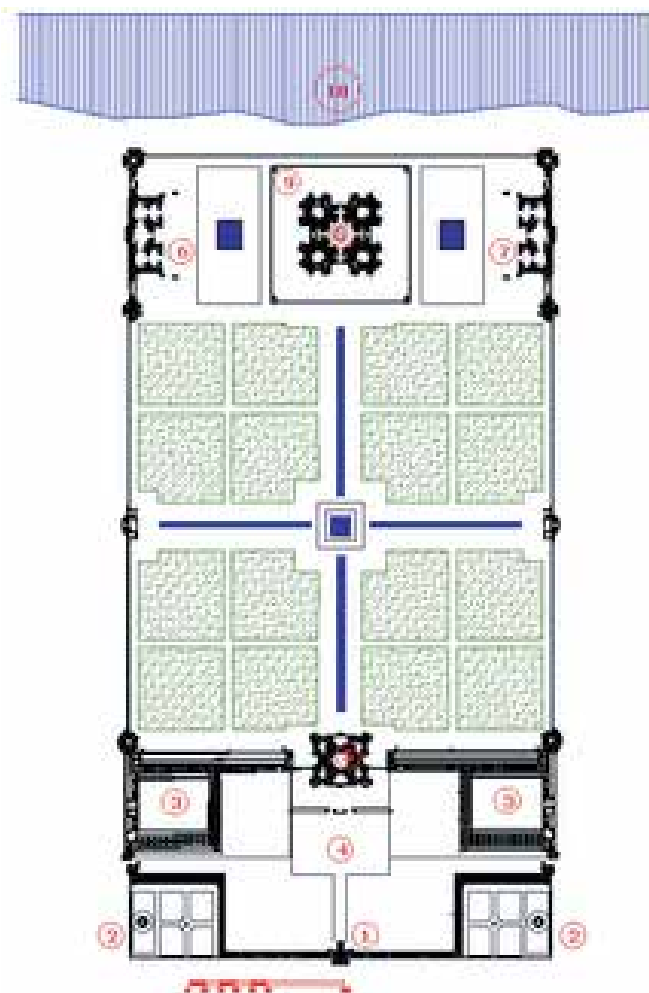


Figure 12. Ground Plan of Mughal *chahārbāghs*

*The material in this paper was given as a lecture at the Islamic Arts Museum, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in 2004.