

Patronizing Architecture in Delhi under the Lodis (1451-1526)

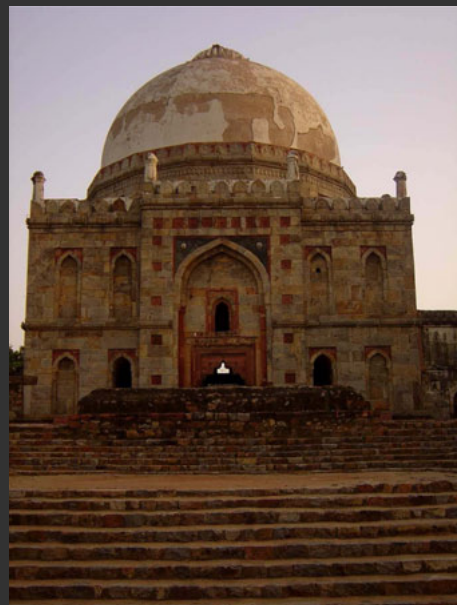
Dr. Sara Mondini, Ca' Foscari University, Venice

The Lodi dynasty, of Afghan origins, succeeded in substituting the Sayyids to the head of Sultanate in 1451, when Bahlol (1451-1489) ascended to the throne of Delhi. The figure of Bahlol Lodi as a sultan is quite discussed: his image seems to oscillate between the traits of a despot, surrounded by his strict servants and diffident towards the nobles of his court, and the portrait of a sovereign that felt more comfortable seated in the assembly together with the nobles, coherently to the Afghan tribal tradition of a king among equals. Since the few chronicles of the time that we know are often mixed with legends and fables, it is difficult today to delineate with certainty the real attitude and policy of the dynasty's founder¹. His successor, Sikandar Lodi (1489-1517), assumed to all intents and purposes the title of king and concretely demanded complete obedience to his nobles as "all-powerful king". This strong stance aimed to consolidate the power and control over Northern India and to try to avoid, or instead to reduce, rebellions and claims from the nobles. Unfortunately the problem arose again during the reign of his successor, Ibrahim Lodi (1517-1526), who was unable to oppose resistance.

Despite the scant attention paid to this period, the architectural remains ascribable to the Lodi dynasty, together with the historical events, seem to clearly testify the strong impact that the new dynasty was able to impress on Delhi's city profile, despite the often instable political situation. From an artistic point of view, the affirmation and evolution of the funerary architecture the Lodis promoted since their accession to the power seem to be still far from being completely explained. In fact, while the beginning of the second half of the 15th century, one can assist to an incredible spread of mausoleums in different districts of the capital, often complexes assembled. If one considers their presence in the wider context of the development of Islamic architecture during the Sultanate period, their number appears as disproportionate if compared to the number of other contemporary monuments that were erected². Authoritative art historians have tried to explain such a spreading of mausoleums through Delhi as a direct consequence of Lodis' political and social organisation and, more generally, of the Afghan dynasties. In their opinion³, the conception of a monarch *primus inter pares* would be crucial to understand the role played by the mausoleums in the architectural production of the dynasty. But we know, as a matter of fact, that Bahlol Lodi was not the first sultan to sit among his "highest grandees" and historical sources as the Tarikh-i Firuz Shahi and the Tarikh-i Mubarak Shahi⁴ seem to confirm that this custom had been already adopted by Firuz Shah Tughlaq (1351-1388).

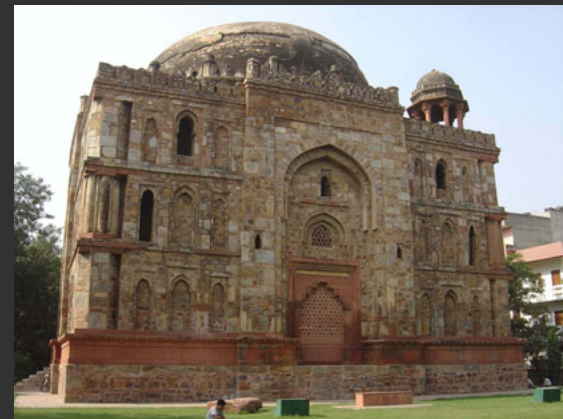


Sikandar Lodi's Tomb, Lodi Gardens



Shish Gumbad (Tomb), Lodi Gardens

Although, the attitude maintained by the previous sovereigns of the Delhi Sultanate toward the funerary architecture and its results in the production of the capital seem to be quite different and, surveying the previous examples of mausoleums, the proportions of their diffusion are eloquent enough⁵. However, a part few examples of mausoleums attributed to religious figures, already built in Delhi and located within the context of dargahs, the concept of funerary complex and necropolis on large scale does not seem to have been developed before the Lodis. All these elements, associated with the scarce clarity or contradictions of the sources, could soon generate doubts about the forcefulness of this hypothesis: the figure of a monarch *primus inter pares* does not seem to explain the extraordinary development of the funerary architecture and its motivation. In order to explain the phenomenon it could be useful to contextualize it and compare it to the tendencies concerning the developments of funerary monuments in different regions of the Subcontinent ruled by coeval Muslim dynasties. The studies carried out until now on the Deccan have remarked how the development of Sufism and the primary role that religious figures and *pir* had in court-life, being strictly connected to the regal power, could have deeply conditioned and influenced the development of the funerary architecture. In India, during some peculiar historical phases, the strong reciprocal recognition of power between the political and religious authority could, in fact, have consolidate and increase their tie and own roots and provide the chance for an interesting exchange of values and meanings.



Bare Khan Ka Gumbad, South Extension-I

Moreover, the arrival of a high number of immigrants and tradesmen, coming mainly from Central Asia and from the regions of Anatolia, could have influenced the Islamic conception of funerary complex, mixing experiences and cultural heritages. Nevertheless, the role played by all these elements in the development of the funerary architecture still needs of deeper investigations and closer examinations and it is difficult at the moment to state with certainty their eventual presence and influence on the architectural development of medieval Delhi⁶.

Percy Brown has noticed how "they excelled in memorials to the dead" and at the same time he remarked how "in the sphere of architecture it was the period of the macabre"⁷. However, except for the macabre aspect of their architectural production, the Lodis have introduced important features in the conception and shape of mausoleums that will play a crucial role in the later Mughal architecture and the peculiarity of these features emerges quite clearly through a survey of the complexes built in the capital.

Their first innovation in thinking and planning the funerary architecture is the grown importance of the concept of complex and the explicit role played by gardens in the Lodi period. Digby⁸ remarks how the original name used to identify the Lodi Gardens was Bagh-i Jod, use which is confirmed by the Babur's memories⁹ where the Persian word *bagh*, garden, recurs.

Therefore, this could demonstrate how the gardens were integral part of the original conception of the necropolis, where the mausoleums were placed together in the same area, one next to the other, growing in number through the years and announcing the idea of regal necropolis whose conception has been perpetuated even under the Mughals.

In the Lodi Gardens, moreover, the single tombs are inscribed in squared enclosures whose perimeter, marked by a wall or a path, in some cases is still clearly identifiable today. The squared gardens are often perfectly quadripartite by two perpendicular paths, which cross on the centre where the tomb is placed. Such a careful geometrical planning as context for the mausoleums could be interpreted as allegorical references to the *jannat*, the paradise promised in the Koran with the metaphorical representation of the four paradisaical rivers mentioned by the Sura of Muhammad. Purpose of these features in the funerary architecture could testify the rectitude and grandeur of the deceased and wish for him the forgiveness and his welcome to paradise, perhaps even in these funerary complexes, datable to former times to the reign of Babur and before the symbolic Mughal use of water.

An accurate study on the high number of structures patronized immediately shows how the innovations introduced during the Lodi period concern not only the general plan of the complex, but also the shape of the mausoleums. Among the complexes of medieval Delhi, in fact, starting from this period it is possible to recognise two main different typologies of structure: the first one that follows the common model widely diffused in the Islamic world since the 10th century, a simple square structure covered by a dome, while the second typology is an octagonal-based structure covered by a dome too, but in some cases two or three stairs high with or without a surrounding portico. Furthermore, the main octagonal tombs observed are all attributed to sovereigns, while the squared ones are more frequently attributed to nobles or members of the court. This element has brought the art historians to assume the idea of a major prestige ascribed to the octagonal plan and its predominant use for commemorating sovereigns. Until now the evidence has confirmed the hypothesis, but it does not seem to be supported by any source¹⁰. Despite the numerous later models, it is quite difficult to trace back the origins of the octagonal plan in India. The presence of new elements, both structural and decorative ones, and the large diffusion of the square-based mausoleum, which perfectly allows the experimentation, have induced the Lodis to realise an incredible series of variations on the same model.



Darya Khan Lohani's Tomb, West of South Extension-I

¹ Siddiqi Iqtidar Husain, 1969, *Some Aspects of Afghan Despotism in India*, Aligarh, Three Men Publication; pp. 13-16.

² Matsuo Ara, 1982, *The Lodi Rulers and the Construction of Tomb-Buildings in Delhi*, *Acta Asiatica* 43; pp. 61-80.

³ Allievi B. Maria, 1924, *Architettura Islamica del Subcontinente Indiano*, Lugano, Edizioni Arte e Moneta; p. 38; Asher Catherine B., 2003, 1992, *Architecture of Mughal India*, The New Cambridge History of India 14, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; pp. 13-14.

⁴ Siddiqi, 1969: 15-18.

⁵ To this purpose the dates reported by Ara Matsuo are emblematic; Matsuo, 1982: 61-80.

⁶ Concerning the diffusion of Sufism, it is interesting to notice that, Ara Matsuo has pointed out that among the earliest structure of Delhi there are many tombs of Sufi Saints; Matsuo, 1982: 68-69.

⁷ Brown Percy, 1975 (1956), *Indian Architecture, Islamic Period*, Bombay; D. B. Taraporevala Sons & Co. Pvt. Ltd; p. 26.

⁸ Digby Simon, 1975, *The Tomb of Bahlol Lodi*, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, Vol. 38, N.3; pp. 555-557.

⁹ Babur's memories from the History of India as told by its own Historians, *The Muhammadan Period*, 1872, The Posthumous Papers of the late Sir H. M. Elliot, K.C.B., Edited and Continued by Professor John Dawson, M.R.A.S., vol. IV, London, Trubner and Co., 8 and 60, Paternoster Row; p. 256.

¹⁰ Assuming the hypothesis of a major prestige ascribed to the octagonal plan and its preferably use to commemorate sovereigns and corroborating the theory presented by Digby - Digby, 1975 - concerning the new attribution of the Shish Gumbad to Bahlol Lodi, it would be interesting to understand the causes of the introduction of the new octagonal plan and its use and meaning.



Wazirpur Tombs (Wazirpur ka Gumbad and others)