Rachel Hirsch
Aga Khan Program Travel Grant Award 2019
Travel Report
22 April 2020

Thesis Abstract

In 1601, Emperor Akbar successfully conquered Burhanpur, a major Sufi center and capital of the Khandesh Sultanate. A decades-long process of urban construction followed, transforming the city into a regional capital on the frontier of the Mughal Empire. However, the twenty-first-century challenges of reconstructing the seventeenth-century city have largely obscured Burhanpur's significance, and isolated attempts at textual analysis or conservation fieldwork have provided only partial understandings of the city's history. Responding to these challenges, this thesis proposes a method that privileges the experiential elements of understanding a city—whether gathered from textual accounts, personal observation, or visual evidence—and posits them within a larger discourse of travel and place formation. From this method emerges a reconstruction of a new Mughal capital that was built in a series of spatial and architectural developments carried out between 1601 and 1631. The function and form of these layers of construction shifted rapidly over the course of three decades based on the needs of the expanding Mughal Empire and the priorities of the individuals sustaining it. Taken together, this thesis reveals a previously unknown process of producing a Mughal capital constituted through successive shifts in patronage that, while varying in their urban priorities, shared the collective goal of creating a legibly Mughal capital.

Research Conducted in Madhya Pradesh, India

Last winter, I proposed a research project that took as its focus the Mughal city of Burhanpur. Burhanpur is located in the present-day state of Madhya Pradesh, India and was long considered a cultural, religious, economic, and political center. Burhanpur was originally founded by rulers of the Faruqi dynasty (1382-1601), but in 1601 the Mughal emperor Akbar (r. 1556-1601) annexed the city as part of a broader agenda of imperial expansion. Burhanpur was listed as a subah (province) capital in imperial Mughal chronicles and underwent significant architectural and urban changes as a means of incorporating the city into the Mughal Empire. Over the course of three decades after its initial conquest, Burhanpur played host to various subimperial officers who governed the area of central India known as the Deccan, and in 1630 it became the imperial residence of Akbar's grandson Shah Jahan. Located along a popular trade route and known for its agriculture and textiles, Burhanpur had an active economy and attracted merchants from South Asia and Europe alike.

Despite the demonstrated importance of Burhanpur to the Mughal Empire, little has been written about its conceptualization as a Mughal city and provincial capital. Furthermore, as is the case for many Mughal buildings and cities, there are no architectural treatises on Burhanpur from the seventeenth century that have survived to the present day. For this reason, I decided to conduct fieldwork over the summer to collect and record data on how Burhanpur was conceptualized and constructed. My plan was to accumulate as much information as possible through surface archaeology observations and conversations with people in the city, and to combine my experiences with primary and secondary source materials when I returned to Cambridge. I created a travel plan and was awarded an AKPIA Travel Grant to carry out my research over the summer of 2019.

At the end of May 2019, I boarded a plane to India and after many hours of continuous travel, finally arrived in the central Indian city of Indore. I stayed in Indore for a few days to get acclimated to the time change, buy a sim card for my phone, and see some of the city that had served as the capital of the Maratha Empire (1674-1818) from 1720-1767. It was also in Indore that I began to keep a travelogue of my experiences in central India. From Indore I took a bus to Burhanpur and began making daily trips out to various sites. Every evening I made a travel plan for the sites I wanted to visit the next day. The next morning, after eating breakfast, packing my bags, purchasing water, and applying sunblock, I told the hotel clerk the sites I wished to visit. He in turn called an autovala (autorickshaw driver) to drive me to the various sites and accompanied me while I explored them. While in the field, I made voice recordings of my observations, took photographs, and drew brief sketches of what I saw. I also tracked my path to and around the sites with a GPS.

Most days followed this pattern but there were a few exceptions. One day was devoted to visiting Asirgarh Fort, a Faruqi citadel that sits atop a hill approximately 25 kilometers north of Burhanpur. For this trip, I hired a car and a driver to take me to the base of the fort, where I spent several hours doing the same surface archaeology fieldwork I conducted throughout Burhanpur. I then walked down the hill on which the fort sits and met the driver at its base. We spent the next several hours at a few other sites around Asirgarh, including an Eidgah, a pleasure palace, and the Dargah-e-Hakimi, a spiritual center and tomb complex.

In another instance of deviating from my normal routine, I spent one morning crossing the Tapti River on foot because certain sites on the southeastern bank were not accessible via autorickshaw. In retrospect, spending time on the Tapti's banks was much more important for my research than I originally expected for a number of reasons. Perhaps most importantly at least at

face value, it provided access to Mumtaz ka Maqbara, the tomb Shah Jahan's wife Mumtaz was originally buried in before he built the Taj Mahal in Agra. A less expected benefit was access to different views of the city from the southeastern bank, as well as exposure to different points of entry to sites such as the Shahi Qila. I was able to see the stairs built into a lower boundary wall that runs along the river and to look into the rooms where elephants were once kept within the palace.

I was also able to walk up to the elephant river rock commissioned by Emperor Akbar instead of merely viewing it from the top of the Shahi Qila. Up close, I could see paint markings on the rock and had the opportunity for darshan (sight of a deity) of a Shiva Linga (aniconic form of the Hindu god Shiva). Likewise, I was able to get a sense for how the Tapti River serves Burhanpur's community today. The ghats (steps leading down to a river) were crowded in the morning and the river was filled with people bathing and herding cattle.

I had a general idea of some Mughal-period sites that I wanted to see before I arrived in Burhanpur, but the number of sites I ultimately visited was exponentially larger. The hotel had a tourist guidebook they let me use to identify the historical buildings I wanted to visit, and I went to local bookstores to find additional publications on the city. Additionally, the hotel employees and autovalas with whom I interacted were generous with their personal insights into the historic city. One employee shared a video over WhatsApp of Burhanpur's sites of interest. An autovala would sometimes stop at a building along the side of the road that I had not listed on that day's itinerary. When I asked why he would say "purana hai." Because it is old. I spent the afternoons and evenings typing up my copious notes, uploading photos and GPS maps, and planning the next day's excursion. In total, I visited more than seventy sites during my stay in Burhanpur.

Conclusions and Further Development

Upon completion of my fieldwork, I was able to collate the information I collected into tools for further analysis. Using the GPS maps I made while in Burhanpur, I plotted previously unidentified sites on maps of the city. I then looked for patterns based on spatial relationships, dating, patronage, my own experiences at the site, and the experiences of travelers before me. With this data, I was able to plan and outline my thesis, which took as its basis the layers of architectural construction revealed through these patterns.

I found that over the course of four decades, Burhanpur transformed from the capital of the Faruqi dynasty to a Mughal imperial residence in successive stages. When Akbar sieged Burhanpur in 1601, the city had already been experiencing significant change for two decades prior. The 1580s and 1590s were marked by significant mosque construction as the Faruqi kings sought religious legitimization for their control of the Khandesh Sultanate. This frenzy of mosque construction occurred alongside the propagation of Sufi stories that likewise emphasized the endurance and legitimacy of Faruqi rule. An analysis of this mosque construction and myth circulation revealed anxieties about the longevity of the Faruqi dynasty that were well-founded given the threat of Mughal conquest.

Upon his annexation of Burhanpur, Emperor Akbar made notable changes to Faruqi urban fabric. Having heard that Burhanpur would always belong to the Faruqis while a particular river rock maintained its original form, he quickly commissioned its transformation into the shape of an elephant. He wrote inscriptions on the very mosques the Faruqis had used to legitimize themselves to declare his sovereignty over the city. Similar inscriptions can be found on the tombs of Faruqi rulers. All of these changes were intended to inscribe Burhanpur within the Mughal Empire by symbolically appropriating the Faruqi built landscape.

Over the course of the next thirty years, subimperial officers expanded the city with the construction of gardens, mansions, serais (rest houses), and hammams (baths). Much of this construction occurred along the underground water system built by the ingenious statesman Abdur Rahim (1556-1627). The water system started in the Satpura hills several kilometers northwest of the Faruqi city center. Bringing water from the hills into the city, it spurred additional construction in the city center and new construction at considerable distances from the Tapti River. The water system also shifted the seat of power from the Faruqi city center to Lal Bagh, a garden built by Abdul Rahim in the city's exurbs, allowing governors to distance themselves from the memory of Faruqi rule.

In 1630 Emperor Shah Jahan made Burhanpur his imperial residence. While there, he began implementing architectural motifs that would later become the hallmark of his reign. Shah Jahan's changes are seen most prominently in the Shahi Qila, Ahukhana (deer park), and Mumtaz ka Maqbara. In an innovative gesture, Shah Jahan introduced gardens to the Shahi Qila grounds, a development in garden design that would also be implemented at his residences in Agra, Lahore, and Shahjahanabad. In the Ahukhana, Shah Jahan built a closed pavilion with a bangla roof, which was associated nearly exclusively with his office, and an open pavilion supported by baluster columns, another architectural innovation dating to his reign. Mumtaz ka Maqbara offers an example of the extremely floriated details that would likewise characterize much of Shah Jahani architecture, especially the Taj Mahal. Together these forms of ornamentation transformed Burhanpur into a Shah Jahani city.

In the last section of my thesis, I explore how Burhanpur has been written about since its transformation into a Shah Jahani city. Described as a paradise by seventeenth-century resident Bhimsen Saxena and "pleasant enough" by traveler Jean de Thevenot, Burhanpur was a bustling

city in the middle of the seventeenth century. Beginning in the second half of the century, however, Burhanpur began experiencing setbacks to its development. In 1658, Emperor Aurangzeb shifted the Mughal capital of the Deccan from Burhanpur to Aurangabad. In the decades that followed, Burhanpur was frequently under attack by the Maratha Empire. As residents fled the city, Burhanpur's economy dwindled and fewer travelers visited and wrote about the city.

I note too that there has been a dearth of twentieth and twenty-first century scholarship on Mughal Burhanpur. Exceptions include a handful of economic analyses of the city and several studies that include Burhanpur's gardens and hunting grounds. But even more than Burhanpur's dwindling status as a major urban center in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, I speculate that this lacuna is the result of current methods and sources used to understand Mughal cities. I suggest instead that a method synthesizing contemporary and historical experiences of the city may shed light on the processual nature of Mughal urban construction as found in the case of Burhanpur.