

Conferenze

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The IsIAO Italian Archaeological Mission
in Afghanistan 1957-2007

Fifty Years of Research in the Heart of Eurasia

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ROBERTA GIUNTA

ISLAMIC GHAZNI: EXCAVATIONS, SURVEYS
AND NEW RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Prior to the start-up of the activities of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Afghanistan (Bombaci 1959; Scerrato 1959a; Adamesteanu 1960) what little was known of Islamic Ghazni consisted of a few relics attesting the importance and splendour enjoyed by the city between the late 10th and early 13th century, when it was chosen as the capital of two important dynasties: the Ghaznavids (who resided there between 977 and 1163)⁽¹⁾ and later the Ghurids, with the sultan Mu'izz al-dīn Muḥammad b. Sām (between 1173 and 1203)⁽²⁾.

The accounts of several famous 19th century travellers and scholars reported in particular the survival of the marble tomb erected for the celebrated Ghaznavid ruler Maḥmūd b. Sebūktikin⁽³⁾ as well as of the wooden

⁽¹⁾ The Ghaznavids remained in power until 1186 although they had lost practically all their territory during the last twenty-three years, and were able to control only the area of present-day North-west Pakistan with Lahore as the capital.

⁽²⁾ In 1150-51 Ghazni was pillaged and burned by the Ghurids who then rebuilt it several years later. After the death of Mu'izz al-dīn, and until 1215, a lieutenant of the Ghurid sultan Maḥmūd b. Ğiyāt al-dīn, Tāj al-dīn Yildiz, was appointed governor of the city.

⁽³⁾ Vigne 1840: 131, fig. on p. 267; Kennedy 1840, II: 31, 59-64; Atkinson 1842: 217-22; Masson 1842, II: 219-22; Bellew 1862: 184; Fergusson 1876: 191-95. Of these descriptions, only that of Vigne is

doors⁽⁴⁾ of his mausoleum, built by his son Mas'ūd I, and of the two minarets built entirely of baked bricks. All that is left of the minarets since the early 20th century is the lower star-shaped section (h. *c.* 20 m), which in both cases stands on a tall stone base⁽⁵⁾. Two epigraphic bands carved on the upper part of the shafts allow the two monuments to be attributed, respectively, to the Ghaznavid sultans Mas'ūd III (1099-1115) and his son Bahrām Šāh (1117-1157)⁽⁶⁾. In the early 20th century a considerable number of marble slabs, mostly consisting of architectural decoration and a few marble tomb elements, all of the Ghaznavid era, were found by the Délégation Archéologique Française led by André Godard (1925) and published by Samuel Flury (1925).

The field activities of the Italian Archaeological Mission began in 1957, although it should not be overlooked that, as early as the previous summer, Alessio Bombaci, after carrying out in-depth studies on the mediaeval historical sources (Bombaci 1957, 1958), had undertaken a first journey to Afghanistan. During his stay he also had the opportunity of viewing an interesting batch of marble slabs characterized by zoomorphic and/or anthropomorphic decoration, most of which on display in the National Museum of Kabul (Bombaci 1959: 10-12, figs. 1-8, 10-12).

In 1957 Umberto Scerrato and Alessio Bombaci opened two excavation sites on the Dasht-i Manara plain

accompanied by a partial sketch of the tomb, i.e. the epigraphic medallions on the two lateral faces of the crowning element.

⁽⁴⁾ This is the only remaining evidence of the original monument (Thomas 1860: 162).

⁽⁵⁾ In several sketches made by 19th century travellers it is possible to make out the original form of the two minarets surmounted by a cylindrical shaft, the height of which was greater than the underlying part.

⁽⁶⁾ Godard, Y.A. 1936; Sourdél-Thomine 1953: 110-21; Pinder-Wilson 1985. As the result of an erroneous interpretation of the inscription, the Bahrām Šāh minaret was for a lengthy period attributed to Maḥmūd.



Fig. 1 - 1957. Dast-i Manara plain. On the left mausoleum of Sebüktingin, on the right minaret of Mas'ūd III. (Dep. CS Neg. R 197/6; © IsIAO).

(Fig. 1), in an area lying between the citadel and the village of Rawza⁽⁷⁾. In the first site, located about 300 m east of the minaret of Mas'ūd III, a sultan's palace was unearthed, delimited by an irregular external perimeter resulting from the adaptation of a pre-existing topographic situation; at the second site, on the slopes of the hills to the north of the two minarets, a private house was

⁽⁷⁾ The two sites are easily recognized in an aerial photograph taken in 1957 as well as in a plan drawn by Norberto Antonioni based on the same photograph (Scerrato 1959a: 35-36, figs. 16-17).



Fig. 2 - 1957. *Ziyāra* Sulṭān Ibrāhīm. (Dep. CS Neg. R 1750/3; © IsIAO).

found. The excavation of the palace began in an area in which a *ziyāra*⁽⁸⁾ stood. In this sanctuary, erroneously attributed by popular tradition to the Ghaznavid sultan, Ibrāhīm, the father of Mas‘ūd III, numerous fragments of an extremely rich architectural decoration made of marble and baked brick⁽⁹⁾ were found, reused on the pavement and the inner and outer walls (Fig. 2); among the finds

⁽⁸⁾ The term *ziyāra* is currently used in present-day Afghanistan to denote both funerary enclosures and true mausoleums.

⁽⁹⁾ All the baked brick finds (13 items) were reused on the outer walls of the monument (inv. nos. C1652-C1655, C2479-C2484, C2489-2491); the marble finds (53 items) were instead found above all on the

was the upper part of a small arch in marble (100 × 72 cm) bearing an inscription referring to Mas'ūd III⁽¹⁰⁾. Other artifacts have been found reused inside the custodian's house, in the area immediately south of the *ziyāra*⁽¹¹⁾.

The excavation of the palace was carried out in the course of five campaigns (between 1957 and 1962). This residence, built of mud bricks and pressed clay, used side by side with baked brick in the points requiring greater static strength and in the facings, represents a very important example of Iranian civil architecture⁽¹²⁾. The square plan building (Fig. 3) presents a large rectangular central courtyard (42 × 20 m), entirely paved with marble slabs (Fig. 4) and surrounded by a low sidewalk on which four *iwāns* opened axially. The northern and southern *iwāns* were larger than the other two; the northern one followed the entrance⁽¹³⁾, while the southern one allowed

inside (inv. nos. C2897-C2949). The western side of this *ziyāra* was instead the origin of two square tile fragments made of yellow glazed ceramics with zoomorphic decoration (inv. nos. C3419-C3420; see also Scerrato 1962). Moreover, a trial trench dug in 1957 inside the sanctuary led to 16 fragments of architectural decoration being unearthed, 15 of which of baked brick (inv. nos. C1605-C1607, C1830-C1841) and only one of marble (inv. no. C2790), together with a bronze coin most probably of the post-Ghurid era (inv. no. C1849).

⁽¹⁰⁾ This fragment was found in the *qiblī* wall, reused as an arch in the *mīhrāb* niche (IsIAO documentation, inv. no. 2952; Bombaci 1957: 20). Three fragments of an interesting alabaster find with carved decoration on both faces were found during the removal of this '*mīhrāb*' (inv. nos. C5441-C5443).

⁽¹¹⁾ These consist of seven fragments made exclusively of baked brick (inv. nos. C1640, C1641, C1695-C1699).

⁽¹²⁾ Another important Ghaznavid palace, attributed to Maḥmūd b. Sebūktigin and thus preceding the construction of the Ghazni palace by about seventy years, was discovered in the mid 20th century by the Délégation Archéologique Française at Lashkari Bazar (Schlumberger 1978).

⁽¹³⁾ This single entrance had no overhang. We have a sketch made in the 1960s by Tullio Tamagnini to represent a reconstruction hypothesis suggested by Umberto Scerrato.

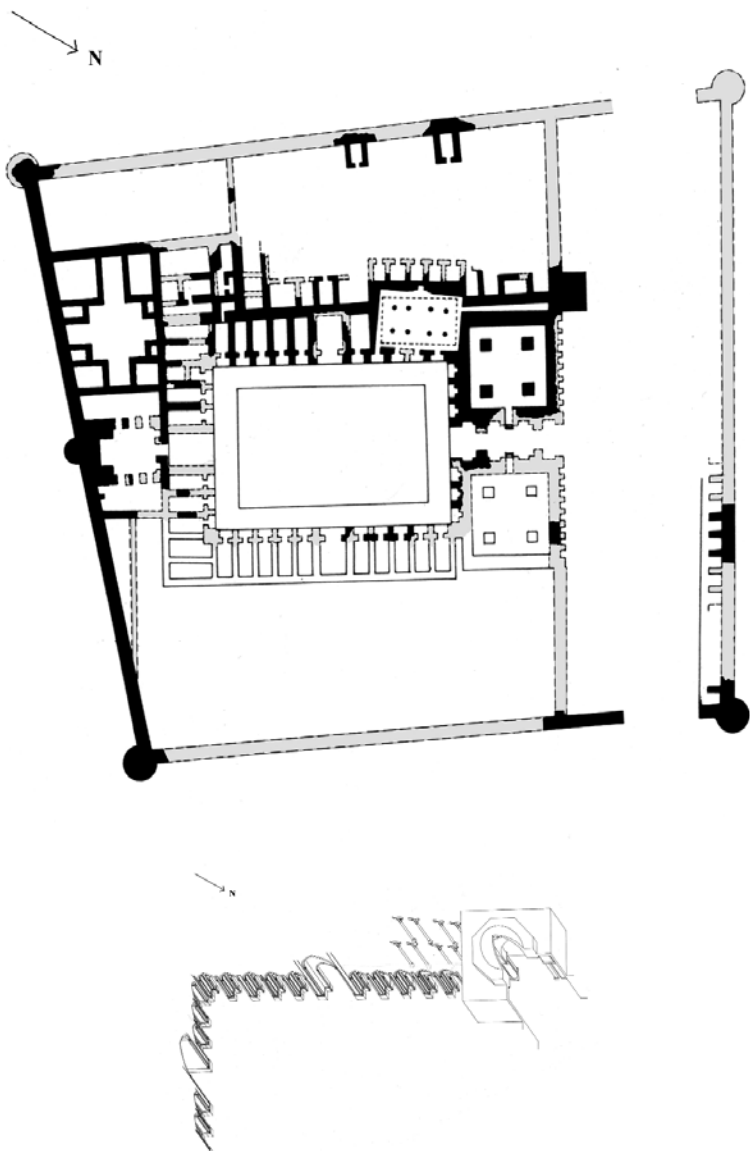


Fig. 3 - The Palace of Mas'ud III: the plan (drawing by Tullio Tamagnini, 1966) and a partial axonometric view (drawing by Danilo Rosati, 2003; © IsIAO).



Fig. 4 - 1957. The Palace of Mas'ūd III: the central courtyard. (Dep. CS Neg. R 3813/8; © IsIAO).

access to the throne room, which was perhaps originally covered by a dome. The private apartments were situated to the west of the latter and presented paving made of baked bricks laid both flat and edgewise, in an excellent state of conservation. A series of small antechambers followed by small back rooms surrounded the central courtyard on four sides. The building comprised a hypostyle mosque, with three naves – of which only the eight marble bases of the wooden columns remained – parallel to the *qibli* wall, and baked brick paving. Many of the areas of the palace – in particular those opening onto the courtyard – were characterized by a rich wall decoration consisting of marble dados and large panels,



Fig. 5 - 1966. Protection and consolidation work in the south-western side of the Palace. (Dep. CS Neg. R 4417/6; © IsIAO).

the latter both in baked brick, and in baked brick with stucco, all painted in blue, red and yellow⁽¹⁴⁾. The excavation also yielded a large quantity of pottery, both glazed and unglazed, several glass objects and some metalwork (Scerrato 1959a; see also Giunta 2005c).

After the completion of the excavations and until 1968 the structures unearthed were subjected to protection and consolidation work (Fig. 5; see also Fontana, this issue).

The excavation of the second site was instead carried out in the course of the only first campaign in 1957. The private house found, built around a quadrangular central

⁽¹⁴⁾ They consist of about 510 marble panels forming the dado of the antechambers that opened onto the central courtyard (Bombaci 1966: pls. IV-XII), the eight column bases of the prayer room (IsIAO documentation) and about ten large panels in baked brick and stucco that were used to decorate the walls of the antechambers, immediately above the marble dado. Some of these finds were found *in situ* (IsIAO documentation; see also Bombaci 1966: pls. V-X, and Rugiadi, forthcoming).



Fig. 6 - 1957. Partial view of one of the burial areas located east of the citadel. (Dep. CS Neg. R 530/11; © IsIAO).

courtyard, appeared seemingly in the same state in which it had been abandoned after some unexpected event occurred. In a niche some perfectly conserved luster painted vessels were found (Scerrato 1959a).

During the same years of the excavation campaigns, and beginning as early as 1957, the members of the mission carried out numerous surveys in the Ghazni area, and in particular in the extensive cemeteries and burial areas (Fig. 6). These had grown up around the more intensely worshipped *ziyārāt* and were concentrated above all to the west, the east and the south of the citadel, in areas far from the places in which stand the tombs of Sebükṭikin, the founder of the Ghaznavid dynasty (d. 997), north of the palace, and that of Maḥmūd (d. 1030), built according to his will on the Rawza hills (Giunta 1999, 2003a). During these surveys a very rich photographic documentation was collected that has proved invaluable today, particularly as far as the numerous architectural and decorative elements and funeral monuments are concerned. These artefacts, almost all made of marble, were often found out of context, and in many cases reused in comparatively recent monuments (Rugiadi 2007).

Among the activities carried out in the Islamic context by the Archaeological Mission starting from 1964, after the

excavation work had been completed, mention should be made firstly of the preliminary study aimed at identifying the various occupation phases of the palace since its foundation carried out by Umberto Scerrato (IsIAO documentation); secondly, it should be recalled the inspection of some important Ghaznavid marble and alabaster artefacts scattered in the Ghazni area that were stripped, examined and reconstructed in order to verify their original architectural contexts. This was the case of the arch of Mawdūd (1041-1048)⁽¹⁵⁾ and of two funeral monuments: that of Maḥmūd mentioned above and the one attributed to his son Mas‘ūd I, both reputed of uncertain dating⁽¹⁶⁾.

Furthermore, in order to achieve a *corpus* of Afghan funerary monuments of the Islamic era, including *ziyārāt* and tombs, additional surveys were carried out outside the city, both in the immediate vicinity, such as in Ramak⁽¹⁷⁾

⁽¹⁵⁾ The disassembly of the three parts forming the arch allowed a rubber impression to be made of the inscription, which is currently conserved in the IsIAO ‘Centro Scavi’. At the present state of our knowledge, this inscription is the earliest dated non funerary epigraphic document belonging to the Ghaznavid era (436/1044-45; Giunta 2005b: 532-34).

⁽¹⁶⁾ The work carried out on the component elements of the tomb of Maḥmūd confirmed its attribution which has also been supported by a recent study of the content of the epitaph and of various script styles (Giunta 2001a; 2003a: 27-44, n. 2, pls. IV-VIII). Instead the work referring to the tomb of his son showed that the various elements had been dispersed, with the possible exception of the upper monolithic element which, on the basis of its morphology and, above all, of the palaeographic analysis of the epitaph, could be attributed to the epoch of Mas‘ūd I (d. 1041). Unfortunately, precisely this element is no longer *in situ*, and is now part of a private collection (*Afghanistan* 2002: 168, n. 135, with ill.).

⁽¹⁷⁾ The internal walls of the shrine of Ramak – a village some 25 km south of Ghazni – were completely clad with reused marble elements. The latter include two important documents: the only example of a funerary stele belonging to a man coming from Nishapur (IsIAO, Neg. 4739/7, photo U. Scerrato 1966; see Giunta 2001b) and the only construction text in the Ghazni area dating to the era of the Ghurid Mu‘izz al-dīn (Giunta 2003b).

and near Naudah, and in more distant areas, such as Balkh: numerous fragmentary tomb elements were found, *in situ* or reused in the walls of more recent buildings.

In 1966 the Museum of Islamic Art of Rawza was set up inside the *ziyāra* of ‘Abd al-Razzāq (see Morganti, this issue), previously restored by the Italians themselves, where 1303 catalogued finds from both excavations and surveys, consisting above all of brickwork and stucco elements, marbles and also pottery, were conserved.

New preliminary studies of the documentation collected during field activities were resumed in the 1990s (Scerrato 1995), when Umberto Scerrato, together with Danilo Rosati, began work on the axonometric reconstruction (Fig. 3) of the Ghaznavid palace (a project that unfortunately he was unable to complete). At the same time, he decided to charge the present author to study the oldest group of funerary monuments and epitaphs, thus offering the opportunity to work on material of considerable importance, the processing of which would have been impossible without his guidance and invaluable advice. This study revealed a very peculiar tomb typology, whose morphology is not found in the other Islamic territories and the prototype of which may be individuated in the tomb of the founder of the Ghaznavid dynasty (Giunta 1999, 2003a).

The study of the funerary and civic inscriptions has produced important results both from the strictly paleographic point of view – in that it has offered insights into the history of the evolution of monumental inscriptions in the eastern areas of the Islamic territories –, and historically speaking, as it has provided further data on the official protocol of the Ghaznavid and Ghurid rulers (Giunta 1999, 2000, 2003a, 2005b, forthcoming a, forthcoming b; Giunta & Bresc 2004).

Field activities were resumed after Maurizio Taddei, Director of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Afghanistan, made a reconnaissance at Ghazni in 1999 and



Fig. 7 - 2002. *Ziyāra* Sulṭān Ibrāhīm. (Photo by G. Morganti; © IsIAO).

reported the serious situation regarding the archaeological sites (Taddei 2000). During the first campaign in 2002⁽¹⁸⁾ the opportunity arose of visiting the palace area where practically all the structures that had been unearthed and restored had disappeared, together with the finds of architectural decoration that had been discovered and left *in situ*. The *ziyāra* of Sulṭān Ibrāhīm, around which the 1957 excavations had begun, still survived although quite badly damaged (Fig. 7): during the excavations it had not been removed although it was ascertained that it had been built at an unknown date on the perimeter of the western *īwān* of the palace. During the same campaign in 2002 and the following ones (until 2004) all the finds recovered over the past thirty years by the Afghans in the area of the palace, in the Museum of Rawza, in the store of the latter and in the former store house of the Mission were reorganized and

⁽¹⁸⁾ Resumption of archaeological activities were carried out under the supervision of Giovanni Verardi, who was appointed as Director of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Afghanistan after the premature demise of Maurizio Taddei in 2000.



Fig. 8 - 2002. The storeroom of Ghazni. (Photo by G. Pastori; © IsIAO).

photographed. For the sake of security, these artefacts had been divided by the Afghans into two large batches and stored in safety in a building built by the Italians in the 1970s in Ghazni⁽¹⁹⁾ (Fig. 8), and in the National Museum of Kabul, respectively (Giunta 2005c, forthcoming c) (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9 - 2004. Marble dado panels stored in the Kabul National Museum. (Photo by the Author; © IsIAO).

At the same time it was also possible to carry out a few short inspections of some of the cemetery areas where almost all the ancient tombs today have unfortunately

⁽¹⁹⁾ This building, never completed, was intended to become the Pre-Islamic Museum of Ghazni (see Morganti, this issue).

disappeared and, if not, their elements have been reused to arrange later tombs (Ead., forthcoming c).

In 2004, within the framework of a wide-ranging programme of study and publication of documents and archaeological material belonging to IsIAO and referring to Islamic contexts, a project was set up on the topic of Islamic Ghazni (Ead. 2005c; Fontana, forthcoming). Side by side with the activities carried on in Afghanistan, the new working group is engaged in research in several different directions:

- systematic organization of excavation documents and graphic and photographic material;

- achievement and processing of computer-based archives;

- check of finds that, on the basis of agreements stipulated in the late 1960s with the Afghan authorities, were delivered to IsIAO, formerly IsMEO, which, except for some three hundred boxes, above all containing pottery, deposited them with the Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale 'G. Tucci'⁽²⁰⁾;

- the study of finds, carried out in particular on marble and alabaster (Martina Rugiadi), baked brick, and baked brick with stucco (Simona Artusi), stucco, and glass (Michael Jung), pottery (Martina Rugiadi), metalwork (Gabriella Di Flumeri Vatielli), with the involvement of 'L'Orientale' University of Naples, 'La Sapienza' University of Rome and the Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale 'G. Tucci';

- continuation of the study of epigraphic (Roberta Giunta) and numismatic (Cécile Bresc) data;

- processing of the graphic documentation (Danilo Rosati).

⁽²⁰⁾ Thanks to funding offered by this museum, in 2007 the work of restoring several baked brick and stucco finds was began under the direction of Elio Paparatti (see Di Flumeri Vatielli, this issue).

The reorganization and study of all this documentation is intended to be included in a series of publications⁽²¹⁾ that it is hoped will significantly add to our knowledge of the history, archaeology, architecture, art history and epigraphy of an area that played a decisive role within the borders of the Baghdad Caliphate and where we hope it will be possible in future to carry out further archaeological investigations.

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Giunta, forthcoming a*

⁽²¹⁾ The first of these publications, by the present author and Martina Rugiadi, will concern the study of the *corpus* of all the marble artefacts (about 700) recovered in the cemeteries, in the *ziyārāt* and in the mosques of the Ghazni area.

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