

The Abbasid Mosque in Balkh

Aga Khan Trust for Culture – Afghanistan

THE NO GONBAD OR HAJI PIYADA MOSQUE is believed by many historians and archaeologists to be one of the earliest Islamic-era religious structures in Afghanistan and possibly in the wider region. Historians Lisa Golombek, who wrote an article on the Mosque in 1969 following her visit to the site three years earlier, and Galina A. Pougatchenkova, who visited the monument in 1967 and wrote an article on the Mosque the following year, are widely credited with making the monument known to the outside world. While there seem to be differences on the exact date of the construction of the Mosque, many agree that the monument hails from the Abbasid era and attribute the timeframe for its construction to the early part of the eighth century CE, possibly with subsequent interventions extending to the first half of the ninth century.

Located 3.9 km south of the centre of modern Balkh, the monument and its remaining stucco decoration is a highly important and exquisite example of early Islamic-era architecture. Measuring approximately 400 square m (external walls of 19.5 x 20 m), the Mosque is located on a relatively flat site some 20 m to the south of a large shallow-water reservoir flanked by a number of mature plane trees. A wall enclosing the 4.2 ha site of No Gonbad was built in 2006 by the Délégation archéologique française en Afghanistan (DAFA).

The name 'No Gonbad' (nine domes) is derived from the number of masonry domes that once covered the Mosque. Significantly, the internal walls, columns, and arches were decorated with exquisite stucco motifs, including highly articulated geometric floral patterns that bear resemblance to other Abbasid-era buildings as far afield as Samarra in Mesopotamia. Originally resting on sixteen columns, of which six were free-standing with the remaining embedded into the outer enclosure walls, all of the Mosque's nine domes have since collapsed, raising the floor level by 1.5 m on average.



What remains today of this 1,200-year-old structure are large sections of the outer enclosure walls, within which three of the four free-standing circular columns, measuring approximately 1.5 m in diameter, are connected by two perpendicular arches spanning a 4.2 m distance. Left exposed to the elements for decades, resulting in severe erosion of the structure and further damage to the fine stucco decoration, it was not until 1972 that the remains of the Mosque were protected when a large metal hanger was erected above the site by the Agency for Technical Co-operation and Development (ACTED) with UNESCO funding. This metal structure was retrofitted with a geo-textile curtain wall by DAFA in 2006 that aimed at limiting further damage to the remains of the Mosque from rain carried into the building by strong northwesterly winds.

Fig.1 | In order to facilitate the consolidation work, the delicate remains of the No Gonbad Mosque were strengthened and a lightweight scaffolding structure was built as to enable access.

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In 2009, experts visiting the site concluded that the two damaged arches spanning the remaining columns were in urgent need of structural repair and consolidation. In partnership with the Afghan authorities, DAFA, the World Monuments Fund, the Associazione Giovanni Secco Suardo and the University of Florence, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) initiated a multi-year conservation project aimed at stabilizing and safeguarding key sections of the remaining architecture of this

important monument. Following a two-year analysis and pilot study programme supported by the US Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation, a comprehensive plan for structural retrofitting was prepared by AKTC and tested on a full-size replica of the columns and arches. This then received technical endorsement from the Afghan Government and project partners.

Funded by the US Embassy in Afghanistan, a team of Afghan and international experts and craftsmen led by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) has been meticulously implementing work on the structure since mid-2011. This has entailed the consolidation and repair of the unique stucco decoration, the structural repair and strengthening of the damaged masonry columns and arches, and modest enhancements to the surrounding landscape.

Further discussion is currently underway on extending the scope of the conservation project to include consolidation work on the fragile outer enclosure walls, also containing exquisite stucco decoration, which are in urgent need of repair and strengthening. A second phase of the work will ensure that the No Gonbad Mosque is safeguarded for future generations of Afghans and scholars alike, paving the way for further scientific research and investigations that are expected to reveal additional information on the history and construction of this unique monument. ■



Fig. 2 | Before structural consolidation work could commence, the exquisite stucco decoration adorning the surfaces of the building had to be stabilized and protected.

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Fig. 3 | Afghan craftsmen were provided with extensive training in conservation techniques.

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