

*'The desert and the sown': The Material World of Mughal Gardens*

I hope to use the MPhil in Early Modern History to investigate the material culture of Mughal gardens, furthering an interest that began as an undergraduate. Taking ██████████ introduced me to a way of doing history that I had never before considered. An essay I wrote on Mughal gardens of North India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan will serve as a springboard for new exploration into their material worlds. Academic literature on these gardens is relatively plentiful, but there has been no attempt to analyse them using the analytical techniques that material culture can offer. I am particularly excited to work with the material culturists in the Cambridge faculty, and believe that my project fits in well with those scholars currently working on early modern history. Moreover, Cambridge has a renowned tradition in South Asian history, and it is my goal to involve myself thoroughly in that tradition of scholarly excellence. I have been in touch with ██████████, who has prospectively, and very kindly, agreed to supervise this project.

My thesis will have two strands. The first is concerned with the 'lived experience' of the garden and its inhabitants (both human and non-human). The second, more theoretical, portion is concerned with placing the concept of 'agency' squarely within discussions of Mughal gardens and garden history more generally.

I hope that this thesis will be genuinely interdisciplinary. Whilst being primarily informed by material approaches, it will take cues from environmental history, as well as new approaches from the disciplines of anthropology, philosophy, and perhaps even archaeology.

Gardens were a central feature of the Mughal tradition. Babur, the first Mughal emperor, ensured garden spaces became vital and ubiquitous spaces of expression across the lands of the empire through his commitment to agricultural, horticultural and architectural diversity and evolution. Much of the existing literature focuses on an idea of garden as metaphor for an Islamic religious paradise or sees them as a tool of political and imperial concerns. These traditions tend to ignore the real and lived experience of sitting, living, toiling and *being* in the garden. Using a variety of primary sources informed by the toolkit of material cultural historians, my thesis will hope to give life back to the everyday user of the garden, and account for the basic sensory environment that the Mughal garden provided: considering scent and smell, sight, sound, and taste. From a social perspective, I hope to de-emphasise elite concerns in favour of lived experiences, seeing the gardens as places not primarily of religious or political metaphor but, more basically, as sites of interaction between humans and the natural world.

I hope to combine recent theoretical reflections on the senses with close readings (and in some cases, re-readings) of primary source material to unearth, as much as possible, the lived experience of garden inhabitation. My thesis will move beyond a literary conception of olfaction in the garden.

I will aim to rectify another lacuna in the academic histories of Mughal gardens: the lack of consideration of what we might call 'natural agency'. I will use Chandra Mukerji's *The Landscape Garden as Material Culture* as a guide. Most garden histories tend to emphasise the extent to which human action controlled and shaped flora and fauna. Recent developments in fields such as environmental and spatial history now understand the built (in this case,

grown) environment to be one of give-and-take between humans and nature. It is my intention to analyse the gardens of the Mughal Empire in light of this relationship.

One of the novelties of the project lies in its unique combination of sources. I will closely read elite Mughal texts such as the *Baburnama* (Babur's autobiography) and other imperial memoirs, combing the texts for particular references to the natural world. Traveller accounts will provide external viewpoints on the gardens and first-hand sensory perspectives. The collections of museums such as the V&A, British Museum, Metropolitan Museum and the Freer Sackler in Washington DC will be of great use: providing visual representations of gardens. In addition, I hope to find and consider objects that were used within gardens (such as hookah pipes) to complement written sources and primary fieldwork.

I will use the British India Office archives in the British Library (photographs, maps and archaeological findings). These archaeological plans, in particular, are a real novelty in the current historiography and will help to understand changes to the Indian landscape over time, and consider forgotten or ruined gardens. In some instances, photographs will help resurrect gardens since lost or destroyed. Sources from writers such as Mary Villiers-Stuart will also aid me in gaining an understanding of the topography of the gardens. I hope to undertake fieldwork in India (and perhaps Pakistan). More widely, I would like to start learning basic Persian using the Cambridge language centre. This will be both a challenge, and an opportunity to immerse myself more fully in my work.

Through a sensitive investigation into the experiences of inhabiting a natural space, I hope that my thesis will contribute to our understanding of the reality of life in a Mughal garden.