



Walking the Kabul Wall, Looking into History

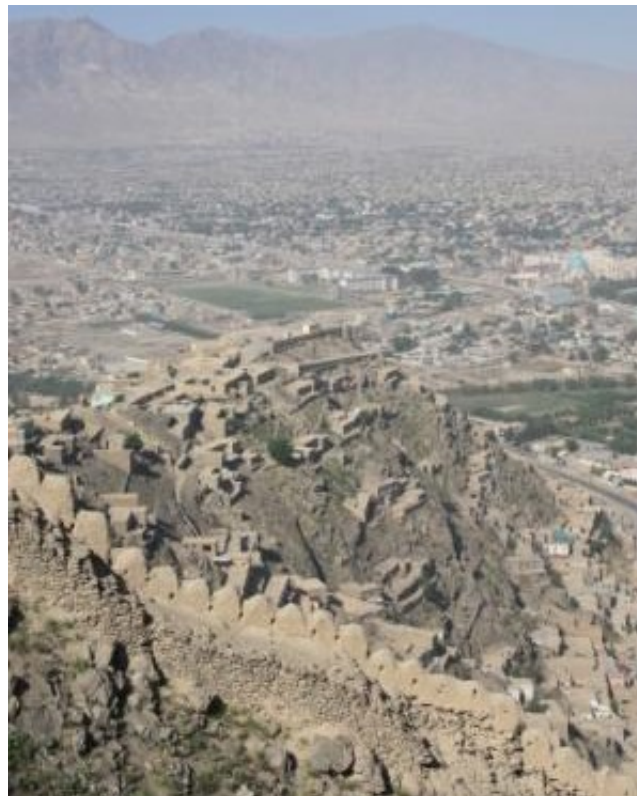
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From the roof of one of the newest buildings in Kabul, the AAN office, you can see the oldest surviving, above-ground structure in the Afghan capital, the Kabul Wall. It snakes along the Sher Darwaza mountain, now green after the spring rains. AAN Senior Analyst, Kate Clark tells some stories from the Wall: of spring flowers, war, tyranny and the freedom won by an unnamed Kabul woman.

The Kabul Wall rises sharply from the historic graveyard at Shuhada-ye Saleheen above the natural wetlands of Kol-e Hashmat Khan, a royal hunting-ground and home, once, to as many as 30,000 water birds from over one hundred species until its source was damned during the war and it became a silted up, seasonal lake (for details see [here](#)). The Wall then follows the ridge of the mountain before passing over and plunging down towards Pul-e Harten.(*)

At this time of year, the mountain is green with new growth, scented shrubs and herbs - vetchlings and other types of pea flowers, thistles, dandelions and daisies, forget-me-nots and



purple gromwell – this a common plant in the Afghan mountains with deep, purplish blue flowers, but familiar to me from a favourite south-facing sea cliff in England, one of only nine places it grows in my country – for a picture of it growing at Branscombe in Devon, see [here](#)(**). There are butterflies everywhere, along with lizards lying almost invisible on the sun-baked rocks and overhead, swallows flying. A couple of finches (*saira*) sing on the lower slopes.

The Wall is still standing, many Kabulis have told me, because it is built partly of the bones and skulls of some of the pitifully oppressed laborers who were forced to build it. Hundreds of years ago(**), I was told, first by my Dari teacher, a tyrannical king, Zamburak and his terrible brother, Zambilak, ruled Kabul.(****) Fearing invaders from the south and south-west, the King ordered a wall to be built over the mountain and stipulated that every day from each family, a man should be sent to labour on site. If any family failed, a man in lieu was hauled off by the King's men and executed. If any worker dropped mud or made a mistake in his work, he was also killed on the spot. The labourers were then forced to bury the bones and skulls of the dead in the wall. Living in the city at that time was a blacksmith's daughter(*****) who was her father's only child and used to help him in the forge. When she was grown, he married her to his apprentice. The morning after the wedding, the groom was too ill to labour on the wall. Knowing he would be killed, his bride went in his stead. Then, even when her husband was well, she kept going back, knowing he would be killed for failing to work on the day after his wedding.

One day, the King himself came to inspect the work, riding up the mountain on his horse, accompanied by soldiers. The woman pulled her scarf across her face.

'You! Come here!' said the king and she walked towards him.

'Why did you only cover your face when I arrived?' he asked her.

'I was not among men before and had no need to be shy,' she told him. 'Now a man has come and I was ashamed.'

With that she picked up a stone and hurled it at the King who fell off his horse and was killed right there and then. The labourers, shamed into action by the young woman's words, rose up against the soldiers. The rebellion spread and the people of Kabul freed themselves from the king's fearful system of tyranny and death.

This was a good story to tell on top of the mountain. But looking down on Afghanistan's great capital, there are other, sadder stories to be told. From here, you can grasp how the civil war for Kabul in the mid-1990s was fought out. It becomes clearer how the various mujahedin factions laid waste to a third of the city and killed tens of thousands of people. Artillery positions deployed on the mountains and heights of Kabul were used to fire rockets and mortars, as often as not, recklessly, disproportionately and sometimes without the slightest excuse of a military target, into the civilian neighbourhoods below. The attacks frequently broke war crimes law (for details, see the [AJP report](#)).



When I first arrived in Kabul in 1999, I scarcely met a family who had not suffered directly from the rocketing – a beloved son killed, a sister's children orphaned, tales of a terrible trek across frontlines trying to find refuge after a home was destroyed. There were acres and acres of ruins, particularly in west Kabul. It took until the post-2001 building boom for people to really populate those areas again.

Now looking out across Kabul, the city is expanding into the unseen distance, although because of the steadfastness of the mountains, it also stays the same. Nearer at hand, right on the peak and in the lee of the Wall, hundreds of trees have been planted, on the orders, the soldiers and police at the post there tell us, of the mayor. The trees seem to be mainly apple, with some apricot. One expert on trees in the city said the mountains had never before been wooded and he thought it unlikely that fruit trees especially would survive. Yet, the saplings are putting out leaves. By each young tree, a plastic water bottle has been half buried in the earth. Water evaporating from the soil, condenses on the hot plastic surface during the day and drips down to give some moisture to the root of the sapling. They appear to be thriving.

(*) Named for the German engineer who designed it, and also supervised the construction of the still-ruined Darulaman Palace to the south.

(**) This is my identification, but I do not have my flora books with me, so I am not 100% sure. The flower is definitely from the borage family. Any thoughts from botanists would be welcome.

(***) One specialist on Kabul's history (who preferred not to be named) said the Wall is reckoned to be about 1100 years old. He said, older structures certainly exist along this and other ridges. What is now known as Bala Burj (the Upper Tower, strengthened by the British when they reinforced the walls in the 19th century) is built over a Buddhist stupa, while a sizeable monastery complex is being excavated nearby, at Tapa-ye Naranj, the Orange Hill. At the western end of the wall lies another Buddhist monastery complex, now buried under Bagh-e Babur.

(****) My AAN colleague, Fabrizio Foschini writes that there is some historical context in the names of the terrible brothers, Zamburak and Zambilak. In the annals of the Abbasid chroniclers in Baghdad, the non-Muslim ruler of Zabulistan (which was then the area between Kandahar and Logar) was called Zunbil - or the Zunbil. It is not clear to what religion he held, whether some sort of Hinduism or the Zurvanite cult of Zoroastrianism. However, the neighbouring, Muslim Saffarid dynasty with its capital in Zaranj (now in modern day Nimruz) had to fight the Zunbil more than once, sending part of the war booty to the Caliph in Baghdad. The same name reappears after several decades, suggesting it was probably a title. It may well be that the name of this major 'infidel' adversary so stuck in the memory of the Muslims that it lingered in their legends about the quite distinct kings of Kabul.

(*****) The name of this 'Malalai' is not remembered, or was never told.

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