Gardens, roads and legendary tunnels: the underground memory of Mughal Lahore

James L. Wescoat Jr, Michael Brand and Naeem Mir

Research on the historical geography of South Asian cities in the Mughal period (1526-1857) is hampered by the past two centuries of destructive conquest, colonial public works, and urbanization. This paper turns to a neglected body of legends about tunnels said to link the Mughal gardens, shrines, and forts of Lahore, Pakistan. Although there is no physical evidence of tunnels, the stories parallel surface roadway networks and thereby shed light on the spatial structure of Mughal Lahore as it has been remembered and imagined up to the present day. In addition, the alleged tunnels served a variety of functions, which the paper interprets first as a body of historical evidence and then as an expression of modern cultural interest in Mughal Lahore.

Key words: Mughal empire, Lahore, gardens, tunnels, landscape memory, landscape imagination, power, powerlessness.

When Lahore became part of the Mughal empire in 1526, the conquering princes built gardens along its riverbanks, paving the way for two centuries of urban landscape change.[1] For most of this period, Lahore was a provincial capital subordinate only to Agra or Delhi; but toward the end of the 16th century Lahore briefly became the imperial capital (Figure 1). Mughal rulers consciously continued the Central Asian practice of building gardens in the cities they conquered.[2] In the case of Lahore, gardens eventually transformed the innermost courtyards of the royal citadel, the residential quarters of the walled city, and suburban routes which encircled the city and radiated out toward Delhi, Kabul, and Multan (Figure 2). Most of these gardens were formal rectilinear enclosures with exquisite waterworks, pavilions, and plantings. They were loaded with allusions to cosmologic, dynastic, and territorial themes which the Mughals fused into a distinctive architectural tradition.[3]

But the Mughal gardens of Lahore were not isolated art objects or symbols. They were nodes in an elaborate network of roads, communications, and ritual movement that linked gardens with a host of related places, including mosques, shrines, bazaars, rest stops (sarais), and settlements.[4] The last Mughal governor of Lahore fell in 1759, after which most Mughal gardens were converted to other uses, along with the physical and social network that had once connected them. Academic research has perhaps understandably concentrated on the monumental sites which survive, to the neglect of the geographical connections among them. The connections among sites are crucial, however, for understanding the evolving pattern of Mughal patronage, power, and social life.

This paper focuses on an unusual but highly suggestive body of popular evidence about the historical geography of Mughal Lahore and its gardens.
Field research in 1988 turned up numerous stories about underground passages among Mughal sites. Longtime residents insisted that tunnels (surang) ran between gardens, forts, and shrines in the region, and that these tunnels served a
variety of important social functions. Armies supposedly marched through tunnels at magical speeds; princes used them to escape a besieged fortress; and women travelled discreetly through them to visit shrines and garden retreats. Sometimes, no particular function was specified. The story simply established a spatial association between one place and another. Archaeologists dismiss these stories for lack of physical evidence. But the dearth of physical tunnels does not negate the value of tunnel stories as a body of social evidence about Mughal Lahore. Two questions are addressed in this paper: first, what do tunnel stories reveal about the historical landscape? Second, what do they reveal about modern interests in Mughal landscape history?

For tunnel stories to shed light on the historical landscape, there must either be physical evidence that tunnels existed or close parallels between tunnel stories and the actual roads or social networks which connected sites during the Mughal period. The first case is straightforwardly archaeological. The second is more complicated, for it involves a figurative mode of thought in which there is an “underground” version of surface events and patterns. If tunnel stories are figurative, and if they have persisted in the face of (or in response to) deteriorating surface connections, they constitute a valuable reservoir of collective landscape memory.

Even in cases where there are no firm connections between tunnel stories and historical evidence, the stories shed light on longstanding popular perceptions of Mughal Lahore. They show how people have imagined Mughal places and what they have valued in them. A rough distinction can be drawn between imaginary stories which refer to historical persons or places, and stories that flow within deeper currents of South Asian myth and folklore. There are many instances of historical imagination: people often claimed that a Mughal king built tunnels between places that we know were constructed after he died. They insisted that the Mughal army could travel from Delhi to Lahore by tunnel in 5 h (rather than the five weeks it might have taken on the surface). They insisted that the Mughal army could travel from Delhi to Lahore by tunnel in 5 h (rather than the five weeks it might have taken on the surface). It was common for people to infer from a blocked underground archway that a tunnel “must have” led to a prominent Mughal place nearby; that a local underground room (tehkhana) must have fed into a larger network of passages; and that the Mughal nobility must have engaged in all sorts of fantastic activities in the tunnels. Mythical accounts, by contrast, have little to do with specific Mughal places, persons, or events. They revolve around gods, demons, lovers, magic, and dangers widespread in South Asian folklore. Such stories shed more light on the cultural context of Lahore than its physical history.

The boundaries between these four categories of stories are fluid, for tunnel stories often blend fact, figuration, historical imagination, and myth. They mix seventeenth-century facts with twentieth-century legends, and seventeenth-century legends with twentieth-century facts. Such data complications are hardly surprising given the past two centuries of urban turbulence and the complex mix of popular interests in Mughal places. What this means is that discrimination is required when using tunnels to reconstruct the physical and cultural landscape of Lahore.

Research context and methods

Little physical evidence survives today to indicate how Mughal gardens fit within the network of communication and movement which radiated out from
the royal citadel in the 16th and 17th centuries. Late-18th century Lahore suffered destructive invasions by Afghan, Ghakkar, and Sikh chiefs. During the Sikh reconstruction (1761–1849), Mughal structures were salvaged for various building projects in Lahore and Amritsar. European travellers described the Sikh capital as a struggling citadel surrounded by ruinous heaps of relict Mughal monuments.

To the south of the city are hills of debris formed of the ruins of the ancient Lahore, and these again are joined by a town lying in ruins, intercepted with decayed caravan serae, sepulchral towers, and mosques, of which I counted no less than forty. These once splendid mosques call to mind a wealthy and religious age, fond of arts. A few buildings, surrounded with beautiful gardens and overshadowed by the crowns of the date palm, impart increased charms to this image of the past.

British annexation of the Punjab in 1849 led to more sweeping transformations. Railroads, highways, and canals cut huge swaths through the garden suburbs of Lahore. The original entrance to Shalamar garden was locked up and a new entry punched through its southern wall to serve a new alignment of the Grand Trunk Road. Large blocks of land were converted into residential colonies, cantonments, and industrial workshops, separating areas that were formerly adjacent or linked. As open tracts of land with a ready supply of bricks for buildings and railway ballast, gardens posed few obstacles to development.

More recently, the modern city has spread far beyond the colonial suburbs, obscuring the logic and coherence of the Mughal landscape. Figuratively speaking, the fabric of Mughal Lahore has become threadless rather than threadbare. Individual sites are protected, but the threads between them are few: an old route, a visual axis, a textual account, and the odd popular story. As a result, it becomes increasingly difficult to reconstruct the spatial context and consequences of Mughal culture.

During the past fifty years, war, migration, and social trauma have further weakened the cultural memory of Lahore. The modern distinction drawn between “locals” who resided in Lahore before the partition of India and Pakistan in 1948, and “settlers” who arrived by the hundreds of thousands after partition marks, among other things, a distinction between those who know the historic landscape and those who do not. Rural to urban migration and modernization continue to enlarge the proportion of “settlers” to “locals” in Lahore.

It is within this context that tunnel stories have been handed down among the locals, and that they came to be taken seriously in this research.

Field research conducted in 1988 revealed the importance of roads, river terraces, and Sufi shrines for reconstructing the historical geography of Mughal Lahore. It also elicited a story about tunnels at the garden of Mian Khan in Bhogiwal village. The alleged tunnels led east to Shalamar garden and west to Lahore Fort. As the survey proceeded, more tunnel stories were encountered. Interviews were conducted with at least two pre-partition residents at each site in Lahore. When a tunnel was mentioned, the following questions were asked: Where was the tunnel entry? Where did it lead? What sorts of things happened in it? Have you seen or entered it? Why is it closed now? Are there any other tunnels that you know about?

Most people took care to distinguish between tunnels they had personally seen, tunnels some family member had seen, and tunnels they had merely heard about. For most, the veracity of the story was a serious matter. Although no one
claimed to have personally entered a tunnel, few doubted their physical existence.

**Spatial patterns**

The imaginary world beneath Lahore has five geographical levels: (1) an *imperial* tunnel between Lahore and Delhi; (2) *provincial* tunnels linking Lahore and nearby *caravansarais*; (3) a *Grand Trunk* tunnel linking the citadel and its suburbs; (4) *fortress* tunnels within the walled city and citadel of Lahore; and (5) *local* tunnels between adjacent tombs and shrines in the suburbs (Figure 3; Table 1). Many residents had heard about the imperial and Grand Trunk tunnels, but they rarely knew about local tunnel stories in neighbourhoods other than their own.

Taken collectively, these stories yielded a coherent map of Mughal Lahore, a map unbroken by modern landscape change, and one in which gardens were surprisingly prominent.[11] At the imperial scale, the orientation was from Lahore toward Delhi, the capital of the Mughal empire during the latter part of Shah Jahan's reign (1638–58). Delhi was the only major city associated with the tunnel stories of Lahore. The imperial tunnel story had the same alignment as the Grand Trunk Road from Delhi to Lahore, but the tunnel reportedly surpassed the road for stealth and speed.

At the provincial scale, by contrast, tunnel stories connected Lahore with smaller places to the west, notably an old *caravansarai* named Pucci Sarai and Jahangir's princely estate in Sheikhupura. Aside from the imperial tunnel story, no Mughal legends extended east of Shalamar garden. For most of its history, Lahore was a provincial capital on the western borderlands of the Mughal realm. The orientation of an imperial tunnel to the east and provincial tunnels to the west makes sense, but further investigation in districts surrounding Lahore would help to clarify the provincial picture, as well as the effects of partition on the collective memory of Punjab.[12]

![Figure 3](image-url)

Figure 3. Tunnel stories collected in Lahore, 1988. Numbers refer to tunnels listed on Table 1
The relationship between provincial and imperial tunnels takes a curious twist at places like Pucci Sarai, however, where one tunnel supposedly led to Lahore and the other to Delhi (i.e., both to the east). The inhabitants of Pucci Sarai were not concerned that the two tunnels led in the same direction. Nor do local people accept the archaeologists’ dismissal of tunnels and tunnel portals. They insist, for example, that a runoff collection structure emptying into a large tank at the Hiran Minar complex near Sheikhupura was the opening for a large tunnel to Lahore.

By far the largest number of tunnels connected sites within the greater urban area of Lahore. These tunnels ranged from 0–10 km in length and connected 2 to
4 sites. In each story, at least one of the sites was a garden. The tunnels were described as straight and direct, never labyrinthine. Most people knew the story about a major tunnel along the Grand Trunk Road, with smaller branches tying in sites north and south of this route. The hub of these tunnels was Lahore Fort (Shahi Qila). The most important artery ran to Shalamar garden in the east and Jahangir's tomb in the west. Another large tunnel supposedly ran south from the Fort to the Chauburji garden beneath the Multan Road, but it did not continue to Multan, the second-most important city in Punjab during the Mughal period and the foremost city in medieval Punjab. There was no mention of tunnels along roads leading to the small but important towns of Sialkot, Kasur, or Ferozpur.

Several types of local tunnels were reported within the walled city. They ranged from subterranean exits at the fort to passageways beneath the gates of the city. These were the only cases supported by physical evidence; which took the form of underground rooms and passages. Lahore Fort, for example, has extensive rooms beneath its upper level. Two elite residential compounds (havelis) in the walled city also had underground rooms allegedly connecting them with the fort or a suburban garden.

Finally, there were reports of local subterranean passages between adjacent sites in the suburbs. Local suburban tunnels were associated with Sufi tombs and shrines. Underground folklore at the so-called Zebunnisa's tomb, Bibi Pakdammen's shrine, and the Waddai Mian Durs all involved religious structures. But we did not encounter tunnel stories at any Mughal period mosques.[13]

Curiously, many places that one would expect to be associated with tunnels proved blind holes. Few underground chambers, stepwells (baolis), or crypts were associated with tunnels. Nor did the widespread folktales about buried treasure in South Asia involve any tunnels. Most tunnel stories paralleled surface routes. They connected sites associated with one another during the Mughal period, most of which can be dated to the latter part of Shah Jahan's reign. This general spatial and historical pattern offers some initial support for a figurative interpretation of the tunnel stories. But to fully grasp their spatial pattern and significance, we have to consider the principal themes.

Theme and function in tunnel stories

As soon as the word tunnel (surang) is mentioned in an interview, stories about its purpose and use quickly follow. People focus on the function of tunnels, rather than their meaning.[14] The function of a tunnel depends upon the functions of the places connected (e.g., religious, military, or residential), and the theme of the particular story. Five combinations of theme and function prevail in Lahore: (1) patronage and power along the Grand Trunk Road; (2) stealth and escape in the citadel; (3) natural and supernatural dangers at river crossings; (4) modesty and passion of royal women; and (5) the flow of religious blessings. A sixth common theme deals with destruction of tunnels and explains why tunnels do not function today.

The Grand Trunk Tunnel: corridor of patronage, movement, and power

The ancient route from Afghanistan to Bengal, known as the Grand Trunk Road, is closely associated with the grandest tunnel story in Lahore and with the
places constructed along it.\[15\] The prominence that storytellers give to three places of the mid-seventeenth century—Jahangir’s tomb, Lahore fort, and Shalamar garden—indicates that the tunnel stories date to Shah Jahan’s reign or later (1628–58 AD). This is confirmed by the fact that, prior to Shah Jahan’s reign, the Grand Trunk Road did not pass by Shalamar garden.\[16\] The tunnel stories reflect a realignment in the 1640s which took the roadway from the lower terrace of Shalamar garden through the village of Baghbanpura to Mian Khan’s garden in Bhogiwal village. From there, the tunnel supposedly ran west to the Gulabi bagh (Rosewater garden) in Begumpura, northwest to the shrine of Chah Miran, and ultimately to Lahore Fort. This alignment was not straight, but it was reputed to be faster and less obstructed than the surface path. This was the tunnel through which the army could move stealthily.

A mid-17th century origin for the tunnel stories helps explain the orientation toward Delhi, which had become Shah Jahan’s capital in 1638. It also raises the question of whether tunnel stories blossomed as Lahore’s position in the empire waned. The war of succession between Aurangzeb and his brothers had had tragic consequences for Lahore’s Prince Dara Shikoh in 1659, and Aurangzeb spent little time or revenue in Lahore. Tunnel stories seem to have advanced as the city declined. Stories about the tunnel to Delhi were primarily concerned with military movement. Speed and conquest were facilitated by the tunnel. Tunnel stories had political significance on the urban scale as well. Lahore Fort, Shalamar garden, and Jahangir’s tomb represent the most powerful Mughal sites in the region. Figuratively speaking, the tunnel was a conduit of urban power. Sites located north or south of it tapped in like branch lines. There is a large garden near Fatehgarh village, for example, which lies on a small road running west toward the former garden of Gulshan Park. The caretaker at Fatehgarh garden said that a tunnel ran northwest to Shalamar garden where it connected into the main tunnel between Delhi and Lahore. Obviously, this was a privileged connection which brought the Fatehgarh garden into association with the greatest places of Lahore. No one spoke of a tunnel to the former garden of Gulshan Park. In fact, there were no tunnel stories which referred to sites that had completely vanished. This indicates that although tunnel stories originated during Shah Jahan’s reign and have persisted in the face of extraordinary urban change, they sometimes reflect later developments at their respective sites.

Because these tunnel stories are about power, they are not spatially symmetrical. Stories at Lahore Fort never refer to minor places like Fatehgarh. The lack of symmetry between stories at major and minor places sheds light on the relative hierarchy and position of places in the Mughal landscape, i.e., the power relationships between them.

It is significant that most of the places connected by the Grand Trunk tunnel stories are gardens. This observation gives support to the idea that one approached a Mughal city via a series of gardens, in this case Shalamar, Raja Bagh, Gulabi bagh, Lahore fort, Kamran’s baradari, Chauburji, and Jahangir’s tomb.\[17\] These gardens were the key cultural nodes on the Grand Trunk Road, connected with one another visually, functionally, and symbolically. One could hardly infer this from the urban landscape today, when gardens stand isolated and scattered like islands. Thus, even when the surface relations among gardens have been severed, tunnel stories have helped people remember or imagine those historical relationships.
Stealth and escape in the royal citadel

People who dismiss the tunnel stories as nonsense allow for the possibility of short escape routes from the citadel. Rebellious princes purportedly escaped from forts through such routes. It should be noted that from Babur's reign onwards (1526–30), gardens were the most immediate places of refuge for a defeated ruler fleeing his former citadel.\[18\] No true tunnel has been found to date at Lahore Fort, but short underground passages do connect basement rooms on northeast side of Jahangir's quadrangle. Some alleged tunnels regulated passage to and from the walled city. Shopkeepers near the Mochi Gate on the east side of the walled city spoke of a tunnel beneath the gate which permitted the king to pass secretly from the city after hours. Six mounted riders could travel abreast through this tunnel. Its opening was discovered several years ago by construction workers, but it was not entered because it was filled with filthy water. This particular story probably originated during the past hundred years for colonial records clearly indicate that an old drain (nulla) surrounding the city area was covered over in the mid-19th century for sanitary reasons.\[19\]

People in Lahore did not mention three common military uses of tunnels for siege, betrayal, or labyrinthine defense networks. Shah Jahan used tunnels to besiege citadels in the Deccan, for example, but not in Lahore. Neither does the city seem to have been conquered or betrayed by a secret passage discovered by an enemy.\[20\]

One of the most famous urban tunnel stories in South Asia concerns the famous Koh-i Nur diamond. In the Lahore version, Shah Shuja the owner of the diamond was imprisoned by Ranjit Singh in the Mubarak Haveli, a beautiful complex inside the Akbari Gate. Shah Shuja had hidden the diamond in his turban, but lost it when Ranjit Singh knowingly demanded to exchange turbans and then galloped off in a tunnel which traversed the entire breadth of walled city and issued out in the Badami Bagh area, north of the fort. An almost identical story is told about Nadir Shah's acquisition of the diamond in Delhi a century earlier.\[21\] Cleverness and deception are essential qualities of the inner urban tunnel stories.

The only firsthand textual account of a Mughal tunnel is told by the Jesuit Fray Sebastian Manrique, who snuck into the gallery above a royal banquet for Shah Jahan hosted at his father-in-law Asaf Khan's palace in 1641. Toward the end of the evening, a eunuch gave the signal and, "... we left at once, following our guide, who, so as not to take us through the multitude of Imperial guards, led us by some underground passages by which we arrived in the street..."\[22\] A longer tunnel associated with a palace supposedly ran from a bath (hammam) in the haveli of Nawab Mian Khan, located in the heart of the walled city, to his suburban garden in Bhogiwal village. This story echoed the more famous account about the royal tunnel from the Lahore Fort to Shalamar garden. As with the Grand Trunk tunnel, citadel tunnel stories shed light on both the spatial structure and experiential character of Mughal Lahore. Whereas the Grand Trunk tunnel was associated with military prowess, the citadel tunnels were associated with cunning and escape.

Natural and supernatural dangers at river crossings

Stories about tunnels beneath the rivers of Punjab take us furthest from the realms of history and most deeply into myth and folklore. People claim that a
tunnel plunged beneath the Ravi River between Lahore Fort, Kamran's baradari, and Jahangir's tomb. Others believe that the Ravi River flowed into tunnels beneath the fort and were used for escape by boat. The most common belief, however, was that tunnels beneath rivers had an eerie dangerous character. A boatman who rows passengers out to Kamran's baradari said the Ravi River tunnel sucks dead bodies down into it, and for that reason you do not find dead bodies in the Ravi River. Colonial officers also fell victim to the mystique of tunnels beneath a river. A tunnel supposedly ran beneath the Indus River at Attack from a Mughal sarai on the left bank to a tower on the right. When a Pioneer Officer tried to "reopen" it, disregarding warnings from villagers, the tunnel bore collapsed, drowning the Sikhs working in it. "...experts say that no such tunnel ever existed."[23]

Although not associated with a river, the watery tunnel at Tilla Jogian was supposedly filled with demons. Other tunnels have not been entered because they are perceived as dirty, dangerous places, brimming with polluted water, filth, and debris.

Hindu stories about subaqueous caverns are even more fearful and widespread. The River Tapti and the Sikander tributary of the Son River supposedly had caverns leading down to Batala, the underworld realm of the snake god and goddess, Nag and Nagina.[24] Any boat which capsized above these caverns was lost. River crossings were inherently fearful, as Punjabi folktales about the drowning of Sohni and Mahival indicate.[25] Tunnel stories exaggerated some of those fears and alleviated others; and in the end, they shed more light on the psychocultural than physical landscape of Punjab.

The modesty and passion of royal women

It was often suggested that tunnels provided a discreet passage for women of the royal household who could travel from the fort to gardens, parks, and reservoirs on the outskirts of the city. Tunnels of this sort supposedly ran from Lahore Fort, across the Ravi River, to Kamran's baradari. The most extreme case of a subterranean refuge for women in Lahore is the story of Bibi Pakdammen (also known as Bibi Haj[26]). Sunni and Shia histories differ on the identity of this pious woman, but they converge on the subject of her fate. During a period of political unrest in Lahore, Bibi Pakdammen felt so threatened by the advance of hostile men that she prayed for the ground to swallow her and her companions up, and her prayer was granted. This underground refuge served as her passage to paradise.

The modesty and concealment of elite women was an obvious matter of concern. Consider the behaviour of Francois Bernier, a sophisticated French physician at the Mughal court in the mid-seventeenth century:

When at Lahor I had recourse to a little artifice, often practiced by the Mogols to obtain a sight of these treasures [women]; the women of that time being the finest brunettes in all the Indies and justly renowned for their fine and slender shapes. I followed the steps of some elephants, particularly one richly harnessed and was sure to be gratified by the sight I was in search of because the ladies no sooner hear the tinkling of the silver bells suspended from both sides of the elephant than they all put their heads to the windows.[27]

Given the extent to which men would go to get a glimpse of women, tunnel stories offered some assurance that they could travel without harassment.
The same theme occurs in pre-Mughal tunnel stories in Delhi. According to a 16th century Jesuit emissary to the Mughal court named Father Monserrate, Sultan Firoz Shah Tughluq (1351–88) constructed three tunnels from his fort at Kotla Firoz Shah out into the suburbs of Delhi. Abul Fazl, court historian to the third Mughal king, gives the same information as Monserrate when describing Delhi in a geographical section of the *Ain-i Akbari.* Feroz Shah’s tunnels were mentioned again in Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan’s inventory of historical monuments of Delhi in the mid-19th century, and a detailed textual search was conducted in the early years of the twentieth century by a Jesuit scholar named Hosten, who repeated the notion that the tunnels provided discreet passage for the women of the court. Hosten noted in passing that the famous Portuguese chronicler, Diego da Couta, had mentioned tunnels connecting the Deccan with Agra, but such stories are not encountered in Mughal texts. Hosten was completely frustrated in his search to discover physical evidence of Firoz Shah’s tunnels in Delhi.

This fascination with Sultanate tunnel stories, which began during the Mughal period, reinforces four points introduced earlier in the paper: first, Mughal tunnel stories were influenced by previous legends in northern India; second, tunnel stories persisted after the decline of the dynasty which built them; third, they gave a sense of the spatial structure of the citadel and its suburbs; and fourth, by enabling the free passage of women, they offered some imagined relief from the social constraints and conflicts which operated on the surface.

Not all tunnels protected the modesty of women. Some served as secret passages linking the house of a lover with the chambers of his beloved. One thinks here of the “thief of love” stories in Bengali literature, as well as in the *Hasht Bihisht* of Amir Khusrau. In each case lovers with extraordinary intelligence and passion were separated by insurmountable barriers which could only be circumvented through a tunnel. One person in Lahore suggested that the princess Zebunnisa “must have” met her lover in the harem of Lahore Fort via a tunnel. Others argued that the death of the lover occurred near her tomb on the Multan road, and that no tunnel was involved. Neither account is substantiated by contemporary Mughal or European texts. Instead, they represent a large genre of stories about errant lovers who somehow found their way into the royal harem and rarely exited alive. For more humble lovers, who do not dare to meet in secret, tunnel stories continue to fuel unfulfilled romances and passions. Fantasies of this sort abound in popular Urdu films and literature, where the tragic “Anarkali” escapes her awful fate through a tunnel. In this case and many others like it, tunnel stories involve human encounters that are risky or impossible on the surface. They link imaginary landscapes of passionate freedom with historical places and times.

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*The flow of divine blessings*

There are hundreds of Sufi shrines in Lahore, but only a few are associated with tunnel stories. Among the shrines lying outside the royal tomb gardens of Jahangir, Asaf Khan and Nur Jahan, for example, we came across no stories about underground connections with the nearby Sufi shrines. This can be explained in part by the ambivalent relationships between pirs and kings. There are several humorous historical accounts about Mughal kings who sent for a
Sufi saint, asking what they could do to be of service, only to have the saint demand only that he never be summoned or disturbed again.

The alleged tunnels between shrines and gardens were highly localized. One tunnel supposedly ran 300 m from the so-called tomb of princess Zebunnissa to the tomb of her pir Rustam Shah Ghazi in the Nawankot area of southern Lahore. The tombs are today separated by the Multan Road which slashes through the princess’ former tomb garden. The tunnel between these tombs supposedly allowed Aurangzeb’s daughter to travel discreetly to her pir’s compound (khanqah) for religious instruction during her lifetime. When asked why the tunnel ran between two tombs if it was for living persons, and how it functioned after the death of the pir and princess, people grew uncomfortable. Most stated that it was simply closed up—a former passage between two places. But one person insisted that the tunnel had continuing significance. He said the tunnel channelled the saint’s divine blessings and power (barkat) to his devotee.[33] Barkat is spatially localized at Sufi shrines. It does not dissipate after the death of the pir; nor do dead bodies rot in the presence of the pir’s barkat.[34] Any physical contact with the pir’s grave including, presumably, tunnels aids in the transmission of blessings.

There were no accounts of saints actually moving through the tunnels. Dead saints do not need to move in order to influence what happens in the world or underground, as was revealed at the adjacent shrines of Waddai Mian and a strict saint named Sayyid Mahmoud Shah. Some blind students studying at the school (madrassah) of Waddai Mian had offended Sayyid Mahmoud Shah by praying in the wrong direction and urinating near his shrine. The angry saint punished the boys by causing them to become frozen in their offending positions. Eventually, the dead soul of Waddai Mian interceded underground with the dead soul of Sayyid Mahmoud Shah on their behalf. Although no physical tunnel was involved, there was an underground transmission of power analogous to the tunnel stories.

Only one story about a religious place did not involve a religious function. A small shrine for Baba Mustaffa, located on the Shalamar Link Road, was reportedly connected to Shalamar garden by tunnel. There were no local explanations for this connection—no movement, no religious instruction, no barkat. Instead, the tunnel story was simply a claim about the local saint’s position within the most important constellation of places in the city.

Destruction of tunnels

Local people could often point to an alleged tunnel portal, but no one had gone beyond the entrance. Some explanations have already been stated (e.g., water, demons, filth, and collapse). People offered another very important set of explanations, however, for the inaccessibility of tunnels. They said with some bitterness and regret that conquering armies had purposefully destroyed the tunnels. “The Sikhs blew them up.” “The British filled them with water.” Although we do find Sikh and British records which deal with the destruction of historical buildings in Lahore, none refer to tunnels. Popular explanations for the destruction of tunnels are once again a reflection of what happened on the surface. Legendary tunnels which enabled historical figures to escape historical situations, and which now enable a modern society to imagine or remember the
coherence of the bygone landscape, have themselves been vulnerable to historical processes of conquest and destruction.

Conclusions

The key difference between tunnel stories and the historical landscape, however, is that the memory of historical roads and land-use patterns has eroded over time while tunnel stories have persisted. To the extent that tunnel stories reflect historical patterns of communication and movement, therefore, they constitute a valuable reservoir of collective memory about Mughal Lahore. More concretely, tunnel stories offer the following insights into the historical landscape of mid-seventeenth-century Lahore:

1. The late Mughal period city was primarily aligned along the Grand Trunk Road, punctuated by a network of monumental gardens leading into and out from the royal citadel. A secondary axis along the Multan Road was just developing at that time. These two major roadways had replaced an earlier set of routes running northwest-southeast, for which no tunnel stories exist.

2. After 1638, Lahore was increasingly dominated by Delhi, eclipsing its former centrality within the empire. It is not surprising therefore that historical connections with Multan to the south, Sialkot to the north, central Asian cities of the Timurid heartland to the northwest, and even the former Mughal capital of Agra have not endured in the collective memory of Lahore.

3. The hierarchy of Mughal places in Lahore is reflected in the assymetrical pattern of tunnel stories and the specific connections listed in Table 1. Tunnel stories strengthen our ideas about known connections, such as between Shalamar and Lahore Fort; and shed new light on the geography of seemingly isolated late Mughal places, like Fatehgarh garden.

4. With the exception of gardens near Sufi shrines, places of local importance were more likely to be associated with monumental sites at a distance rather than other local places, indicating that an historical consciousness of the "city" exists at the level of the locale, as well as within a larger but still limited constellation of Mughal places.

The tunnel stories also shed light on the modern meaning of Mughal Lahore. When people spoke Mughal Lahore, they meant the landscape of the mid-seventeenth-century, when Shah Jahan was shifting his capital to Delhi, and Lahore was losing its imperial status. Impressive architectural projects continued for some time; and it was this last semblance of greatness that the tunnel stories fixed within the popular memory. Tunnel stories then served as local cultural "maps" of Mughal Lahore that endured 18th century invasions and modern urban projects.

At this point, the most compelling interpretation of tunnel stories is that they express a psychocultural struggle with the loss of urban integrity; i.e., the loss of spatial coherence, autonomy, and power. The problem of spatial coherence is the easiest to substantiate. Most tunnel stories involve places which were formerly related to one another, but which now stand separated. Zebunnissa and Rustam Shah Ghazi's tombs are bifurcated by the Multan Road, and a tunnel is said to link them.

If tunnel stories are viewed not just as cultural artifacts of Mughal times, but as a subconscious will to remember Lahore when it was powerful and whole, then the six themes discussed above begin to make sense as a group. All six are
concerned with power, or the loss of power. The army marched to conquest in a regional tunnel, or fled through a fortress tunnel. Women travelled discreetly in one tunnel, and met their lovers in another. Events which were difficult or impossible on the surface, could occur underground. Religious powers also flowed underground from *pir* to devotee. Fantasy, whimsy, and escapism certainly enter into tunnel stories, but what the stories share is a concern for the vicissitudes of power.

This makes it especially troubling that these alleged conduits of power are inaccessible today. "The Sikhs blew them up; the British filled them with water." Part of the story always deals with the destruction or inaccessibility of the tunnel. Tunnels cannot be entered. But unlike a vanished road, they are not forgotten. A full interpretation of tunnel stories would require much more detailed interviewing; but one promising hypothesis is that, in addition to maintaining the legendary connections within an historic landscape, tunnel stories represent a genre of popular criticism. Things which were (and still are) impossible on the surface, can take place underground. Perhaps the most critical commentary on the history of Lahore is that the power and spatial coherence expressed by tunnel networks of the Mughal period are acknowledged to be absent today.

In addition to what they reveal about Lahore, tunnel stories raise broader questions for geographical research. They suggest the need for more serious examination of imaginary landscapes: first as a body of evidence for reconstructing historic landscapes; second, as a popular criticism of urban change; third, as an expression of historical tensions between social wants and realities; and fourth, as a line of insight into the enduring landscape interests and concerns of local social groups.

These general propositions in turn cut across three realms of contemporary scholarship which have loomed outside the scope of the present paper. First, we believe there are some affinities between the type of study undertaken here and recent Anglo-American writing about landscape iconography, political symbolism, and commemorative places. But these affinities have yet to be formulated in explicit theoretical and methodological terms. Any enterprise of that sort faces a second stream of scholarship which challenges "western interests" in "Asian places." Why are we really writing about Mughal tunnels, and why are you reading about them? Questions of this sort dominate the burgeoning critical literature on "orientalism," which can be most generally defined as the activity of distinguishing, enjoying, and criticizing some cultural "other". Orientalism has been characterized as a problem of "imaginative geographies," but there have been few incisive investigations of geographical imagination to date. Once the imaginary landscapes of "difference" have been unveiled, we encounter a third stream of cross-cultural research which concentrates on transformative historical interactions between South Asian, European, and American places—rather than on affinities and differences. This broad field ranges from encyclopedic surveys like Lach's *Asia in Making of Europe* to more focussed and critical studies of colonial architecture in India, oriental architecture in the west, and world's fairs.

As with the tunnel stories of Lahore, we stand outside the portal to each of these more complex lines of inquiry. Contemporary scholars argue that there are indeed more sophisticated paths between places, cultures, and times. The new routes are said to offer greater powers of interpretation. They may help us escape
some former problems. But they are also blocked by formidable demons, difficulties, and dirt.

*University of Colorado, Boulder*

*Australian National Gallery, Canberra*

*University of Engineering and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan*

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**Notes**

[1] The term “Mughal” (= Mogol, Moghul, Mogul, etc.) refers to the dynasty which governed Punjab and northern India from the early-16th to mid-18th centuries with several brief interruptions. The dynastic use of the word Mughal differs from its ethnological meaning, as discussed in E. Dennison Ross, *A history of the Moghuls of central Asia being the Tarikh-i Rashidi of Mirza Muhammad Dughlat* (New York 1970) 28–51. Mughal rulers attached great importance to their descent from Timur, the Turkish conqueror from Central Asia, as discussed in Thomas Lentz and Glenn Lowry, *Timur and the princely vision: Persian art and culture in the 15th century* (Los Angeles 1989). The term “urban landscape” has no exact parallel in Mughal sources. The words city and urban refer here to a broad geographical area which included the royal palace complex, the walled town, and suburban places constructed within one day’s march from the citadel.


[5] Interviews with officials of the Pakistan Department of Archaeology (Northern Circle, Lahore, 1988–9)


[8] American and British geographers have written a great deal about the relations between landscape imagination and history, including the following reviews: Hugh C. Prince, Real, imagined and abstract worlds of the past, *Progress in Geography* 3 (1971) chapter 2; and John K. Wright, ‘Terra incognita: the place of imagination in geography, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 37 (1947) 1–15. Unfortunately, none of these works deal with South Asia, imaginary tunnels, or the “archaeological” character of landscape legends

[9] Leopold von Orlich, *Travels in India, including Sindh and the Panjab* v. 1 (London 1845) 211

[10] Field survey of some 200 Mughal period sites in Lahore, mapped at a scale of 1:10,000

[11] This composite map of tunnel stories is useful for various points of geographical interpretation and reconstruction, but it does not reflect the perspective of any particular social group in Lahore (i.e., it is a “foreign” way of thinking about the topic)

[12] Sikh tunnel stories were encountered along the international border in the eastern Lahore district villages like Padanah, but these alleged tunnels were local and unconnected with Lahore. Given that all but a few tunnel stories deal with Mughal places, future investigations could draw upon the listings of towns and archaeological sites provided in Abu’l-Fazl Allami, *Ain-i Akbari* (Delhi 1977 reprint); Anon., *Objects of antiquarian interest in the Punjab and its dependencies* (Lahore 1875); and Subhash Parihar, *Mughal monuments in the Punjab and Haryana* (New Delhi 1984)

[13] The absence of tunnel stories at Mughal mosques reflects, in part, the critical attitude of more orthodox Muslims toward miracle stories and secular fantasies, neither of which should be associated with a mosque

[14] Western scholarship on “underground space” tends to leap quickly to questions of meaning and symbolism, as, for example, in Gaston Bachelard, *The poetics of space* (Boston 1969) who is concerned with subconscious and cosmic fears; Mircea Eliade, *The sacred and the profane* (New York 1959) who speaks of the “telluric Mother”; and Victor Turner, *The ritual passage* (Chicago 1960) who is the most concrete in interpreting the underground *Isoma* ritual as a transformative process similar to Van Gennep’s idea of the “territorial passage” in *The rites of passage* (Chicago 1960). None of these academic approaches or interpretations fits the South Asian tunnel stories


[16] The Grand Trunk Road originally ran some three km to the south of Shalamar garden

[17] The best account of the role of Timurid gardens in approaching a city is found in Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo, *Embassy to Tamerlane*, trans. by Guy Le Strange (London 1928)


[19] Punjab archives, file 26–7, March 15, 1851


[23] *Attock district gazetteer* (Lahore 1930) 316


[26] Interviews at the shrine of Bibi Pakdammen, 1988; Latif, Lahore, 213
[29] Rev. H. Hosten, Father A. Monserrate’s description of Delhi (1581), Firoz Shah’s tunnels *Journals of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* (1911) 99–108; and *idem.*., Firoz Shah’s tunnels at Delhi *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* (1912) 279–81
[32] William Finch, *Early travels in India*, W. Foster (Ed.) (New Delhi 1985) 122–87 reported that a Mughal king had one of his courtesans encased within a wall for her suggestive behavior toward his son; pers. comm. with Robert Skelton
[34] W. Crooke, *Popular religion and folk-lore*, v. 1, 184–5
[35] For example, Denis Cosgrove, The myth and stones of Venice: an historical geography of a symbolic landscape *Journal of Historical Geography* 8 (1982) 145–69; and Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels (Eds), *The iconography of landscape* (Cambridge 1988)