The role of religion and tradition in garden conservation: A case study of Qadamgah tomb-garden, Neyshabur, Iran
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Introduction

After the Venice Charter of 1964, the policies, guidelines, regulations, selection criteria, theories, concepts and terminology regarding heritage conservation changed, and continue to evolve. The approach towards heritage has expanded, moving away from a focus on single important monuments to include the environments and contextual surrounding of heritage, from a static, museum-like approach to a more dynamic one.¹ However, in practice, conservation works that are guided by the of ICOMOS² charters (e.g. the Nara Document on Authenticity of 1994, Burra Charter of 1999³) are more concerned with preserving the ‘material authenticity’ and the ‘original fabric’ of cultural heritage, without considering the importance of authenticity in terms of intangible/intrinsic values. Concerning architectural conservation, ‘authentic restoration’ is hard to achieve, in particular with respect to historical landscape and gardens, due to the nature of their dynamic process of change.⁴ This paper will set out to depict the potential role of Shi’a belief and traditions as an alternative strategy for garden conservation through the examination of Qadamgah tomb-garden as a case study. This provides a contrast to the dominant material approach to conserving cultural heritage, motivated by the economic or political inclinations of the authorities or managers of the heritage sites.

Qadamgah is a physical representation of the belief of Iranians towards their eighth Imam. According to Shi’a Muslims, the twelve divine Imams are the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) through his daughter, Fatima and his son-in-law, Imam Ali. In Shi’a doctrine, the Imam acts as a mediator between God and Muslims, and is in a state of infallibility (Ismah).⁵ Therefore the status of the Imam and Imamzadeh⁶ is exalted beyond that of any notable Sunni, and thus enjoys the nature of sacredness.⁷ Qadamgah also embodies theological meaning, as well as aesthetic associations with the Paradise garden of the Hereafter described in the Qur’an. While the dead body of Imam Reza is physically absent, the blessedness of his presence in the early ninth century still exists, and it continues to play a crucial role for perpetuating the life of this garden in twentieth-first century Iran. In the case of Qadamgah, no matter whether the miraculous stories associated with its spring and footprint of Imam Reza are correct or bogus, no matter the extent to which the material authenticity of the tomb-garden remains, and no matter what kind of attitudes towards conservation have had an impact upon it, we can now say that the

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² International Council on Monuments and Sites.
³ ICOMOS-IFLA, Historic Gardens and Landscapes (the Florence Charter), (Florence: ICOMOS-IFLA, 1982).
⁵ Shi’a Muslims have faith in twelve Imams as the best protectors and converters of Muhammad Sunnah, who have the best knowledge regarding Qur’an and Islam.

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conservation of its intangible aspect is more achievable, and the garden is more ‘authentic’ in terms of its spirit and function, which is one part of an ideal conservation scenario in international ICOMOS charters.

Qadamgah garden: A brief history

Qadamgah tomb-garden is located in the village of the same name 24 kilometers east of Neyshabur, Iran, and was built in the early seventeenth century (Figs. 1 & 2). The development and formation of Qadamgah as a village rests on its association with a miraculous spring called Cheshme Hazrat, in addition to the carved stone footprint of Imam Reza, the eighth Shi’a Imam. In about 200 AH/815 AD, when Imam Reza (A.S.) travelled from Medina in Saudi Arabia to al-Ma’mun’s court in Khurasan, on his way to Marv he stopped at the village to say a prayer. It is said that his retinue claimed that there was no water in that place, but Imam Reza removed a heavy stone and under that there was a source of water.

Another narrative also said that due to the absence of water for ablutions before praying, he decided to perform dry ablutions (Tayammum),7 when the water sprang out miraculously at this spot. According to locals, after his prayer, the impression of his feet appeared on the stone, while others are of the belief that it was carved by stonemasons during the seventeenth century in order to depict the blessedness of Imam Reza’s presence in this place. Due to the existence of the carved stone footprint attributed to Imam Reza, the site was given the name of Qadamgah, literally the ‘place of foot’ or ‘footing’ (Qadam means ‘foot’ and gah means ‘place’). However, the authenticity of feet could be debatable, as there are various centuries-old narratives about the carved stone footprint. ‘A similar impression of the Imam’s feet is preserved in the shrine of Imamzadeh Muhammad Mahrouq,9 the relative of Imam Reza, in Neyshabur, which seems to suggest that a miracle also took place while Imam Reza passed through that city’.10 Due to the governance of Sunni rulers in Iran, the sacred spring was covered over until the seventeenth century in order to hide its miraculous origin.

It was only during the Safavid dynasty (1501-1736) that emphasis was given to the construction and refurbishing of the holy shrines and tomb-gardens of Imam and Imamzadeh as a result of the domination of Shiism.11 For the first time in the history of Islam, Shah Ismail, the founder of the Safavid dynasty, selected Shi’a as the official state religion to maintain the internal cohesion of Iran, and to differentiate it from its powerful neighbours, particularly

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7 **Tayammum** is an act of dry Muslim ablution using sand or soil when there is no available clean water.
8 Qadamgah village previously was known as Hemra, Sorkhak and Alibab.
10 Hillenbrand, p.262.
11 After Arab conquest in the seventh century and almost 900 years of foreign domination, the Safavid, as native rulers, revived the Persian sovereignty and dominated most parts of Iran. *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. by E. Van Donzel, vol. 7 (Boston: Brill,1998), p.765.
the Sunni Ottoman Empire (1299-1923). Safavid Kings concentrated on the construction of tombs of Shi’a notables and their ancestral Sufis to venerate the Divine, and also to reassert their significance as the symbol of their kingship. This was in contrast to Mughal kings, who generally built funerary tomb-gardens for the veneration of worldly love—the most famous example of which is the Taj Mahal in Agra, which Shah Jahan, the loving husband, constructed for his wife, Mumtaz Mahal—or the Homayun tomb in Delhi.\footnote{However, apart from religious dimensions manifested in the \textit{chaharbagh} layout of these tomb-gardens, Taj Mahal and Homayun also had ‘funerary-dynastic and religious associations’ and many rituals were practiced. See Ebba Koch, ‘Mughal Palace Gardens from Babur to Shah Jahan (1526-1648)’, in \textit{Muqarnas}, 14 (1997), 143-65; Sadaf Ansari, ‘Constructing and Consuming “Heritage”: Humayun’s Tomb in Popular Perception’ (Unpublished master’s thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2003). Moreover, many of these tomb-gardens such as Data Ganj Bakhsh and Milam Mir in Lahore were constructed for Sufis. See James L. Wescot, ‘From the Gardens of the “Qur’an” to the “Gardens” of Lahore’, in \textit{Landscape Research}, 20 (1995), 19-29.}

In 1587, with the rise of Shah Abbas I, the fifth and greatest Safavid King, the embellishment and renovation of Shi’a shrines or tombs of Imamzadeh entered a new phase. From 1587 to 1629, in order to spread and consolidate Shiasm, Shah Abbas decided to transform Mashhad, the authentic resting-place of Imam Reza, into the main Shi’a centre.\footnote{Charles Melville, ‘Shah Abbas and the Pilgrimage to Mashhad’, in \textit{Safavid Persia}, ed. by Charles Melville (London: I. B. Tauris, 1996).} For that purpose, in 1601 he travelled to Mashhad from Isfahan on foot, ordered the reconstruction and development of Imam Reza’s holy shrine, and through the construction of caravansaries opened a safe route for pilgrimage to Mashhad.\footnote{Grigor, p.86.} During his reign, grand purpose-built tombs were constructed for the ardent devotees of Imam Reza, such as Khajeh Rabi in Mashhad, or any area that was blessed by the Imam’s attendance, such as Qadamgah in Neyshabur. Qadamgah gained the status of a tomb complex, as it was located on the pilgrimage route to Mashhad. Shah Abbas ordered the construction of a mausoleum around the sacred spring in approximately 1020AH/1611AD (Fig.3).

Under his rule, the run-of-the-mill mausoleum of Qadamgah and Imamzadeh Mahrouq in Neyshabour (1041AH/1631AD) and Khajeh Rabi in Mashhad ‘were formed in [a] definite architectural style that much differed from Timurid predecessors’.\footnote{Hillenbrand, p.306.} After the construction of the tomb in Qadamgah, the reliquary of the Imam’s feet was installed in its southern wall, set at the height of 1.5 m (Fig.4).

Considering its landscape design, the layout of Qadamgah garden adopted the typical \textit{chaharbagh} pattern, with its physical form evoking the image of Paradise described in the Holy Qur’an.\footnote{James L. Wescot, Islamic Gardens and Landscapes (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press; Bristol: University Presses Marketing, 2008).} However, in contrast to Persian palace gardens, the monumental tomb-garden of Qadamgah contains a dual connotation, as apart from its \textit{chaharbagh} layout the garden itself also embodies and reinforces this theological and spiritual denotation.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Fig.3.png}
\caption{The Ali mausoleum of Qadamgah garden. (Source: Taheri, Neyshabur Tourist Guide (Neyshabur: Abarshahr, 2009, p.65)}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Fig.4.png}
\caption{Carved footprint of Imam Reza in Qadamgah. (Source: Photo by the author, 2012)}
\end{figure}
As part of Shah Abbas I’s agenda for fostering the Shi’a pilgrimage cult, a caravanserai was constructed near the garden to accommodate pilgrims and caravans. Subsequently, water reservoirs (Ab anbar), a thermal bathhouse (hamam), and two Qanats (a traditional Iranian irrigation system) were built (Fig.5).

All were dedicated as waqf (endowment) for the welfare of pilgrims. Added near the sacred spring, these joint constructions transformed the simple area into a tomb-garden complex, which became a place for the worship of God which was visited by large numbers of pilgrims.

Fig. 5: Plan of Qadamgah garden. (Source: Redrawn by the author based on the plan provided by the Cultural Heritage Organisation of Khorasan.)

Change and continuity in Qadamgah garden during the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979)

Qadamgah garden continued to function until the early twentieth century and was a religious destination for pilgrims. With the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty under the leadership of Reza Shah in 1925, Qadamgah experienced waves of change in its religious ideals and significance similar to other religious places. Under the rubric of the modernization of the country (or in the words of Katuzian, ‘pseudo-modernisation’), Reza Shah underlined nationalism, de-Islamisation and Westernisation. He established a heavy-handed urban renewal programme, undermined the existing religion by banning women from wearing the veil in 1936 and focusing on pre-Islamic traditions. In the eyes of Reza Shah, any Islamic ceremonies that recalled Muslim traditions (but especially those with Shi’a essence, such as ‘Taziyeh’) were considered as devoid of value, and thus were targeted as hallmarks of religious backwardness which jeopardised the ‘Great Aryan Civilization’ of Iranians. Moreover, he set an agenda to marginalise the ulama (community of Muslim clerics), and clerical deputies, who were perceived as an obstacle to progress and denounced as ‘black medieval reactionaries’. He closely scrutinised the accounts of religious endowments, aiming to disempower the Awqaf (Pious Foundations) that were established during the Safavid era to take care of shrines and Mouqafah (properties and buildings consigned to a specific use). While according to the law of waqf, the revenue derived from such endowed buildings should be dedicated only for repair works or requested purposes mentioned in the written instructions of waqfnameh, Reza Shah changed the system of waqf properties, ordering instead that the revenue coming from endowed buildings be spent for other purposes, in particular the restoration of pre-Islamic heritage, such as that found in Persepolis. These political reforms introduced by Reza Shah Pahlavi were reflected in the life of Qadamgah garden and contributed to the deterioration of both its religious significance and physical condition. However, Qadamgah was not completely set aside from Shi’a life, and the belief of people played a key role in encouraging Shi’a Muslims to make pilgrimage to it and perform religious activities there.

The policy of de-Islamisation was continued during Mohammad Reza Shah’s reign (1941-1979), as well as through the land reform of 1962, which led to the loss of a large amount of income for Awqaf. However, unexpected revenue flowing from the emergence of the oil industry after 1950s and the establishment of the National Organisation for Conservation of Historic Monuments (NOCHMI) in 1344 SH/1966 paved the way for the preservation of cultural heritage. In contrast to the early period of Reza Shah’s reign that was marked by humiliation of Islamic traditions and buildings, from the 1960s both Islamic and pre-Islamic culture and monuments were depicted as layers of authentic Iranian history. Therefore, restoration works were established in Chehel Sotun, Hasht Behesht gardens in 1347 SH/1969 and spread to other gardens, including Dolat Abad, Arg, Fin, and Cheshmeh Ali, as well as the tomb-gardens of Qadamgah and Imamzadeh Mahrough in Neyshabur. In 1972 the branch of NOCHMI in Khorasan took the restoration of Qadamgah garden into its hands and 25 million Rials was provided for its repair. For the first time, in the process of preparing an inventory of the tomb complex in 1352 SH/1974, plan documentation and maps of the garden were drawn up. Through the physical

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18. When Reza Shah travelled to Turkey and was inspired by Atatürk’s reforms, on his return, he decided to change the appearance and body of Iranians via a definition of a new ‘dress code’. He forced all of the men excluding registered clergymen to wear ‘Pahlavi cap’ (kolah Pahlavi) and trousers with coat and banned the Islamic veil (hijab) for women in 1936, which met with opposition from the religious leaders and led to many conflicts.


21. The Land Reform Act of 1962, which after three main stages was officially approved in 1971, aimed to share the large land and agricultural properties with peasants, who ‘worked on the same land’, to end the unequal distribution of the land and traditional system of landlord-peasant relations (arshab-rayat). This reform was opposed by the landlords and certain clerics, who had acquired large areas of land under the rubric of endowments. Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 778-86.

intervention and beautification that followed, Qadamgah garden, with its chaharbagh asymmetrical plan, once more attained the physical form of Paradise Garden, as well as its religious connotation. These restoration works undertaken by the NOCHMI were not based on exact archaeological surveys or historical documents, and were halted following the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

The role of religion and tradition in shaping different conservation ethics in Qadamgah garden after the Islamic Revolution of 1979: Qadamgah as a multifunctional garden

This section elaborates the way in which the approaches and the ethics of conservation of religious places and waqf properties, including Qadamgah garden, are significantly different from other cultural heritage sites, particularly after the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

Following 2500 years of imperialism, the shift of power to the Islamic Republic brought different ideologies and concepts towards religious places, paving the way for an enhancement of the religious dimension of holy shrines and other related Islamic monuments. Due to the domination of religious authority, the role of clergymen, including the Awqaf administrators, was praised for upholding Islam and Shiism. Subsequently the sanctuaries belonging to Shi’a notables received further attention, with the aim of towards turning them into a show of Iran’s emergence as a main Shi’a centre in the world, with more than 70 million followers.

Therefore, after the Revolution, and in sharp contrast to the treatment of Royal gardens, whose symbolism has been made impotent, from the conservation point of view, the tomb-gardens and other sanctities of Shi’a notables have been transformed into ‘living heritage’. Once more, religious and social meanings have been returned to holy shrines and tombs of Shi’a notables, as they become the focal point of religious authorities. These places have been portrayed by the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) not as ‘simply a place of burial and commemoration’, but instead as a ‘surrogate mosque’ and mother-house for certain activities that lead Shi’a Muslims toward Paradise.

The annual reports of the National Relic Society bear witness to the fact that in 1362 SH/1984, in the mêlée of war, the restoration plans of 253 historical places, including Qadamgah in Neyshabur, which had been halted for five years because of the Revolution and Iran-Iraq war, was to be restarted. From a financial point of view, while other historical buildings and gardens suffered from insufficient government budgets for their maintenance, this is not the case for Qadamgah. The law of waqf made Qadamgah self-sufficient, which facilitated the process of conservation.

23 Hillenbrand, p.260.
24 Rizvi, p.254.
As the prime aims of pilgrims are the upkeep and survival of Qadamgah in return for divine rewards and to benefit from the blessedness of Imam Reza, it received financial support from the public through covenants (نازع) and وقف. This distinctive conservation method guarantees the physical entity of the complex. Therefore, in the 1990s, thanks to a large budget obtained from the public, and under the supervision of Awqaf and the Cultural Heritage Organisation (ICHO), maintenance of the garden resumed in an attempt to improve the visual appeal of Qadamgah garden (Figs. 8 & 9). The income derived from covenants and the economic activities surrounding the tomb-garden is sufficient to meet the restoration and maintenance cost of Qadamgah. Of the total revenue, 40% is spent on restoration and maintenance of the garden, 25% on organising socio-cultural events, 15% belonged to the Awqaf and 20% is spent on staff and garden administration.

Unfortunately though, due to the absence of a comprehensive national framework and various conflicts between the organisations involved (in particular the Awqaf and the ICHO), the restoration works rarely attained even material ‘authenticity’, an ideal principle of ICOMOS charters such as the Venice charter of 1963.

In the case of Qadamgah, however, from a social and symbolic point of view, its traditional function and intangible values have remained relatively intact over the centuries. Pilgrims still are sincere in their belief towards the Imam—one of the important factors for transforming the garden into a living place. Qadamgah was and is used for major events with a traditional, cultural and religious nature that are deeply rooted in the daily life of Iranians. In Qadamgah and other holy shrines, touching and kissing the iron grille (ژاریه) or threshold of the tomb complex (Fig. 6), reciting the Holy Qur'an or beseechment (دعا), chanting, performing of Ta’zieh rituals, distributing offerings (نازه), and performing Muslim Eid prayers are all dominant and popular activities in order to obtain Divine reward (اجر). During specific Shi’ite holy months—in particular Muharram—and on the eve of Shi’a Muslims’ feasts—such as Aid-e-Ghadir khum—or on birth anniversaries of Imams, the communal and religious functions of all shrines and tombs in Iran have been enhanced. The month of Muharram and the anniversary of the martyrdom of Imam Reza are the peak times for pilgrimage, during which the number of pilgrims rises dramatically (to over 100 times everyday levels). People make pilgrimage to Qadamgah from different cities in Iran, but mostly from Khorasan province: They are diverse in social status, colour, age, gender and academic background, but all participate in the same ritual to share and express their grief and allegiance to their Imam.

From early times in Qadamgah, during Muharram, Тазиye, the passion plays of mourning for the death of Imam Hossein and his companions, has been performed on the eve of تاسوع and Ashura (9th and 10th of Muharram), administered by Awqaf (Fig.10.5). The ritualistic behavioural pattern that was embraced by the post-revolutionary government as well, turns Qadamgah into a forum for social interaction and a locus of dynamic activities that draws millions of pilgrims annually. Above all, Qadamgah is a venue where the ancient pre-Islamic feast on New

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26 ICHO was established in 1985.
27 The graves of Muslims oriented towards Mecca in Qebleh direction.
28 Hillenbrand, p.266.
29 This record of the number of pilgrims was for 1391 SH/2012. Source from interview with the manager of Qadamgah conducted by author in Qadamgah on 3 September 2013.
Year’s Eve is celebrated. Perpetuation of the nationwide festival of Nowrouz, a symbol of Iranian collective identity, demonstrates how Qadamgah garden has found its way to constitute an individual identity that makes it stand out from other historical gardens in Iran.

However, the activity that marks Qadamgah as a unique place and distinguishes it from other shrines in general, and tomb-gardens in particular, is the collection of water from the source of the sacred spring (see Fig.10.2). Pilgrims are allowed to bring bowls or bottles to drink and collect small amounts of water. There are various narratives regarding the miraculous healing by Imam Reza in his holy shrine in Mashhad, and also concerning the occult nature of the water in Qadamgah. Interviews conducted by the author in the summer of 2013, confirmed that many pilgrims believed that, through the blessings of Imam Reza, the water could benefit the supplicant’s spirit, protect them against discomforts and relieve their worries or have emotional consequences. According to the Manager of Qadamgah, two examples of the curing of disease have been recorded in Qadamgah. The spring, which has never gone dry—even in drought seasons—with its miraculous narrative, is a powerful incentive that motivates millions of pilgrims to travel to Qadamgah even on foot from remote areas (see Fig.7).

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30 This water was also examined by the Health Centre of Khorasan Razavi Province in about 1389 SH/ 2010 and it is said that the water is safe for human consumption. Source from interview with the manager of Qadamgah, conducted by author in Qadamgah on 3 September 2013.
In terms of marketing, Qadamgah is a true place for housing various functions that have provided a source of income for locals and brought benefits for \textit{Awqaf}. During the post-revolutionary era, particularly after 1990, the urge to take a greater interest in the economic use of heritage was felt. This was due to the financial crisis following the ‘post-war reconstructions’ and the decline of oil revenue, which lead to priority being given to the development of the tourism industry.\footnote{Hodjat, p.264.} Due to the lack of potential for the development of international tourism markets, pilgrimage tourism to holy shrines and tomb complexes has become the dominant type of tourism in Iran. This shift in approach was accompanied by the establishment of a series of new policies. The rites of visitation of Shi’a holy shrines were encouraged by the authorities. The Holy Shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad has been positioned at the heart of religious and political events, broadcast in national media frequently to make it as visible as possible. Mashhad became a magnet for absorbing annually about twenty million domestic pilgrims, in addition to two million international visitors, establishing it as the seventh of the great sanctuaries of the Muslim world. Qadamgah stood as a unique stopover on the itinerary of pilgrims en route to Mashhad.

From a commercial point of view, the increased number of pilgrims crystallising in the physical ambit of the garden has changed the economic activities on the site. Subsequently, the land-use and morphological pattern of the tomb’s surroundings underwent change. From the 2000s onwards, under the supervision of the ICHO and with the budget of \textit{Awqaf}, a restoration plan was proposed by the ICHO for the rehabilitation of caravanserais that had lost their original function and been abandoned for many years, as shown in Figures.11&12. It was successfully transformed into a traditional restaurant (\textit{restoran sonati}) where visitors drank tea or smoked hookah (\textit{qalyan}), not as religious veneration, but rather as Iranian recreational habits (Fig.10.4).\footnote{It is noteworthy that during the last site visit by the author in summer 2013, the restaurant was closed and instead caravanserai rented to private sector for use as a gallery.} Moreover, the stalls around the courtyard of caravanserai, previously known as \textit{Hojreh}, have been rented to the pilgrims. Exploiting the commercial aspect of old caravanserais provided an opportunity to improve the poor quality of the tomb complex and thereby the welfare of pilgrims. Many visitors asserted that due to the availability of guest rooms and additional services, they were encouraged to spend some nights in Qadamgah to benefit from the blessedness of the tomb complex.\footnote{From the interview with the visitors and pilgrims to Qadamgah, conducted by the author in Qadamgah on 3 September 2013.}

Moreover, a small bazaar, retail business and booths have emerged in order to meet the demands of pilgrims (Fig.10.3) bringing benefit for both \textit{Awqaf} and locals.\footnote{The shoppers contract with the \textit{Awqaf}.} Some vendors earn their living through selling local souvenirs. For pilgrims, souvenirs from the loci of Qadamgah form a significant part of the pilgrimage as they are considered blessed. During the peak times of pilgrimage, some locals are also encouraged to open their homes to host pilgrims, providing a seasonal source of income for these families. Implementation of all of these sub-projects in the proximity of Qadamgah has boosted business as well as the number of visitors to the garden, which reached more than eight million in 2012.\footnote{ICHO report, branch of Khorasan Razavi, (Mashhad, Cultural heritage Organisation, 2011).} Through the combination of a sense of materiality and
spirituality, Qadamgah garden finds the ability to balance the affairs of this world and the Hereafter, and continues its life in a sustainable way. Nowadays, the life of a village with a population over 3,700 inhabitants connects the existence of Qadamgah garden and the frequent visits of devotees of Imam Reza.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Could faith become an alternative strategy for the conservation, continuity and vitality of heritage gardens? The examination of Qadamgah garden has revealed how, when the motivation behind garden conservation is derived from the interest and belief of the people, the garden is more likely to survive, both in terms of tangible and, in particular, intangible values. This case study is a unique example of a living heritage garden in Iran, which has demonstrated its ability to resist complex ideological shifts and upheaval in the country, and which with unplanned policies, continues to function as a spiritual, commercial and social centre, due to the active involvement of people. In the case of Qadamgah, as a result of the sanctity (barekat) associated with the eighth Shi’a Imam, the symbiotic relationships have continued between tomb-garden and people, pre-Islamic and Islamic rituals that all contribute to changing the Qadamgah into a thriving centre. As long as the aura of holiness associated with Imam Reza encompasses the garden area, it motivates Shi’a Muslims to make pilgrimages or pledge money as a covenant for its restoration, leading to a continuity of the sense of vitality that is inherent in it. Should these beliefs and strong faith decrease or vanish, the impetus for the garden’s existence would perish simultaneously.

Nowadays, Qadamgah is more than a garden for contemplation. It is a source of revenue for *Awqaf* and locals through tourism. Its garden is a source of pleasure for visitors, and still functions as a place of assembly for social gathering. Its sacred spring (*Cheshme Hazrat*) is a source of blessedness, the garden area and its tomb are spiritual centres for thousands of pilgrims, serving as a refuge from the hustle and bustle of city life. With regards to conservation practices, in contrast to other heritage sites, Qadamgah is self-sufficient and self-protected against physical vandalism, for which much is owed to the traditional mechanism of *awqaf*. Therefore, it has developed the ability to function consistently, safely removed from the world’s political and ‘mercantilistic’ outlook. So far, all of the international guidelines on conservation have been written very much from a European perspective, which blocks the traditional ways of thinking in the spirit of Islamic principles that could benefit Islamic garden heritage. The distinctive conservation approach in the case of Qadamgah, which relies heavily on the degree of religiousness of Iranians, going hand in hand with traditions, might challenge the current ICOMOS charters, which have failed to address the alternative power of religion while emphasising the importance of saving the ‘physical authenticity’. This case study, and the way of Qadamgah’s conservation, could not be taken as an ideal or universal model, nor be directly applied to other gardens in Iran, because of the particular nature of this type of garden. However, as in Iran there are no specific measures and frameworks for the conservation and management of historical gardens, this particular case study does reveal to us that if conservation schemes come into line with Iranian beliefs and traditions, the long-term conservation of heritage sites is more achievable. By acknowledging and developing the influential role of belief, it could offer an alternative strategy through which garden conservation frameworks could be drafted in Islamic countries, especially Iran.