

Baha'i Studies Review 11 (2003) 83–95

Efforts to preserve the remains of the Bab: Four historical accounts

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Abstract

The execution of the Bab and his companion, Mirza Muhammad 'Ali Zunuzi (Anis), took place at noon on Tuesday, 9 July 1850, but it was not until 21 March 1909 that their mangled bodies were entombed in their permanent shrine on Mount Carmel, Haifa. During this interval of 59 years, fearing destruction by entrenched enemies, these remains were concealed in a number of places, often unknown to the generality of Baha'is. The object of this article is to outline the background of this episode of Baha'i history based on early documents. Even though these accounts occasionally overlap in their descriptions of the events, yet each contains an important perspective that has warranted its inclusion. Four accounts are here translated for the first time into English.

Introduction

Immediately after the execution of the Bab and his companion Mirza Muhammad 'Ali Zunuzi (Anis), on Tuesday,² 9 July 1850,³ their remains were cast by the edge of a moat outside the city of Tabriz. 'Four companies, each consisting of ten sentinels, were ordered to keep watch in turn over them. On the morning following the day of martyrdom, the Russian consul in Tabriz, accompanied by an artist, went to that spot and ordered that a sketch be made of the remains as they lay beside the moat.'⁴ One of the early Baha'is, Haji 'Ali 'Askar Tabrizi (d. 1874), reported the following to Nabil Zarandi:

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- 1 This article is dedicated to the loving memory of Colonel 'Izzatu'llāh Nūr. I am grateful to Sepehr Manuchehri for suggesting inclusion of the passage from *al-Kawākib al-Durriya*.
 - 2 Nabil [Zarandi], *The Dawn-Breakers: Nabil's Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahá'í Revelation* (trans. and ed. Shoghi Effendi), Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1970, p. 517, indicates that the day of martyrdom was a Sunday. However, more accurate calendars as well as several Qajar histories, such as Muhammad Taqi Sipih, *Nāsikh at-Tavārīkh*, Tehran: Kitāb-furūshī Islāmiyyih, 1353 AHS, vol. 3, p. 305; and Mīrzā Muḥammad Ja'fār Haqāyiq-Nigar, *Haqāyiq al-Akhhār Nāshirī*, vol. 1, section on 1266 AHQ events, Tehran: Dar at-Tab'ih Dawlati, 1284 AH, clearly indicate that 9 July was a Tuesday.
 - 3 There is consistent disagreement between the Baha'i and other histories on the day of martyrdom of the Bab. The Baha'i histories maintain that it took place on 9 July, while the Qajar histories place this event a day earlier. For example, 'Abdu'l-Baha in many tablets, including *A Traveller's Narrative* (trans. E. G. Browne), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1891, vol. 2, pp. 44–45, and Shoghi Effendi in *God Passes By*, rev. edn., Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1974, p. 52; and Nabil in *Dawn-breakers* 517, mark 9 July 1850 as the day of martyrdom. However, *Nāsikh at-Tavārīkh* 3: 304–5, *Haqāyiq al-Akhhār Nāshirī* (1266 AH events), *Seyyid Ali Mohammed dit le Báb* (Persian translation of A. L. M. Nicolas' history by 'Ali-Muḥammad Farih-vashi), Tehran, n.p., n.d. pp. 403, 407; Mirza Yahya Azal, *Mujmal Badī' dar Vaqāyī' Zuhūr-i Manī'* (supplement to Mirza Huseyn of Hamadan, *Tārīkh Jadīd or New History of Mīrzā 'Alī-Muḥammad the Báb* [actual title as published], (trans. E. G. Browne), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1893, have indicated that it took place a day earlier. Perhaps more significantly, the British diplomat in Tabriz, Richard Stevens, who discusses the execution of the Bab in his 24 July 1850 report to Justin Sheil, the British ambassador in Tehran, marks the day of martyrdom of the Bab as 8 July 1850 (see Moojan Momen, *The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions 1844–1944: Some Contemporary Western Accounts*, Oxford: George Ronald, 1981, p. 78).
 - 4 Nabil, *Dawn-Breakers* 518.

An official of the Russian consulate, to whom I was related, showed me that same sketch on the very day it was drawn. It was such a faithful portrait of the Bab that I looked upon! No bullet had struck His forehead, His cheeks, or His lips. I gazed upon a smile which seemed to be still lingering upon His countenance. His body, however, had been severely mutilated. I could recognize the arms and head of His companion, who seemed to be holding Him in his embrace. As I gazed horror-struck upon that haunting picture, and saw how those noble traits had been disfigured, my heart sank within me. I turned away my face in anguish and, regaining my house, locked myself within my room. For three days and three nights, I could neither sleep nor eat, so overwhelmed was I with emotion. That short and tumultuous life, with all its sorrows, its turmoils, its banishments, and eventually the awe-inspiring martyrdom with which it had been crowned, seemed again to be re-enacted before my eyes. I tossed upon my bed, writhing in agony and pain.⁵

Nabil gives a useful outline of the events after the martyrdom of the Bab, which is summarized here to provide a frame of reference for the later discussion.⁶ According to Nabil, it was some days earlier that through his contacts in the government circles, Haji Sulayman Khan Tabrizi (son of Yahya Khan) – an ardent believer in the Bab – learned that the Prime Minister had issued orders for the execution of the Bab. Together with some close friends, he immediately left Tehran for the purpose of the Bab's deliverance, arriving in Tabriz a day too late. He went directly to Bagh-Mishih, a suburb of Tabriz, the home of Haji Mirza Mihdi, the kalantar of Tabriz, one of his friends and confidants, who was a dervish belonging to a Sufi mystical community. Haji Sulayman Khan was ready to take immediate action but the kalantar, being a seasoned and wise officer, advised against a rash decision and suggested to him to wait in another house for the arrival that evening of Haji Allah-Yar, a well-known gang leader in Tabriz and feared by the generality of the people.

At the appointed hour, Haji Sulayman Khan met Haji Allah-Yar and several of his armed men. That very night, they set out for the location where the remains of the Bab were left and when the guards saw the approaching men, recognizing their determination and fearing for their own lives, they quickly withdrew and allowed Haji Allah-Yar and his men to take the precious remains. Later, apprehensive that their superiors would accuse them of dereliction of duty, the sentinels announced that wild beasts had consumed the remains, a view that found currency in majority of the Qajar court histories and some European reports, but was effectively refuted by Nicolas.⁷

The remains were taken to the silk factory owned by one of the Babis of Milan. Next day, it was laid in a specially constructed wooden case, and transferred then, according to Haji Sulayman Khan's directions, to a place of safety. The latter immediately reported the matter to Baha'u'llah, who was in Tehran and who instructed Aqa Kalim to dispatch a special messenger to Tabriz for the purpose of transferring the bodies to the capital.

Nabil leaves the rest of the story untold, only suggesting that the sacred remains were taken to Tehran, first to Imamzadih Hasan, and from there to a secret location, which he strongly hints to be

5 Nabil, *Dawn-Breakers* 518.

6 Nabil, *Dawn-Breakers* 518–21.

7 The majority of Qajar court histories indicate that the remains of the Bab were left unguarded to be destroyed. However, the French diplomat/historian, Nicolas, cogently argues the inaccuracy of this statement (A. L. M. Nicolas, *Seyyed Ali-Muhammad dit le Bab* 378): 'M. de Gobineau, in agreement with the authors of the *Nasikh at-Tavarikh*, of *Rawdat as-Safa*, of *Mir'at al-Buldan*, in a word with all the official historians, relates that after the execution the body of the Bab was thrown in a moat of the city and devoured by dogs. In reality it was not so, and we shall see why this news had been spread by the authorities of Tabriz (little eager to draw upon themselves a rebuke of the government for a favour dearly sold) and by the Babis, desirous to prevent any further investigation by the police. The most reliable testimony of the actual witnesses of the drama or of its actors do not leave me any doubt that the body of Sayyid Ali Muhammad was carried away by pious hands and, at last, after various incidents which I shall narrate, received a burial worthy of him.'

Imamzadih Shah ‘Abdu’l-‘Azim, just south of the city (imamzadihs are shrines where a descendant of one of the Shi‘i Imams is buried). He concludes his account by noting that through Baha’u’llah’s instructions, Aqa Jamal, a well-known believer of the period, searched and located that spot, but Nabil says: ‘That spot is, until now, unknown to the believers, nor can anyone conjecture where the remains will eventually be transferred.’⁸

Therefore on this important question of what befell the remains of the Bab and at what locations they were kept until their safe transference to the Holy Land, the *Dawn-Breakers* – generally very informative and reliable – provides little or no help. However, fortunately there are other accounts that provide a substantial insight into the sequence of events and they are the object of our study.

Four Historical Accounts:

In this article we will consult four accounts that fill the gaps in Nabil’s comprehensive history:

- (1) The first account is by Mirza Hasan Adib Taliqani, who was appointed by Baha’u’llah to the high office of the Hand of the Cause of God and who provides an outline of the events from the period of the martyrdom of the Bab until 1867 when two prominent believers, at the behest of Baha’u’llah, delivered the casket to Tehran. This account is significant by virtue of the fact that Mirza Hasan Adib, as a Hand of the Cause resident in Tehran, was well positioned to learn of the details.
- (2) The second account is by the renowned historian of the Baha’i Faith, the Hand of the Cause of God Mirza Asadu’llah Fadil Mazandarani, which appears in his *Tarikh Zuhur al-Haqq*.⁹ As it will be noted, this outline is congruent with Nabil Zarandi’s narrative of the same events.
- (3) The third account is by ‘Abdu’l-Husayn Avarih, who in his history of the Babi and Baha’i Faiths, *al-Kawakib al-Durriyyah*,¹⁰ records a detailed outline based on the recollections of the Hand of the Cause of God Haji Mulla ‘Ali-Akbar Shahmirzadi, whom Baha’u’llah had appointed and charged with the safekeeping of the remains of the Bab.
- (4) The fourth and final account is based on memories of Aqa Husayn ‘Ali Nur. It was in his house in Tehran that the remains of the Bab were kept for nearly five years.

To be sure, there are similarities and divergences among these four narratives, in comparison with one another and with Nabil’s narrative. Where they diverge, however, is only in minor details and otherwise they seem complementary. All four accounts appear to be extremely reliable giving a great insight into the sequence of events. It is most helpful to read all four together in order to fully comprehend the sequence of occurrences.

Taliqani’s account provides a perspective about the days immediately after the martyrdom of the Bab that are somewhat at variance with Nabil’s. For instance, Taliqani suggests that the remains were left in the middle of the city square, whereas Nabil insists they were taken outside the city and left by the moat. Taliqani’s information is consistent with the practice of public execution during the Qajar period when the remains of the offenders were often kept on public display as a lesson to others. Another divergence of Taliqani’s account from Nabil’s is that the former reports that upon the arrival of the remains in Tehran they were kept in Imamzadih Ma’sum, whereas Nabil suggests Imamzadih

8 Nabil *Dawn-Breakers* 522.

9 *Tārīkh Zuhūr al-Haqq* (for the purpose of this translation a manuscript copy in the possession of the translator was employed; this history is also published electronically by H-Bahai at: <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~bahai/arabic/vol4/2tzh/2tzh.htm>) 2: 501–3.

10 *Al-Kawākib al-Durriyyah*, 2 vols. Cairo: Sa’adah, 1923, vol. 1, pp. 368–71.

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Hasan. It was kept there for some years, before being taken briefly to Masjid Masha'u'llah, then to the residence of Aqa Mirza Sayyid Hasan Vazir in Tehran, and then to the home of Aqa Husayn 'Ali Nur.

The second narrative by Fadil Mazandarani covers the same contour as Nabil's, but provides richer details, such as the exact names, dates and locations. Given that Fadil's history had benefited from a close consultation of Nabil's narrative, it can be surmised that he was using the latter's information to construct his outline, but filled in the details to make his account more accessible to the reader.

The third account by Avarih is particularly useful in understanding events surrounding the transference of the remains from Imamzadih Ma'sum to the Tehran residence of the aforementioned Vazir.

The final account is focused very much on the period from 1890 to 1895 when the remains of the Bab were kept in the Nur's house in Tehran and should be considered as a stand-alone document.

To sum up, if one were to construct a time line for the journey of the remains of the Bab, it would be as follows:

July 1850	Martyrdom and rescue of the remains
Summer 1850–67	Imamzadih Ma'sum (south of Tehran, also known as the Shrine of Ibn Babuyyih)
1867 (a few days)	Masjid Masha'u'llah (south of Tehran)
1867–8 (14 months)	Residence of Aqa Mirza Sayyid Hasan Vazir (in Tehran)
1868–90	Imamzadih Zayd (near Tehran)
1890–5	Residence of Aqa Husayn 'Ali Nur (in Tehran)
1895–9	House of Muhammad Karim 'Attar (in Tehran)
1899	Transported by way of Tehran, Isfahan, Kirmanshah, Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut, and then by sea to 'Akka
31 Jan. 1899–March 1909	House of 'Abdu'llah Pasha (in 'Akka)
21 March 1909	Shrine of the Bab (in Haifa)

1. Taliqani's Account

Mirza Hasan Adib Taliqani's account covers the period of the martyrdom of the Bab until the time when Jamal Burujirdi and the Hand of the Cause Haji 'Ali-Akbar Shahmirzadi, known as Haji Akhund, delivered the casket to Tehran. We are fortunate that his fellow Hand, Mirza Asadu'llah Fadil Mazandarandi, preserved this narrative in his monumental history of the Baha'i movement,

Tarikh Zuhur al-Haqq (The History of the Manifestation of Truth).¹¹ The date of composition of this account is given by Taliqani as Muharram 1326¹² AH (February 1908):

The investigations carried out by this ephemeral servant about the sacred remains of His Holiness the Primal Point [the Bab] – may my spirit be a sacrifice unto his sanctified resting place – has revealed that after his martyrdom, the holy remains of the Bab and Mirza Muhammad ‘Ali were left abandoned in the same city square [where the execution had taken place]. This afforded the citizens the opportunity to insult and heap abuse on the remains and the hoodlums were instructed to prevent its burial.

At that time, Aqa Siyyid Ibrahim Khalil and Dhabih, who numbered among the Bab’s close companions and secretaries, together with a number of other believers, had taken refuge in a textile factory owned by Haji Ahmad Milani. They were engaged in planning various ways to rescue the sacred remains, or in the event of failure to do so, at least to learn of their whereabouts.

They decided to dispatch to the city square two Milani believers disguised as beggars and lunatics to watch over the situation. Since people tend to avoid such madmen, they were able to spend the night at the same location and in fact another believer, under the disguise of charity, was appointed to occasionally bring them food and water. They remained in the square for the first and the second days, during which time rank upon rank of the public came to see the remains. Some shed tears of remorse while others heaped all manner of abuse.

On the third day, orders were issued for the remains to be unceremoniously thrown by the city’s moat. That day the Russian consul had remarked to the local authorities: ‘In our country it is customary that when a captive survives an execution attempt, he is then pardoned and freed. Therefore, the second attempt at executing this personage [the Bab] was illegitimate. I wish to visit his remains.’

That afternoon the consul, accompanied by an artist, went by the moat where the artist made a pen-portrait of the Bab. The consul then offered a gratuity to the soldiers to bury the two corpses. The officers had moved some of the earth by the moat, buried the two bodies, and had departed.

That night Haji Sulayman Khan led a group of men, including the kalantar [and] Haji Allah-Yar, to that location. Allah-Yar stood watch to respond to opposition, while Haji Sulayman Khan, assisted by others, recovered the remains and placed them in a bag. Thereupon they left post-haste and were not followed.

After journeying for a while, Haji Allah-Yar was sent home and the rest set out towards the textile factory of Haji Ahmad Milani where Aqa Sayyid Ibrahim was awaiting their arrival. Siyyid said to them, ‘The dawn is well nigh here and I am too impatient to observe caution. We must conceal the remains immediately.’ A casket that was about a metre long was ready. With his own hands, Haji Sulayman Khan wrapped the sack containing the remains in a cloth and placed it inside the casket. From what has been learned, apparently one of the hands of Mirza Muhammad-‘Ali [Anis] was separated from his body. Haji Sulayman Khan placed a bouquet of flowers commonly found in the homes of Tabrizis next to the sanctified countenance of the Bab. They quickly sealed the casket and placed it in the wall cavity, covering it with mortar.

11 *Tarikh Zuhur al-Haqq* (for the purpose of this translation a manuscript copy in the possession of the translator was employed; this history is also published electronically by H-Bahai at: <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~bahai/arabic/vol3/tzh6/tzh6.htm>) 6: 490–92.

12 The actual date is hard to read and may be Muharram 1316.

After a few days, a tablet was received from the Ancient Beauty [Baha'u'llah] addressed to Aqa Siyyid Ibrahim, the text of which is presently extant. This tablet instructed the transfer of the remains to Tehran. The believers removed the casket from its hiding place, wrapped it in cotton and disguised it as merchandise ready for dispatch to Tehran. Haji Sulayman Khan accompanied the remains to the capital pretending to be an importer of goods from Europe.

When they arrived in Tehran, the Ancient Beauty [Baha'u'llah] was in Shimran. The believers attained his presence and reported what had transpired. Baha'u'llah dispatched Mirza Husayn Isfahani with specific instructions to take delivery of the casket. Obedient to his mandate, Mirza [Husayn] took the casket to Imamzadih Ma'sum which was located in middle of the desert [south of Tehran]. He placed the casket in an abandoned building, raised a wall in front of it, and undertook minor repairs of the surrounding walls.

No believer, man or woman, was aware of this secret, except that Baha'u'llah had informed the honoured Maryam.¹³ A few years passed in this fashion during which the honoured Maryam had disclosed the matter to her nurse-maid. Later, others learned of this secret and soon the number of pilgrims arriving at the Imamzadih Ma'sum grew notably, providing it with considerable income. In no time it became the meeting place for the friends and strangers. Gradually much talk was taking place about this matter, which allowed many to learn of this well-guarded secret.

About then, another tablet was received from the Ancient Beauty instructing the immediate and secret removal of the holy casket to another location. After consultation, the believers decided to take the sacred trust to the Shrine of 'Abdu'l-'Azim and hide it in one of the abandoned buildings in that region. In the middle of night, Hasan Aqa and his brother went to Imamzadih Ma'sum, opened up the wall, removed the casket and made their way towards the Shrine of 'Abdu'l-'Azim, to a house to which they had previously sent their wives on the pretext of a pilgrimage.

Aqa Jamal [Buruji] and the honoured 'Ali-Akbar [Hand of the Cause Haji Akhund] came in the morning to pay homage to the sacred trust. Everyone was proposing different thoughts and suggestions. Eventually unanimity was attained by deciding to hide the sanctified consignment in one of the rooms of the Masjid Masha'u'llah, on the edge of the desert. They opened the casket, wrapped the bag in a silk cloth and since the original box was fragile, built another box of the same size from plane-tree timber, and placed the first box inside the new one.

At night, they transferred the casket to the Masjid Masha'u'llah and placed it in one of the smaller rooms and, using the discarded bricks, raised a new wall in front of the precious trust. They returned to the Shrine of 'Abdu'l-'Azim and that afternoon departed for Tehran. On the way, once more they came by the Masjid and one of the men went inside to pay his respects when he noticed that some of the bricks on the newly erected wall had been tampered with. Greatly perplexed by the turn of events, they decided to remove the casket and take it with them to Tehran.

When they reached the capital, they became anxious thinking that the officers could discover the true identity of their cargo through inspection at the city-gate. They thought of leaving the wooden box temporarily by a moat while they devised a plan, when suddenly and unexpectedly a severe thunderstorm began. Immediately everyone in the vicinity rushed towards the gate and the honoured 'Ali-Akbar, who had the casket in front of him on his mount, was caught in their midst and was hurried through the gates without anyone inquiring of his load. They proceeded to the home of the late Aqa Mirza Siyyid Hasan Vazir, which

13 A devoted cousin of Baha'u'llah, who was also a sister of Mahd-'Uliya, Baha'u'llah's second wife. Maryam lived in Tehran.

they considered safe, and on the pretence of depositing a trust, hid the casket in the basement [with Haji ‘Ali-Akbar Akhund remaining in the house for the next 14 months].

After some time, once more the news of the event became widely known among the believers. No matter how they tried to dissuade the friends from visiting that location, it had no effect. Finally, the late Haji Amin wrote to Baha’u’llah about the situation and in response a tablet was revealed instructing him that without the least hesitation and with great urgency he should undertake the care and protection of the sacred casket and to keep the matter strictly confidential.

This matter was kept secret until the passing of Haji Amin.¹⁴ At that time, the honoured Mirza Asadu’llah Isfahani was appointed to receive the casket and he moved it to the home of Aqa Husayn ‘Ali Isfahani at Sar Qabr Aqa district. In the year 1314 AH [1896 AD], he returned and retrieved the sacred trust which eventually he transferred to Haifa at ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s behest. The Master is presently raising an edifice for this purpose, which soon will be completed and will be the point of adoration of the entire world.

2. Mazandarani’s Account

The Hand of the Cause of God Mirza Asadu’llah Fadil Mazandarani provides the following account, which appears in his *Tarikh Zuhur al-Haqq*.¹⁵ As the reader will note, this outline is congruent with Nabil Zarandi’s narrative of the same events:

Before the instructions of Mirza Taqi Khan, [the prime minister], for the martyrdom of the Primal Point reached Tabriz, [Haji] Sulayman Khan, son of Yahya Khan Tabrizi, who ranked among the noblemen of the nation and was a devotee of the Bab, learned of this decision. In utmost haste and accompanied by several other Babis, he left Tehran for Adharbayjan with the object of achieving the deliverance of the Bab from the clutches of the authorities and the guardsmen. However, when he arrived in Tabriz, two days had already passed from the martyrdom of the Wronged One [the Bab] and overwhelmed with grief and consternation, Sulayman Khan inquired of the circumstances from a number of the prominent Babis of that province. In the course of their consultation, they resolved that unmindful of the consequences, they would rescue the remains of the Bab from the edge of the moat where they were left with a band of soldiers who stood guard over them.

Subsequently, Sulayman Khan apprized Haji Mirza Mihdi, the kalantar of Tabriz, who was a righteous man belonging to a Sufi mystical order, of this secret decision and sought his assistance. The kalantar spoke with great sympathy and compassion, and summoned a certain Haji Allah-Yar, who was one of the gang-leaders and fearless rogues of Tabriz, and instructed him to accompany the Babis that night on this mission.

In the middle of night, which corresponded to the second evening since the martyrdom – and for a complete day and night the remains, unclad and unprotected, had been left exposed to the elements – the aforementioned group, which included Haji Allah-Yar, Sulayman Khan, Haji Muhammad-Taqi Milani, Husayn Milani and some others, went by the moat. They were all properly armed. They retrieved the abandoned remains, wrapped them in an ‘*abā* [cloak], placed it over their shoulders and quickly left the site.

14 Shoghi Effendi (*God Passes By* 274) writes: ‘Assisted by another believer, Hájí Sháh Muḥammad [i-Manshādī] buried the casket beneath the floor of the inner sanctuary of the Shrine of Imám-Zádih Zayd, where it lay undetected until Mirzá Asadu’lláh-i-Isfáhání was informed of its exact location through a chart forwarded to him by Bahá’u’lláh.’

15 *Tārīkh Zuhūr al-Haqq* 2: 501–3.

With great haste, they proceeded to the silk factory of the above-mentioned Haji Muhammad Taqi [one of the Babis of Milan] and concealed their treasured trust in that location. Sulayman Khan and Haji Muhammad Taqi gifted a sum of money to Haji Allah-Yar for his services and rested that night with ease. Next day, they prepared a casket in the fashion of a wooden case used by merchants, wrapped their precious cargo in white silk and placed it in that container and, in accordance with Sulayman Khan's direction, transferred it to a place of safety. Sulayman Khan also informed Baha'u'llah of what had transpired and awaited his instructions.

That night after the remains were taken to the silk factory, the aforementioned Husayn Milani proceeded post-haste to Milan and washed the blood-soaked 'abā in the pool of Haji Muhammad-Taqi's home and for some time the Babis were grief-stricken and bitterly sobbed over the martyrdom. When the letter of Sulayman Khan reached the presence of Baha'u'llah in Tehran, he instructed the honoured Aqa Mirza Musa Kalim to select an able, trustworthy and brave messenger and to dispatch him forthwith to Tabriz.

At the time when the Primal Point was being conducted under guard to Adharbayjan and had reached the vicinity of the village of 'Abdu'l-'Azim, out of his love for Tehran, he had revealed a visitation tablet for the Shrine of 'Abdu'l-'Azim in the course of which he had unambiguously expressed his wish to be entombed in that location.¹⁶ In light of this, it was decided to transfer the casket to Tehran. Hasan Aqa Tafrishi, who was among the devoted believers and served as the second-in-command in the custom office of Adharbayjan, was enlisted for this important task. Despite all the difficulties and obstacles in conducting shipments of merchandise across the borders and within the country, and the strict regulations of the authorities trying to prevent thievery and larceny at the custom offices, and mindless of all the dangers in conducting such a mission, Hasan Aqa succeeded in safely transferring the casket to the Shrine of Imamzadih Hasan in the vicinity of Tehran. He then informed Baha'u'llah who immediately dispatched Aqa Mirza Musa Kalim and Aqa Mulla 'Abdu'l-Karim [Qazvini], known as Mirza Ahmad Katib, to receive the casket and with utmost caution and vigilance securely deposit it at the Shrine of Ibn Babuyyih, near the Shrine of 'Abdu'l-'Azim. Secretly they completed this important charge and no one was aware of its details.

During the time of Baha'u'llah's stay in Edirne [Adrianople], about the year 1283 AH [1866 AD], Aqa Mirza Munir Kashani, was informed of the location of the burial site by the Shrine of Ibn Babuyyih, but despite his best efforts was unable to find the exact location. However, shortly thereafter, in accordance with the instructions of Baha'u'llah, Aqa Jamal Burujirdi proceeded to the same location and found the burial spot.

For their necessary protection, the remains were transferred from one place to another in Tehran and during this long period, their location was kept a well-guarded secret. At last, in the year 1317 AH [1899 AD], they were moved from Iran to Palestine and the Holy Land and eventually were laid to rest on Mount Carmel, in a magnificent and splendid shrine, which is the focus of attention of the friends and others.

16 According to Nabil, 'This decision was prompted by the wish the Báb Himself had expressed in the "Ziyárat-i-Sháh-'Abdu'l-'Azim," a Tablet He had revealed while in the neighbourhood of that shrine and which He delivered to a certain Mírzá Sulaymán-i-Khaṭīb, who was instructed by Him to proceed together with a number of believers to that spot and to chant it within its precincts. "Well is it with you," the Báb addressed the buried saint in words such as these, in the concluding passages of that Tablet, "to have found your resting-place in Rayy, under the shadow of My Beloved. Would that I might be entombed within the precincts of that holy ground!"' *Dawn-Breakers* 520-1.

3. Avarih's Account

'Abdu'l-Husayn Avarih in his history of the Babi and Baha'i Faiths, *al-Kawakib al-Durriyyah*,¹⁷ records the following outline based on the recollections of the Hand of the Cause of God Haji Mulla 'Ali-Akbar Shahmirzadi, whom Baha'u'llah had appointed and charged with the safekeeping of the remains of the Bab. Avarih states that after Haji Sulayman Khan rescued the remains of the twin martyrs from Tabriz, he safeguarded them in his own house in the Sar-Chashmih district of Tehran. After some time, the casket was taken to the Shrine of Imamzadih Ma'sum, where it remained concealed until 1867. Avarih further indicates that the reason for keeping the location of the Bab's remains a secret were twofold: (a) the authorities were intent on the discovery and destruction of the remains, therefore their whereabouts had to be kept from the authorities' spies; and (b) the believers were intent on a pilgrimage to these remains and were not very discreet in their actions.

In the year [12]84 AH [1867], Baha'u'llah revealed a tablet addressed jointly to the Hand of the Cause of God Haji Mulla 'Ali-Akbar Shahmirzadi and Aqa Jamal Burujirdi, the renowned teacher of the time. Therein instructions were given for them to remove the remains of the Bab from Imamzadih Ma'sum to another location. Those two believers immediately set out to the said location and without any assistance dismantled the wall, which housed the precious casket. They quickly carried the casket and left for the Shrine of 'Abdu'l-'Azim. Apparently, at the time there was no custodian present at the Imamzadih Ma'sum, or perhaps there was a custodian and he was not very strict. Another possibility is that usually such custodians can be approached with a little bribe. At any rate, they placed the holy casket on a mule and travelled to the vicinity of the Shrine of 'Abdu'l-'Azim. At first their search did not identify a safe location. Consequently, they continued with their journey towards Chishmih-'Ali.

On their way they came across an abandoned building known as Mas'jid Masha'u'llah. They concluded that this location was suitable for their purpose and entered the mosque at night-time and deposited the holy casket. Prior to hiding the casket, they opened its cover and noticed that the treasured remains of the Bab were wrapped in cotton cloth used for shrouding the dead. They also discovered that a flower bouquet had been placed on the Bab's chest, which had been sprayed with bullets. The flowers were now dry and appeared to have been there for years. The assumption of this author [Avarih] is that it was Haji Sulayman Khan who had placed the flowers [in the casket] years earlier.

They removed the flowers and wrapped the sacred remains in silk, which earlier had been prepared for this purpose. Once again they placed the sanctified bodies in the casket and placed the casket under an arch-wall standing next to a near-collapsed wall. They quickly repaired the vicinity of the arch with similar bricks. During this construction activity one of the Babis resident in the Shrine of 'Abdu'l-'Azim assisted in supplying them with mortar.

Afterwards the two left for the village of Quch-Athar, where they remained until the afternoon of the following day. On the way back to Tehran, upon reaching the junction at Chishmih-'Ali, they became worried and concerned about the safety of the casket and returned to the mosque to ensure that their trust had remained undisturbed. This concern was well-founded as a number of farmers had seen the two men during the evening hours and following their departure had dismantled the wall and broken into the casket. However the holy remains had not been touched. The present author [Avarih] believes that the farmers had not recognized the identity of the bodies because if they had, they could have disturbed or abused the sanctified remains which may in turn have stirred up trouble in that precinct. The farmers must have thought the casket contained treasures stolen from another location and when they found that it contained just bones and flesh, they left it alone.

17 1: 368-71.

Haji Akhund [Shahmirzadi] has explained, ‘Once we decided to return to the mosque, Aqa Jamal accelerated at once because he had a faster mule. I reached our destination an hour later. When I came upon the mosque, I found him in a state of bewilderment. I asked what had caused him such anguish, and he replied that the wall had been damaged and the casket broken into. I was similarly distressed and rushed towards the wall. As I moved the casket, I noticed that its weight had not changed. I informed Aqa Jamal that the remains were still intact. He was elated and we lifted the broken casket onto his mule and accompanied it towards Tehran. Prior to arrival at the city-gate, we were apprehensive as the gatekeepers could inspect our load. If the true identity of the contents were discovered, not only the holy remains, but also our lives would be at peril.

At this time an astonishing incident occurred. A short time before our arrival at the city-gate, a rainstorm had begun and it quickly developed into a thunderstorm. Severe gusts of wind and rain forced all travellers from the Shrine of ‘Abdu’l-‘Azim to rush forward towards the gate. This enabled us to use the crowd as a cover and take the casket safely through the gate and into the city to the house of Aqa Mirza Hasan Vazir.’

Haji Mulla ‘Ali-Akbar rented that house and stayed there for 14 months solely to protect that casket. In a short time, however, unfortunately the believers learned of this secret and arrived from far and wide to pay their respects. As hard as he tried, Haji Akhund was unable to keep this matter concealed. Some Baha’is even offered to purchase the house and turn it into a permanent Shrine of the Bab! As this was not possible and could provoke the authorities, the Hands [of the Cause of God] wrote a supplication to Baha’u’llah, seeking his guidance. Soon a response was received and they followed the instructions therein.

4. Memoirs of Aqa Husayn ‘Ali Nur

Aqa Husayn ‘Ali’s father was Aqa ‘Ali, a deeply religious Muslim who would observe his religious obligations to the point of fanaticism. When Aqa ‘Ali first heard of the Baha’i Faith, he decided to investigate its veracity, promising himself that should he find it to be the truth, he would walk to the presence of its author. Some time passed and one night he dreamt of Baha’u’llah and the Bab. Through this vision, he was confirmed in his belief and ecstatically began his journey to ‘Akka. With utmost difficulty, he reached his destination, only to be told, after a prolonged search, that Baha’u’llah was incarcerated in the city’s prison and all were barred from meeting with him. Desperate to see Baha’u’llah, Aqa ‘Ali ascended a nearby hill and from its top was able to briefly gaze on the face of Baha’u’llah who waved at him from the window of his prison cell. Thrilled with this blessing, Aqa ‘Ali wrote to Baha’u’llah and was honoured with a response in which the surname ‘Nur’ (light) was bestowed upon him. Aqa ‘Ali Nur returned to his native town of Isfahan and commenced teaching the Baha’i Faith.¹⁸

Aqa Husayn ‘Ali was born in 1861 in Isfahan. When he was 18 years old, two prominent and wealthy Baha’i merchants of the city, Mirza Hasan and Mirza Husayn, surnamed the King of Martyrs and the Beloved of Martyrs, were wrongfully accused, seized and after considerable tortures, put to death. This event took place at the instigation of the leading ‘ulama and with the knowledge and collusion of the governor, Zillu’s-Sultan.¹⁹ During the evening following these martyrdoms, Husayn ‘Ali and his older brother, Hasan ‘Ali, together with three other believers who served the King of Martyrs, secretly left the city and through unfrequented routes and after enduring great hardships eventually reached Tehran.

18 ‘Izzatu’llah Nur, *Khāṭirāt-i Muhājirī az Isfahān dar Zamān-i Sulṭānu’l-Shuhadā va Mahbūbu’sh-Shuhadā*, Tehran: Mu’assisih Matbu’at Amri, 128 BE/1971, pp. 79–80.

19 For details see H. M. Balyuzi, *Eminent Bahá’is in the Time of Bahá’u’lláh*, Oxford: George Ronald, 1985, pp. 33–51.

Gradually, they were able to re-establish themselves in the capital where Husayn ‘Ali became a successful merchant, his seed-money having been granted by Baha’u’llah. He bought a parcel of land on the south side of Bagh Firdaws (presently a women’s hospital), next to the Bazar Madar-Aqa, where he built a nine-room house. It was in this house that for four years the remains of the Bab were kept.²⁰

Some time later, Aqa Husayn ‘Ali committed to paper his fascinating memories of the King and the Beloved of Martyrs and the events leading to their slaying, and he included a chapter on the concealment of the remains of the Bab in his house in Tehran.²¹

About the year 1269 AHS [1890], Mirza Asadu’llah Isfahani and his wife arrived in Tehran from Isfahan and came to the residence of this servant, which was located south of the present Bagh Firdaws. After a few days, he mentioned, ‘We intend to continue our journey to the Holy Land, but certain objects have been left in our trust which we have placed in a box and we now wish to leave them in your care. After our return, we will come and retrieve our trust, but you must exert your utmost to ensure the protection and safekeeping of these items.’

I accepted this charge and the following day, he and his wife returned to our house carrying a wooden box. With utmost reverence, they placed the box in the room near the courtyard and asked that the room be locked and no one be permitted inside until their return the subsequent day. They took the key with them.

The next day Aqa Mirza Asadu’llah and his wife returned and this time they brought with them an iron container (known as Hishtar-khun Sanduq), which was lined with iron sheets from both outside and inside. They opened the room and the two of them entered and closed the curtains so carefully that nothing could be seen from outside and we had no idea what they were doing within the room.

They stayed inside for four hours. Finally, they emerged from the room and, summoning me forward, stated, ‘This is the trust that we would like to leave in your charge.’ I looked inside and noticed that the new iron container was locked and sealed, and placed in the centre of the room. A strong aroma of attar and musk was emanating from the container and perfuming the air. We left the container in the large, built-in pantry of the room and later, one of the Baha’i youth, who was a builder, came and brick-walled the front of the pantry.

Of course, caring for an entrusted object is a very difficult task, particularly when one believes it to be a box of the writings of the Bab and Baha’u’llah. As such, after Aqa Mirza Asadu’llah’s departure, I was protecting that trust with my own life. Even at nights, I would stand guard in the room till morning and be watchful. In fact, early on, for many nights I would sleep in that room, but after a while refrained from doing so.

It went thus for two years, until once more the people of rancour and enmity in Tehran raised the standard of sedition and some of the believers, including Ibn-i Abhar, Haji Amin and Haji Mulla ‘Ali-Akbar were arrested. News was spreading throughout the city that the homes of Baha’is were being targeted for pillage and plunder. This rumour greatly disturbed me and I worried that the enemies may rush our home and steal the trust. Therefore, we convened a family consultation and it was decided to hide the entrusted container more securely.

20 ‘Abdu’l-Husayn Avari, *al-Kawākib al-Durriyah*, 2: 49, states, ‘Aqa Husayn ‘Ali was among the devoted Baha’is who because of persecutions in Isfahan had taken refuge in Tehran and was dwelling in a neighbourhood known as Sar Qabr Aqa. It was in this house that for some six months the remains of the Primal Point were kept. Presently the aforementioned believer, in old age and with various infirmities, including blindness, lives in the same house.’

21 This book considerably supplements A. H. Ishraq-Khavari’s *Nūrayn-i Nayyirayn* about the two martyrs of Isfahan and contains many tablets of Baha’u’llah and ‘Abdu’l-Baha. It was published through the efforts of Aqa Husayn ‘Ali’s son, Colonel ‘Izzatu’llāh Nūr. This excerpt is from pages 68–75 of this book.

Quickly we moved the container from the pantry on the western side of the house to a location on the eastern side, where we removed a portion of one of the thick walls and vertically inserted the container in the cavity. That night, we raised a wall in front of the cavity and covered it with plaster, which was heated all night by a fire so by the morning it was completely dry and looked identical to the other portions of the room.

That very day, I wrote to Mirza Asadu'llah Isfahani, stating, 'Great uproar reigns throughout Tehran and rogues and ruffians are determined to harm and persecute this innocent community [i.e. Baha'is], and may even succeed in pillaging the homes of believers. Since safekeeping a trust is one of the important ordinances enjoined upon the people of Baha, until now I have protected your trust with my life. However, now there is the possibility that hoodlums may rush our house and, God forbid, harm your trust. Therefore, at your earliest, kindly arrange for your return to Tehran to retrieve this trust.'

I sent the above letter and some time later received a reply from Mirza Asadu'llah which stated that, at an opportune time, he would acquaint the Master ['Abdu'l-Baha] with the situation and after receiving his permission, would come to Tehran to regain the entrusted container.

A year later, Aqa Mirza Asadu'llah came to Tehran, arrived at our house and asked for the container. We removed it from its hiding place inside the walls and returned it to him. After carefully inspecting it, he moved it to another location, which apparently was the home of Aqa Muhammad Karim 'Attar.²²

Six months had passed when one day the postman brought a letter from Kirmanshah. Upon examining it, I noticed that it was from Aqa Mirza Asadu'llah. I quickly opened it and read that he had expressed much appreciation and gratitude for the safekeeping of the trust that had been left in my charge for nearly four years. He had further written, 'However, your efforts in protecting this trust are not without their due reward. Indeed, they have won a prize such that even your progeny, generation after generation, will pride themselves upon your service. Your house will forever be honoured that at one time it was the repository of such a sacred trust.' At last, he revealed, 'Know that this trust was none other than the sanctified remains of the Wronged of the World, the Primal Point, may my soul be a ransom for his martyrdom. Know the worth of this charge as your house will one day be the site of pilgrimage of millions of people and indeed it will be regarded as one of the Faith's holy sites.'

... On reading this letter, immediately the friends were invited to our house and the above letter was read for them. It was a majestic feast that rarely one similar to it had been seen before. All the friends and lovers of that Manifestation of Divinity perfumed their nostrils with the musk of the spot where the sacred remains had been deposited and prostrating themselves on that threshold, used its dust as the kohl of their eyes. It was a feast conducted in the utmost magnificence and splendour. The lovers of that Beloved of the World composed enchanting odes and sang enthralling songs. From that day, that spot was designated as one of the Faith's holy sites. In accordance with 'Abdu'l-Baha's wish, a picture of the house and that room was taken and sent to the Holy Land.

22 According to Shoghi Effendi (*God Passes By* 274): Mirza Asadu'llah first 'removed the remains to his own house in Tihrán, after which they were deposited in several other localities such as the house of Husayn-i-'Aliy-i-Isfahání and that of Muhammad-Karim-i-'Attár, where they remained hidden until the year 1316 AH (1899), when, in pursuance of directions issued by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, this same Mirzá Asadu'lláh, together with a number of other believers, transported them by way of Isfahán, Kirmánsháh, Baghdád and Damascus, to Beirut and thence by sea to 'Akká, arriving at their destination on the 19th of the month of Ramadán 1316 A.H. (January 31, 1899), fifty lunar years after the Báb's execution in Tabriz.' *Al-Kawākib al-Durrīya* 2: 49 states that while in Tehran, the remains had been kept in the home of Aqa Muhammad-Karim 'Attar, Imamzadih Hamzih and for six months in the residence of Aqa Husayn 'Ali Isfahani.

EFFORTS TO PRESERVE THE REMAINS OF THE BAB

Some time later, when I was privileged to be in the presence of the Master on pilgrimage, one afternoon, along with a group of believers I was invited to the home of Mirza Asadu'llah. Once more, Mirza Asadu'llah reiterated, 'Protect that house since it is one of the Baha'i holy sites!'²³

23 In listing the Baha'i properties acquired in Iran, Shoghi Effendi (*God Passes By* 338) recorded, 'Other acquisitions that have greatly extended the range of Bahá'í endowments in that country include . . . the house owned by Mírzá Husayn-'Alíy-i-Núr, where the Báb's remains had been concealed.'