



Title: A Case study on the architectural characteristics of Se Gonbad Monument, Urmia

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Abstract

In Islamic architecture, shrines and religious monuments possess a privileged position after mosques. Iranians have long been familiar with the principals of constructing tombs and respected their nobles and dignified people at all times; thus, they constructed tombs and mausoleums in order to immortalize names of their nobles and dignified people. Tombs represent some aspects of civilization and even the culture of ancient country of Iran as well. The architectural peak of monuments in Iran, began from the Seljuk period. Since, in this era architects created tombs, in various ways and in various designs mostly based on their past experiences which was influenced by various architectural styles and methods. The current study investigates, history and architecture of the tombs of Segonbad¹, located in the center of West Azerbaijan province, i.e. Urmia. At the entrance of the structure, there exist three embedded Kufic inscriptions carved from stone. At the ending lines of the inscription, a carved date as "Muharram of 580 AH" explicitly represents that the brick tower or the tombs date back to the sixth century. According to the inscription, the building is constructed by the order of, "Shishqat Almozafari" an emir (ruler) of the Seljuk and its architect had been a man named "Mansour bin Moussa". From the architectural points of view, the present structure has a very keen similarity with the tombs of the 6th century - especially tombs in Maragheh and other tombs belonging the Seljuk period. The most important characteristic of this structure is that, there are two decorative form in the northern side, contains Muqarnas², Girih Tiling³ and Kufi cornices representing the name of sponsor and constructor. The results of the study suggest that foundation of the tomb was made with stones, mortar, sand, and lime; besides, the material used in the construction of the building includes bricks and stones. The next important case about the current construction is, its interior plan and the grave room made in square shape which epitomizes the ability and skill of its architect in embedding a square room inside a cylindrical tower.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, vault, shrines, altar, arch, Karband, Muqarnas, Girih

¹ Three domes

² A form of architectural ornamented vaulting, geometric subdivision of a squinch, or cupola, or corbel, into a large number of miniature squinches, producing a sort of cellular structure

³ A set of tiles that were used in the creation of Islamic geometric patterns



Introduction

In Iran, shrines and Imāmzādeh -- found in all cities of Iran without an exception -- are considered as the most popular religious buildings after the mosques [Hillenbrand, Robert, 1366, p. 273], the most prominent part of Iranian architecture was composed of mosques up to the Seljuk's period; however, in this period tombs, took the lead on the number of mosques. [Ferrier, 1374, p. 86]. In Islamic territories, different types of tombs varying from small and plain to large and luxurious ones had been built in the history of the Islamic rules [Grabber, 1357, p.16]. the first Islamic shrines were made to glorify Islamic rulers as well as the Shia Imams from the fourth to the sixth centuries. In Iran, these shrines were in the form of square towers or buildings having a dome on the Squinch. later, with the effects of the Turkish rulers, their performance and geometrical shape saw a great permutation. In some cities, the tombs were considered as places for relaxation and even the gathering places for people who had come from some distant places to the presence of apostles of God. In addition, the development of the land lording disciplines by the military leaders established the need and necessity of personal wealth and greatness as well as the establishment of the monarchy in the country, and therefore a need for building personal tombs. [Ettinghausen, and Grabar, 1384, 32]. Most of the graves and tombs of kings were constructed in specific locations in the area sometimes near a mosque or shrine; however, usually a tower tomb or shrines were located in one of the local cemeteries [Newton Wilber, 1365]. Since one of the architectural aspects of the tombs, was deemed as a link between the physical world and the spiritual, consequently, tombs, shrines and their components would be regarded as coded symbolic concepts. It is for that reason that a tomb tower (the most important type of tombs), is regarded as a sign of the rise and thereby pointing to the sky and heaven. [Pope, 1365, 13].

Tomb towers are regarded as the biggest and most popular types of the tombs constructed during the Islamic era, though in the early days of the Islamic rules tombs constructed in the form of quadrilateral, at the end of the fourth century tomb towers took the advantage (Meshkati, 1349, 189). Tomb towers originally were constructed in a tall cylindrical form which had a conical roof or so - called "Spire". This kind of building in next three subsequent centuries coinciding with the Seljuk state, became the basis of one of the eight major forms of architecture in Iran, and then in Asia Minor (Rice, 1381, 66).

After understanding and elaborating on the architecture of shrines and tombs, it is a need to examine the shrine of Segonbad, while having these questions in mind, what is the due reason of using bricks and stones, in this construction? Why Segonbad had been designed in a cylindrical round shaped tower dome? What is the cause of the building an altar in the temple of the shrine? Was it, according to some oral narrations a tower, the shrine of one of the Seljuk Emire's? Was this tower as believed by some historians a fire temple during the Sasanians which left derelict after Arab invasions to Iran and Azerbaijan, though reconstructed later? If we just response in the form of a hypothesis, simply with addressing the architecture of Seljuk period, we would reach to a clear answer to it, and that is, since the basic elements of these material, the mud and stone, were easily found, and even simply cast.

In response to the second question of the reason for designing tombs in the form of a tower, it was due to the given importance to the tomb of kings as well as dignifying and respecting their rulers. Additionally, in some cases, political issues and the authority of the government was



similarly involved, besides, the architecture of circular and cylindrical tombs was very popular during the Seljuk era. For the third question, and the application of the altar in these tombs, the main reason was that it gave a religious aspect to the shrines and thereby would result in survival of the buildings, since in that case, people treated them with more respect, and consequently, kept them with more effort. In response to the fourth question, by examining the written sentences on the inscription about to whom the shrine had been constructed to, the name "King Shishqat Almozafari," likely indicates that he is the buried character at the current site. Similarly, based on the available evidences, Segonbad had been a religious structure, since even at the present time, some graves exist around the building. Finally, in response to the last question, it must be admitted that it is impossible for the shrine to be the fire temple of the Zoroastrians, due to the fact that fire temples in the northwest of Iran had a "Char Taq" structure, in contrast to the Islamic structures. Besides, there is no valid proof for the said allegation. Though the Segonbad is deemed as an important structure in respect of its architecture applied to the Seljuk tombs in our country, particularly in West Azerbaijan province, so far no comprehensive research is carried out on such an important foundation. Having a research on this historical structure, emphasizes the importance of establishing historical relations and the development of public structures in Oromia metropolis at this point of time.

Review of the Literature

The Seljuk were a group of the Oghuz Turks, who were nomadic living in the east of the Aral Sea and accepted Islam because of being adjacent to the neighboring Islamic countries [Dabirinejad, 1351, 69]. Azerbaijan had a different situation than other parts of Iran during the invasion of the Seljuk Turks. The process of the sovereignty of the Seljuk over Azerbaijan, was a gradual and indirect process carried out along with the rule of local and regional powers in the region; however, Azerbaijan was released from the Seljuk domination earlier than other areas [Samieian, 1391, 28]. After a while, the Seljuk Turks dominated over the Azerbaijan's culture and assimilated Iranian civilization, the same as the Arab tribes which were settled in Azerbaijan during the onset of Islam but later no trace of them was left. The Seljuk period in Azerbaijan was the era of prosperity of architecture, art and culture. [Ibid, 1391:32].

The era of the Seljuk is called a period of renaissance, prosperity and novel methods in architecture. The Seljuk era can be categorized as a turning point in the Iranian architecture. After the 6th century that Sufism influenced widely the Muslims, the construction of the tombs of Sofia increased broadly [Ibn Battuta, 1370, 227]. During the same period, the impact of mystical trends, mysticism, as well as the Shi'ite trends in the construction of tombs and shrines had been extensively effective [Pope a, 1365, 215]. The application of three basic elements including rock, gypsum and bricks both as material, and as a part of the decoration was the most important indication of this era. In the Seljuk architecture, working with bricks from both aspects of beauty and structure, flourished fascinatingly so that there maybe no match could be found until then. Shape and color in decorative bricks of the walls were so charming that sometimes the Seljuk architects preferred it over gypsum plaster decorations. Regardless of its decorative functions, bricks had an important function of displaying different pressures. Sir E. Lutyens says: "Do not say Iranian bricklaying, rather it's better to say a magic of Iranian brick" [Pope, 1392 a, 145]. Preferring bricks to stone, creating geometric shapes while bricklaying, creating special designs with bricks, setting up by indentation and rise out of the blocks as well as creating inscriptions carved from bricks are the outstanding architectural features of this period. Many tombs of the Seljuk era had been decorated with gypsum plaster. Gypsum plastering received great importance in Islamic monuments to the extent that the artists were called as "Jassas" and the name of many of them are still found in the inscriptions [Kiyani, 1392, 25]. Not much research has been carried out around the formation of the shrine sets. Shrines, often having circular, square and octagonal maps had been constructed with different



architecture designs. In Iran, it is only during the Islamic rule era that such types of shrines were established with exclusive features and magnificent decorations. These structures were even known as Tower, Dome, Shrine and Mazar [Ibid, 1392, 10]. The process of forming shrine sets during the mentioned Islamic period in Iran was not uniform and faced many vacillations. With regard to the works left from the beginning of the Islamic era prior to the Seljuk period, no trace could be detected of such types of buildings; however, the construction of the tombs in two various forms of square cupola and a single tower tomb had seen a certain growth. An important example of the square type constructions, is the tomb of "Amir Ismaeil Samani" in Bukhara, belonging to the Samanid (Kiyani, 1374, 43) and the tomb of Arselan Jazeb belonging to the Ghaznavids in the village of Sang Bast in Mashhad (Ibid, 1374, 173). Gonbad-e-Qaboos dome is among the most fascinating towers constructed during the Al-e-Ziar period (Ibid, 1374, 45). Besides, the most fabulous forms of such architectural designs, is Segonbad in Oromia, constructed during the Seljuk period.

Derivative Origin and Location of Segonbad in Orumia

Architect Mansour bin Moussa built the "Uch Gonbaz" construction as a shrine by the order of "Amir Shishqat Almozafari" governor of the city in 580 A.H. "Uch Gonbaz" in the Turkish language means triple domes and so the name was translated into Farsi, as Segonbad. Afterwards, its Farsi name was used in the new documents and promoted. Some researchers believe that it was famous as "three domes" since there existed three domes in all three floors of the construction; however, a group of historians also believed that the existence of two other monuments in the vicinity of a village so called "Chehriq" -a rural village of Salmas County" was the main reason of naming it. Currently, Segonbad in Orumia is one of the remaining historical monuments from the Seljuk era which its architectural design possesses a very special prominence. It is located in the southeast of Orumia, capital of the West Azerbaijan province. The shrine was built in 580 A.H and there exist three Kufic inscriptions inside. The shrine is related to specifically to "Muhammad Atabegs" (570 to 581 A.H.) from the Atabegs of Azerbaijan (The Ildegizids) in the Seljuk period. Turkish emirs, were very interested to make their tombs, in the shape of a tower as an imitation of tents [Ernest Connell, 1368, a, p. 74]. Nonetheless, the shrine of Shiite Imāmzādeh were rarely built in the form of a tower [Robert Hillenbrand, 1366, a, p. 32].

Segonbad is located in the southeastern part of the city in one of the alleys around the Ostad Barzgar street. Previously it was located in the southeastern outskirts of the city and around the monument was vacant; however, at present, due to the expansion and development of the city within the recent 32 years, it is located inside the city surrounded by buildings. In order to maintain its privacy and prevent any damage to the decorations, Segonbad and its area has been cordoned off with metal bars and (Figure 1).



Based on the descriptions of Andre Godard the shrine was built same as the domes built in Maragheh including stone benches which contain a dungeon above the building encompassing the shrine. Its entrance is like the shrines built in Maragheh decorated by some patterns embedded in the body of cylindrical shape. The entrance is located in the middle of a flat arch which the mentioned square frame is situated at the topside of it" (Godard, Maksim Siroux and et al. 1376]. At the entrance of the building there located three Kufi inscriptions and at the ending lines of the inscription, a carved date as "Muharram of 580 AH" explicitly represents that the brick tower or the tombs date back to the sixth century. From the the architectural aspects, the tomb, has the same structure as of the sixth century tombs especially the ones built in Maragheh and other shrines of the Seljuk era. No significant attention had been paid to the current historical monument up until the nineteenth century; however, it was made known to the art world by N. Khanikove for the first time in 1852 and consequently it was registered as a historical monument under the registry number 242. The structural elements of the shrine include, the front side of the building facade vault, alter or the grave room and architectural face inside the building.

The exterior face of Se Gonbad

Se Gonbad in a cylindrical shape, was built utilizing two types of different material including stone and brick. Its arc and dome was soared slowly and shaped as a calotte. Exterior face of it is circular, though its interior side is formed quad angle and two hole located in the east and west side of the building. Although Se Gonbad is defined as a property of the 6th century and the Seljuk era, in terms of bricklaying and structural form, it is alike towers of Mughal era. Foundation of the building is filled with gray stones up to a 3.6 meters high and for the higher parts all the utilized material for building is only quad angle bricks. The monument currently is only in two floors, besides, it possesses four louvers. In the first floor, which is called vault, has a curved roof and thereby becomes separated from the second floor. The circular shaped vault has a tower of silence which its upper part is changed to include the shrine by brick. Additionally, its entrance ornamented and surrounded by some delicate Islamic patterns in the body. In both two cylindrical and circular sides there are two windows which are opened to the shrine. The windows are set at an altitude of 2.3 meters high from the ground and embedded in rectangular shape and a size of 84*35 cm. The door of the first floor is about 1.70 meters high. The second floor of the shrine has a door to the height of 2.50 meters. Its diagonal is 5 meters and its height is about 13 meters.

The current highly valued historical monument is located in a land surrounded by lots of graves. It is predicted that probably the aforementioned land had been its yard and thereby due to its value and sanctity had been changed to be a cemetery primarily. On both sides of the building facade three inscription are located which only bear the name of the sponsor and constructor without any reference to the history of the construction and its utilizations purposes (Figure 2).



Figure 2, General view of the tomb, based on the information provided by the Author, 2015

A number of historians and authors believe that the main and basic intention for building the present monument had been a watch tower; nonetheless, since they did not affirm it documental, it seems that any detailed and elaborated studies and scientific researches in the future would be of great help to clarify the situation and, even the initial application of the construction. Given that, according to the non-documented reports during the excavation around the tower in the years from 1969 to 1972, some graves were discovered showing the similarity with other tombs of the 6th century in terms of architecture, subsequently it is more likely that the construction had been utilized as a shrine.

Architecture and decorations facade of the Se Gonbad

As it was described earlier, the construction had been built in the cylindrical and simple shape form having been decorated just at the entrance part of the grave. Moreover, it had been decorated with a very fantastic frames of milling stones at the motifs and plaster cornices which surrounds facade of the entrance of the shrine. Such type of frame making up is a fascinating prototype of its own. Additionally, another important point about the construction, is a special type of painting and stone decoration applied deliberately which goes beyond the aesthetic dome and Muqarnas in about 9 meters high, given a special elegance to the building. Decorations at the entrance of the shrine are the first of their kind, decorated with pieces of pebble and plaster cornice with geometrical shapes in Kufic. Type of the decorations and framing at the head of



Figure 3 Decorations, based on the information provided by the Author, 2015



In the creation of these marvelous lines small stones had been utilized. At the head of the entrance there are three Kufic inscriptions carved from stone decorated at the upper side with Muqarnas and in three rows. The second inscription is located on the top of the tower arch of the entrance. The third inscription is located at the outer wall of the flat panel, which unfortunately the lower parts of the inscription on both sides of the port are ruined and the letters are missed. At the end of the inscription a phrase had been carved referring to the Muharram of 580 A.H. (1179 A.D.). According to the inscription, the building is constructed by the order of, "Shishqat Almozafari" an emir of the Seljuk. What makes a difference here, is that, the letters, lines and patterns of Se Gonbad had been created with stone, due to the fact that the architects of time were used to decorate ornamental parts of constructions differently based on their own personal taste. Nonetheless, the dispute lays on the ground that they created it with tiles as in Maragheh or Nakhichevan. Perhaps the main reason of such difference is related to the means not available for the architect while constructing the Se Gonbad.

Constructing a basement for the shrines had been a conventional custom in Azerbaijan during

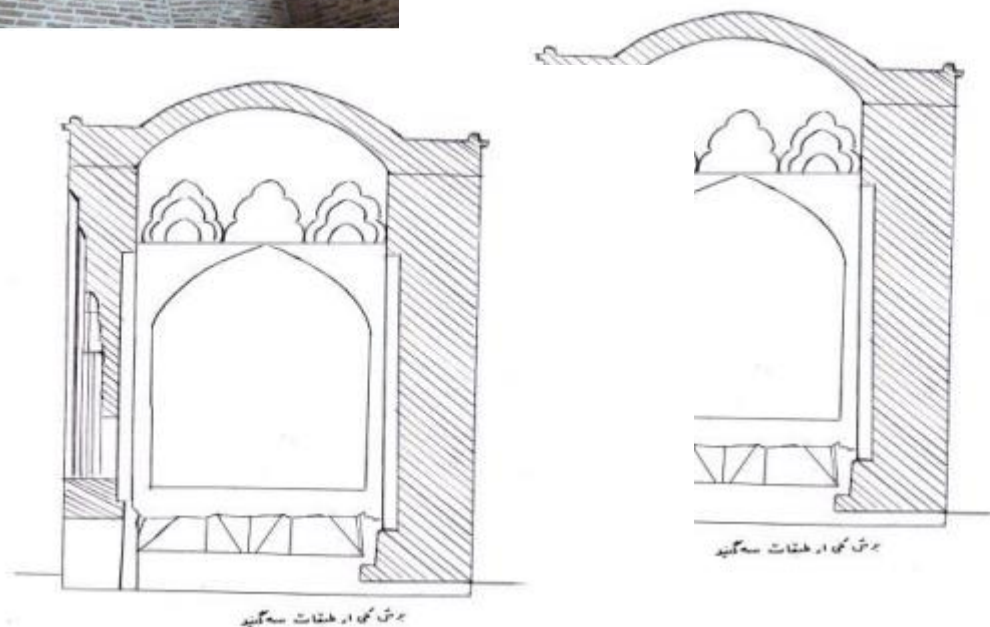


Figure 5 General perspective of the floors, based on the information provided by the Author, 2015



The walls of the Se Gonbad are composed of two parts including brick and stone, though the stones applied, are of milled lava type and the bricks sized 20*20*5 centimeters. Mortar utilized between the stones and bricks of limestone mortars; however, for renovating and arming the construction, cement mortar is applied. The shrine has two skylights on either side of it, at the North and South face, connected with four channels with upside and downside the floors. Although in most of the literature, they had been elucidated as skylight, concerning their locations and weak receiving gleam, it would be said that they had been implemented as an outlet to air draught. The cover of both two floors is made with brick mausoleum. At the basement, because of its low height the square space is changed to the circle space due to creating corners to the construction. On the upper floor, the same construction with Muqarnas is utilized as well.

Interior Architecture of Se Gonbad

internal map of the dungeon and the shrine is square shaped, which the architect embedded with a specific skill in the cylinder tower and again constructed a circular room utilizing highly

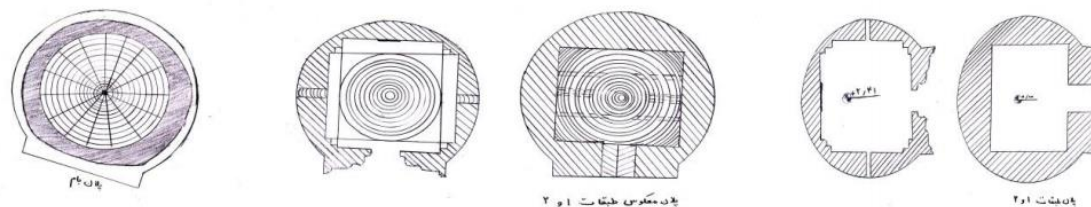


Figure 6: The plan of Se Gonbad, based on the information provided by the Author, 2015

The inlet of the dungeon is located just below the shrine 's main port and two window provide light to inside. The wall of the shrine is decorated with archways, Muqarnas, Karbandi. The ceiling of the dome shaped half circular bricks are laid in a single circular mode. Furthermore, the wall of the shrine in the room are decorated symmetrically with Muqarnas in the corners. On the wall in front of the main entrance of the shrine there is an altar in 185*135 centimeters size with 4 cm prominence compared to the wall. The sidelines of the altar which is like a frame approximates 25 cm. Interior side lacks no more decorations.

Conclusion

In Islamic architecture, shrines and religious monuments possess a privileged position after mosques. Iranians have long been familiar with the principals of constructing tombs and respected their nobles and dignified people at all times; thus, they constructed tombs and mausoleums in order to immortalize names of their nobles and dignified people. Tombs represent some aspects of civilization and even the culture of ancient country of Iran as well. this is very tangible matter, since even several centuries have been passed (580 A. H.), it is still safe. three inscriptions carved from stone decorated at the upper side with Muqarnas and in three rows. The second inscription is located on the top of the tower arch of the entrance. The third inscription is located at the outer wall of the flat panel, which unfortunately the lower parts of the inscription on both sides of the port are ruined and the letters are missed. The ceiling of the dome shaped half circular bricks are laid in a single circular mode. Furthermore, the wall of the shrine in the room are decorated symmetrically with Muqarnas in the corners. On the wall in front of the main entrance of the shrine there is an altar in 185*135 centimeters size with 4 cm prominence compared to



the wall. The sidelines of the altar which is like a frame approximates 25 cm. Interior side lacks no more decorations. Even though the current construction is deemed as an architectural monument in West Azerbaijan, no vas research has been carried out about it. Consequently, concerning the importance of the current monument, a vast study is recommended.

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