



DARB -E EMĀM

DARB-E EMĀM, large shrine complex in the old Sonbolestān quarter of Isfahan (number 217 in the official register of Persian national monuments), centered on a burial chamber identified in an 18th-century inscription (see below) as that of Ebrāhīm Baṭḥā (or Ṭabāṭabā'ī?), a descendant of one Ḥasan Moṭannā, and Zayn-al- 'Abedīn, believed to have been the son of Imam Ja'far al-Šādeq. The main structure, consisting of entrance portal (*sar-dar*), vestibule, and tomb, was built in 857/1453 and expanded and modified several times during the Safavid period (Figure 1).

The elaborate portal of the main structure, entered on the north side, is faced with tile mosaics, considered among the finest specimens of such work in Persia and comparable to the contemporary mosaics at the Blue Mosque (Masjed-e kabūd) in Tabrīz. The portal opening consists of a pointed arch contained within a rectangular frame in which lozenge- and cross-shaped tiles alternate against a background filled with floral designs; the spandrels are filled with symmetrical compositions of vine stems and flowers. The interior side walls are paneled with geometric designs emanating from central ten-pointed stars, and panels with centralized floral designs flank the doorway.

A Persian inscription in white *toḷṭ* script (see CALLIGRAPHY) on a dark-blue ground encircles the interior of the portal at the springing of the arch, though the final words have disappeared. The surviving portion reads: "When the ruler of the greatest domain, lord of the mightiest realm, and sovereign protector of the world Abu'l-Moẓaffar Mīrzāda Jahānšāh, may God perpetuate his stewardship, entrusted the government of this province to the care and



direction of the prince, the support of the pillars of the religion of Moḥammad Abu'l-Faṭḥ Moḥammadi, may God sustain his rule, the great and most just commander and the repository of grandeur and majesty Jalāl-al-Dīn Šafaršāh, may God enlarge his fortune. . . .” Partly on the basis of a painted inscription preserved on the walls of the vestibule (Godard, pp. 52-53), Jalāl-al-Dīn Homā'i suggested completing the portal inscription thus: “undertook the erection of this majestic shrine and mighty edifice, seeking the pleasure of God, in the year 857.” Abu'l-Moẓaffar Mīrzāda Jahānšāh, the Qarā Qoyunlu ruler (841-72/1438-67), had captured Isfahan two years earlier. Moḥammadi, called Moḥammad-Solṭān in a Persian poem inscribed under the small dome of the vestibule and dated 857, was Moḥammadi Mīrzā, son of Jahānšāh and at that time ruler of Isfahan as his father's deputy under the tutelage of Lala Šafaršāh (Abū Bakr Ṭehrānī, pp. 326-30; pace Godard, pp. 53-54).

In the interior corners of the portal above the tile inscription two *moqarnas* squinches flank a central latticed window framed by three Persian verse couplets in tile work. The semidome (*nīm-kāsa*) rests on a squinch net of tile mosaic.

The tomb chamber itself is covered by an onion-shaped dome on a cylindrical drum. The mosaic facing of the exterior was restored in 1010/1601-02 and again in 1325 Š./1946 by the Department of antiquities (Edāra-ye bāstān-šenāsī; Honarfar, p. 346 n. 1). Fragments of Safavid inscriptions remain on the drum, including the koranic surah LXXVI in Kufic script and the building inscription in white *tolṭ* on a turquoise ground.

In the centuries that followed the initial construction of Darb-e Emām a number of additional tombs were constructed in the vestibule and surrounding the shrine. None of the tombstones in the vestibule bears a name or date. Eventually their number forced the closing of the original entrance, during the reign of Shah Solaymān (1077-1105/1666-94). The door was replaced by a long window with a grill of interlaced star patterns, and the shrine had thenceforth to be entered directly from the south. A helmet-shaped dome on a cylindrical drum was raised over the vestibule, thus increasing the space of the shrine itself, without altering the basic plan. The inscription on the exterior of the drum was executed by Moḥammad-Rezā Emāmī in 1081/1671 in *tolṭ* on a background of azure tiles with lozenge designs.

In 1127/1715 Shah Solṭān-Ḥosayn constructed a new portal to the east of the original. The date is given in a large inscription band in white on dark-blue tile



mosaic, which encircles the three sides of the entrance passage. Below it, immediately above the central doorway, is an Arabic inscription on square tiles in two registers: “The refurbishment of this shrine, dedicated to *mawlānāsayyed-al-sājedīn*, in which are the tombs of the two *sayyeds* Emāmzāda Ebrāhīm Baṭḥā and Emāmzāda Zayn-al-‘Abedīn, took place on the order of Nawwāb Ḳāqān b. Ḳāqān, the greatest of the Safavid shahs mentioned above [in the upper inscription]. Written by the lowly ‘Abd-al-Raḥīm in 1129 [1717].” The tympanum above the inscriptions on the back wall is faced with tile mosaic in a geometric design. A series of rooms was built leading from this portal to an anteroom south of the shrine (Godard, pp. 55-56).

Today the Darb-e Emām complex encompasses a number of units arrayed around three square courtyards respectively north, east, and west of the original structure. From the northern courtyard both the original and later portals are visible; from the eastern courtyard a series of blind arches (*tāq-nāmas*), some containing latticed windows and doorways; and from the western courtyard porticos ornamented with *moqarnas* of polychromed stucco and mosaic spandrels (*pošt-e baḡals*). The central portico in this wing once housed a fine 15th-century stained-glass window mounted in plaster; some years ago it was removed and installed in one of the rooms of the Čehel Sotūn (q.v.) in Isfahan.

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Figure 1. Plan of the Darb-e Emām complex, Ifsahan. After Golombek and Wilber, II, fig. 126.