



EMĀMZĀDA II. FORMS, DECORATIONS, AND OTHER CHARACTERISTICS

EMĀMZĀDA

ii. Forms, decorations, and other characteristics

Introduction. The identity of the people interred in *emānzādas* and the exact location where they are entombed are often moot questions, as in most cases there are no historical documents authenticating the claims for these shrines. Nevertheless, the identity of many of them is known, and it is clear that the interred often have no relation to the Shi'ite Imams. Most of the individuals were well-known Sufis believed to have performed miracles, such as Shaikh Aḥmad Fāhhādān and Taqī-al-Dīn Dādā Moḥammad in Yazd, Shaikh Šehāb-al-Dīn in Ahar, and Shaikh Aḥmad Jām (q.v.) in Khorasan. Some shrines are burial places for individuals who played an important role, real or imagined, in establishing Shi'ism in Persia, such as Shaikh Ṣafī in Ardabīl and Shaikh Ḥaydar, the son of Shaikh Jonayd and father of Shah Esmā'īl I, in Meškīnšahr (Afšār, II, pp. 346, 351; Kārang, II, pp. 86 ff., 378 ff., 614-16). Shrines were also occasionally built over the graves of martyrs, local rulers, or even scholars (e.g., Sar-e torbat-e Emām in Gilān and Ebn Babawayh's mausoleum in Qom; see Sotūda, II, p. 343; *Dāyerat al-ma'āref-e tašayyo'* I, Tehran, 1366 Š./1987, p. 308).



Forms. In terms of general design, shrines can be divided into two categories: single-buildings, also known as tomb-towers, and shrine complexes (*āstāna*). Many single-building shrines are located in rural areas, small towns, and their environs. Shrines built as inter-connected units or complexes, such as large *āstānas*, are fewer in number and almost always located in cities. The size of these complexes depends on their importance in the public eye and their location. In most cases the various sections were added at various times. Structures such as porticos (*ayvān*, q.v.) and courts, for examples, were gradually added to the core units of the shrines.

In form, tomb-towers are domed squares with four alcoves (*čahār soffa-ye šāhnešīndār*), polygons, stars, or circles. Some scholars have traced their origin to Palmyra towers and others to the dome-shaped tents of Central Asian nomads. There is no doubt, however, that shrine construction over the grave of Imams and their descendants is a popular Shi'ite tradition, particularly in Persia. According to the Sunnites, graves should be at the same level as the earth around them and undecorated.

In pre-Islamic Persia, tomb building can be traced back to Elamite times. The most remarkable example is Haft Tepe (2nd millennium B.C.E.) in Kūzestān. In the Median and Achaemenid periods, mausoleums were carved from rock. Examples include those attributed to Cyrus I, Cyrus the Great, and Smerdis (Bardiya, qq.v; Negahbān, pp. 14-15; R. Ghirshman, tr., pp. 135-36), all of which predate Palmyran structures. There are no examples of such mausoleums from the Arsacid (q.v.) period, and only written references from the Sasanian period, such as to the mausoleum built for Kōsrow II Anōšīrvān (q.v.; *Mojmal*, ed. Bahār, p. 464).

The mausoleum of Amir Esmā'īl Sāmānī in Bukhara (r. 279-95/892-907) is one of the oldest examples of a tomb-tower from the first four centuries after the advent of Islam and has been extensively copied ever since. It was built on a square base and has a squat (*kamkīz*) dome. This type of architecture clearly continues the design of the square-domed (*čahārṭāq*, q.v.) fire temple of the Sasanian period, which can still be seen in Nīāsar, Kāšān; Bāza Hūr, Khorasan; and Jerra, Fārs (Narāqī, pp. 38-45; Mošṭafawī, pp. 113-14; Godard, 1938, pp. 53-57). The design may have evolved over time into two formats: the domed square with four alcoves (*čahār soffa-ye šāhnešīndār*) and the centralized octagon. Both of them, particularly the latter, provide ample opportunity for expansion around the center. The octagonal format also offers greater room for circumambulating the grave or cenotaph. Tomb-towers have also been



transformed into polygonal structures to create additional space. The exterior and interior plans differ, with a polygonal or star-shaped plan used to create greater height. Polygonal tomb-towers with engaged (*jesmī*) columns and buttresses in the corners, such as Gonbad-e Qābūs (q.v.), Kāšāna funerary tower in Beštām, or Borj-e ‘Alā’-al-Dīn in Varāmīn, are notable examples.

One important characteristic of tomb-towers is their height, which can reach tens of meters (in the case of Gonbad-e Qābūs, 55 m). They are capped by conical domes, which give an illusion of even greater height. The ratio of height to diameter in these structures varies between 3.5 and 5.5 and becomes much smaller in larger *āstānas* and shrines. The structure is given a taller image by using tall drums and slender, high minarets flanking the dome. Other types of domes placed above shrines are *nār*, *āwgūn*, *čapīla* (dome with high pitch), *kāgī* (ovoid), double vault (*do pūš*), *‘araqčīnī*, and *kolāhkūdi* (pointed).

The exterior view of the complex determines the design of many elements, including the height and pitch of the domes, the *ayvāns*, portal arcades, and minarets. Tall portal arcades, along with vast courts and large *ayvāns*, occupy most of the space outside the tomb area. In most cases, the design of the courts follows that of mosques: they have four *ayvāns*, one in front of each side of the building. In addition to the main *ayvān* in front of the dome chamber, there are one, two, or three more *ayvāns*, which function as arcades to various courts or other structures around the complex (e.g., Emāmzāda Šāhzāda Aḥmad in the village Kūhīn near Tafreš). In certain shrines, there are courts with two *ayvāns* (e.g., Emāmzāda Aḥmad o ‘Alī in Qom; Fayz, II, pp. 170-76, 281-82). On either side of the *ayvāns* there are usually chambers with their own *ayvāns*. In most cases, a large pool in the middle of the court provides water for pilgrims’ ablutions. These pools are carefully placed to reflect the *ayvāns*, domes, and the minarets. Troughs and water stands (*saqqā-kāna*) are also found in the courtyard.

Pavilion shrines (*kūšk emāmzādas*) are rather large, usually octagonal, two-story structures built in the middle of a garden. They are inspired by structures developed during the Safavid period, such as K̄vāja Rabī’ at Mašhad (see below).

Many shrines were originally constructed for purposes other than burial of the Imams’ descendants but later became known as grave sites. In reviewing the plan and design of *emāmzādas*, as well as related historical documents and



popular beliefs, it becomes apparent that some must have been built on the site of old revered places, such as *mehrābas* (e.g., Emānzāda Maʿšūm at Varjūvī near Marāḡa or Šāh-e Čerāḡ in Shiraz), fire temples, and the like (Varjavand, 1973, 1975, and 1976). Clarification of this issue depends upon the outcome of archeological studies of these *emānzādas*; archeological studies of such early mosques as Masjed-e Jāmeʿ in Isfahan or Qazvīn have revealed earlier structures under the Islamic buildings. Similarly, complex shrines other than single buildings or tomb-towers may have developed over the centuries around a core section. Following the addition of mosques and porticos, many of these shrines have attracted devoted Muslims for religious practices, such as Friday prayer, Qurʾān recitation, or mourning rituals during the months of Moḡarram and Šafar. Occasionally, the establishment of a *madrasa* nearby has turned these shrines into active centers for training religious scholars or into important religious institutions such as the seminaries (*ḡawza-ye ʿelmīya*) at Najaf, Karbalāʾ, Qom, and Mašhad.

The importance and location of shrine complexes determine the different units connected to them. In medium-sized complexes, the units usually include a portico, a mosque, and a place for cooking votive offerings (*nadrī*). In larger complexes, more of the same units are added. At Āstān-e qods-e rażawī (q.v.) in Mašhad, for example, there are several porticos known as Dār-al-Siāda, Dār-al-Ḥoffāz, Dār-al-Žiāfa Tawḡīd-kāna, and several mosques known as Bālā sar, Pošt-e sar, and Women’s mosques. Other units fully or partially connected include sanctuaries (*basts*, q.v.), courts, places for beating drums (*naqqāra-kāna*), guest houses (*mehmān-kāna*), religious schools (*madrasa-ye ʧollāb*), libraries, water stands, tombs of notables, and places where visitors’ shoes are kept. Esteemed shrines such as Āstān-e qods-e rażawī and Āstān-e Fāṡema Maʿšūma in Qom also contain valuable depositories and museums.

Decorations and furnishings. The decoration of *emānzādas* depends on the size and different units of the structure or complex, on the style of construction, and on the period and region of construction. Single buildings or tomb-towers can be constructed of mud brick, baked brick (plain or decorated), stone, or wood. While simple at first sight, the manner in which bricks are laid together is subtle and attractive. Most shrines have a simple or elaborate band (*qaṡārbandī*) that separates the base of the structure from the dome (e.g. Emānzāda Moḡammad near Babol). In the case of tomb-towers built on a star-shaped design with projecting flanges and brick pilasters, the addition of these bands (which may even contain inscriptions) enhances the striking effect.



Domes are covered with plain or glazed bricks, which are usually turquoise. Conical *moqarnas* domes (*rok varčīn*) typical of Kūzestān and Lorestān are covered with a fine, white layer of stucco.

Tiles have also been used to decorate the exterior of tomb-towers, either as strapwork (*dovāl*) or mosaic (*mo'arraḡ*) tile. In the late Saljuḡ and Il-khanid periods, cut tiles were often set in bands or panels or around the upper arch of the main façade. In shrine complexes of the Il-khanid and later periods, the portal arcades, *ayvāns*, domes, minarets, and arcades around the court were often richly decorated with three kinds of tile decoration: tile mosaic (*mo'arraḡ*), polychrome (*haft-rang*), and a style in which pieces of tile are inserted between the bricks (*ma'qelī*, also known as *bannā'ī*). In the central Kavīr regions, in such cities as Isfahan and Yazd, the huge tiled domes of shrines create beautiful aerial sights as the shining of colors contrast with the surroundings. Other notable examples of exterior decoration are found in such important shrines as those of Najaf, Karbalā', Samarra, Mašhad, and Qom, where enormous domes and prominent minarets are covered with gold.

On the interior, *emānzādas* can be decorated with tile, mirror work (*ā'īnākārī*, q.v.), stucco (*gačborī*; q.v.), and fresco (*negāra*). The latter two are the oldest. Stucco decoration comprises two types: inscriptions and other decorations such as frescoes. The oldest and most attractive inscriptions are done in Kufic script, especially when they are colored and have floral designs. These inscriptions were usually placed at the base of the dome as bands on the upper parts of the *emānzāda's* walls. An interesting example is Emānzāda Yaḥyā in Varāmīn. Other stuccoes show geometric and floral subjects. The latter was used in *meḥrābs* and around inscriptions, while the former was usually applied on floral designs as hexagonal or octagonal frames. The addition of color to stucco decoration, particularly in prayer niches (*meḥrāb*), was thought to increase the visual appeal.

Paintings, mostly with floral or bird motifs, are found in shrines built after the 4th/10th century. Various examples dating since the Safavid period, especially from the Qajar period, include scenes from Koranic stories. They also depict the ascension (*me'rāj*) of the Prophet Moḥammad or portray Imam 'Alī and, particularly, the events that took place at Karbalā' (see 'ĀŠŪRĀ'). The most interesting examples can be found in the Emānzāda 'Alamdār and Emānzāda Pīr Rūban in Dezfūl, Emānzāda Āqā Sayyed Našīr at Rānkūh in Langarūd, Emānzāda Āqā Sayyed Ḥosayn at Demūčāl in Lāhījān, and Emānzāda Hādī in Deylamān.



Tile work inside the shrines is done in mosaic or with polygonal tiles. Generally, tile mosaic was used for the *mehṛāb* and the inscriptions at the base of the dome, while polygonal and star tiles were installed on dados. Tile work covering the entire surface of the *emānzāda* dates back to the Il-khanid period. In some shrines, large polygonal tiles with *mehṛāb* designs were used to cover the cenotaph. Interesting examples can be found in Emānzāda Šāhzāda Ebrāhīm ‘Alī b. Ja‘far and Emānzāda Aḥmad and ‘Alī in Qom. The tiles measure 70×70 cm and have a sky-blue background and *tolṭ* script in vermillion. They date to the second half of the 7th/13th century (Fayż, II, pp. 281-87; Meškātī, p. 236).

Decorative mirror work inside the *ayvāns* facing the tomb and inside the *boq‘a* of *emānzādas* are characteristic of the late Safavid and particularly the Qajar periods. Decorative mirror work usually accompanied stucco designs. In some cases the entire inner side of the dome and most of the body of the structure are set with mirrors. In most cases, however, floral relief stucco and mirror work are combined. The cutting of mirrors and the style in which they are set together to maximize sheen is of extreme importance. Elaborate examples can be found in the *āstānas* of Imam ‘Alī al-Reżā in Mašhad, Fāṭema Ma‘šūma in Qom, and Šāh-e Čerāg in Shiraz.

Other characteristic decoration and furnishings of shrines are wooden doors, cenotaphs, and grilles (*zarīḥ*). Many shrines have attractive wooden doors with handsome strapworks (*qāb-bandī*) and paintings. The designs are generally either geometric or floral. The same types of designs also can be found on cenotaphs, which are inscribed with Koranic texts, the name and genealogy of the deceased, and the names of the founder and the carpenter. Wooden grilles are usually latticed and relatively simple. Shrines in the Gīlān and Māzandarān regions have quite a number of different wood designs, some dating back to the 8th/14th century but most belonging to the first half of the 10th/16th century. Examples of large wooden doors include the three-meter wood door of the Āstān-e qods-e rażawī (dated 735/1334-35) and the door of the shrine of the Šāhzāda Ḥosayn in Qazvīn (from the period of Shah Ṭahmāsb, r. 930-84/1524-76). The large cenotaph at the Haft-tanān shrine in Lārijān, measuring 1.5 x 1.97 x 5.77 m, is a notable example of the genre (picture in Sotūda, III, plate 281).

Other important features of major *āstānas* are gold- and silver-covered doors and steel grilles. They have been made since the Safavid period, especially during the Qajar period and the last few decades, by Persian, especially



Eşfahānī, craftsmen. Floral designs or *nasta'liq* inscriptions embossed on gold or silver plates are masterpieces. Doors with enameled decorations in cartouches can be seen at Āstān-e qods-e rażawī, Karbalā', Najaf, Šāhzāda Ḥosayn in Qazvīn, Šāh-e Čerāg, and Shah 'Abd-al-'Azīm, south of Tehran. In a very few instances, e.g., Āstān-e qods from the Faṭḥ-'Alī Shah period, the doors were studded with jewels.

Cemeteries have always been set close to or in shrine courts, indicating the special importance of the dead near places of worship, as attested by the discovery of the Elamite catacombs (*gūr-sardābas*) near the ziggurat of Čoğā-Zanbīl (q.v.; 2nd millennium B.C.E.; Amiet, pp. 52-59). Important people were usually buried inside the shrine or in the adjoining *ayvāns*. Trees have also been planted near the shrines, either before or after their construction, to create a paradise-like atmosphere. The trees found near most shrines in Persia, particularly in the north, include Siberian elm, oak, maple, plane, yew, cypress, box-tree, and elm. The size of the trunks, which indicates the age of trees, varies from 680 cm for cedars and oaks to 830 cm for maples and 1,200 cm for plane-trees (e.g., Emāmzāda Šāhzāda Ḥosayn and Emāmzāda Sayyed 'Alī Kīā Solṭān, both in Kojūr; Sotūda, III, pp. 180, 231).

Numeric symbolism. Attempts have been made to establish a relationship between the number of sides or flanges of an *emāmzāda*, or the number of the facets (*yāls*) of the pyramidal roof and the religious beliefs of the pilgrims. Such attempts have failed to establish links, for many important and major *āstānas* have been built on the basis of a square plan. Seven-sided structures, which one might imagine were appealing to Isma'īlī Shi'ites, are almost non-existent. So are dodecagonal structures, while decagons and especially octagons are abundant. As to the number of facets in a pyramidal roof, the existence of some dodecagonal roofs, such as those found in Abū Lo'lo' in Kāšān, do provide a model, but in comparison to shrine complexes, these tombs with pyramidal roofs are insignificant. Therefore, neither plan, number of the sides on the exterior, nor the pyramidal roof nor number of tiers of *moqarnas* (*rok-e heramī*) can be considered a sign or symbol of anything. Architects have designed shrine structures on the basis of previous models, adding new ideas to take into account functions for specific local and ecological situations, rather than to create symbolic significance.

Waqf-nāmas and farmāns of custodians. Documents valuable in identifying the founders and builders of shrines include *waqf-nāmas* and *farmāns* assigning custodians. These documents also help us to understand the historic or even



economic situation of the region where shrines are located (e.g., 150 such documents related to the Šāhzāda Ḥosayn shrine in Qazvīn were published by Modarresī Ṭabātabā'ī).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

see [iii](#), continued.