



GONBAD-E SORĶ

GONBAD-E SORĶ, the “Red Tomb” (also known as Gonbad-e Qermez) is the earliest of five medieval mausolea located in Marāḡa in Azarbaijan ([Figure 1](#)). The others are an unnamed circular tomb (563/1168-69), Gonbad-e Kabud (593/1196), Gonbad-e Ġaffāriya (ca. 728/1328), and Joi Borj (ca. 730/1330). An inscription on the north side around the tympanum records that the tomb (referred to as both *qobba* and *mašhad*) was ordered by Abu’l-‘Ezz ‘Abd-al-‘Aziz b. Maḥmud b. Sa’d, known by the title of Qawām-e Ādarbāyjān, and possibly a member of the Aḥmadili dynasty. The building was completed on 11 Šawwāl 542/4 March 1148. A further inscription on the east side names the builder as Abu Bakr Moḥammad b. Bandān Bannā’ b. Moḥassen [or Moḥsen] Me‘mār (Godard, 1934, p. 4; idem, 1936, pp. 133-34; Herzfeld, pp. 91-92; Combé, Sauvaget, and Wiet, nos. 3135-36; Mayer, p. 94; Hillenbrand, 1974, II, p. 94).

Gonbad-e SorĶ is constructed of brick on a base of cut stone, with additional decorative details in glazed tile (*kāši*), terracotta, stucco, and carved stone. The structure is divided into a crypt and an upper chamber. Accessed by a small arched entrance on the east side, the crypt is roofed with a diagonal cross vault. The upper chamber, reached via a set of steps on the north side, comprises a square-planned lower section rising to an octagonal drum which originally supported an eight-sided pyramidal roof (now replaced by a low dome). Triangular buttresses are attached to the exterior of the octagonal drum.

The external facades on the south, west, and east sides are decorated with pairs of blank niches. The arches of the niches are supported by engaged



colonettes with stone capitals, each of which carries a simple inscription. Above the niches is a zone of carved terracotta and stucco comprising a lower inscription band and an upper band of *gereh-sāzi* (q.v.). The corners of the building are marked by engaged columns topped with carved stone capitals. Although geometric brick patterns are attested throughout the exterior, the most complex arrangement is encountered in the engaged columns on the northeast and northwest corners flanking the entrance. These columns employ twelve different types of curved and rectangular brick (Hillenbrand, 1974, II, p. 91). The north side is articulated by a series of rectangular or arched frames around the central doorway. In the spandrels and the tympanum, the decoration is formed of glazed tile and carved stucco. Additional accents are provided by the use of carved brick plugs, some incised with the word *Allāh*, on the soffits of the six arches framing the tympanum. Aside from the dark blue glazed boss in the center of the tympanum, turquoise is the only glaze colour employed on the building.

The interior is less elaborate than that of the exterior, with a layer of plaster covering the walls. Paired blind niches on the south, west, and east sides echo those of the exterior. The low brick benches around the walls are probably not original. The octagonal zone of transition comprises alternated broken-headed arches (each pierced by a window) and squinches. The squinches are formed of two intersecting arches framed by a third, a composition possibly originating from here. This form of squinch is known in 7th/13th- and 8th/14th-century buildings in Azarbaijan such as the mosques at Marand and Reżā'īya/Urmia (Schroeder, p. 1035, pl. 412A; Hillenbrand, 1974, II, p. 91).

Gonbad-e SorĶ stands at an important point in the evolution of the monumental mausolea. With its square plan and octagonal pyramidal roof, Gonbad-e SorĶ combines elements of the two common forms of Islamic Iranian monumental tomb, the domed cube, and the conically-roofed circular or polygonal tower. While the majority of the structural and decorative components such as the engaged columns at “Tomb of the Samanids” in Bukhara (295/907), the combination of multiple types of geometric pattern in the two mausolea of Ķaraqān (460-86/1067-93; Stronach and Young), and the use of glazed tile in a *gereh-sāzi* design in the Kalyān mosque in Bukhara (515/1121; Pickett, p. 29) can be traced back to earlier buildings, it is in the subtle modulation of both the masses and the ornament that Gonbad-e SorĶ represents a significant advance. The building illustrates the increasingly confident use of colored glaze to provide decorative accents. Glazed tiles are



employed to varied effect in the tympanum, the spandrels, the engaged columns, and the soffits of the blind niches (Seherr-Thoss, pls. 31, 32). Many of the themes developed at Gonbad-e Sork were taken up and elaborated upon in later mausolea of the Saljuq and Il-Khanid periods.

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