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## **Iranian Seljuk Architecture with an Emphasis on Decorative Brickwork of the Qazvin Kharaqan Towers**

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### **Abstract**

Iranian Seljuk period is one of the most magnificent, the most prominent, and at the same time, the fate of the most innovative historical periods. One of the prominent works of Seljuk architecture, which is a valuable work in art and architecture of the Islamic Iran in terms of decorative brickwork, is the Qazvin Kharaqan Towers. These twin towers have more than thirty types of brickwork with stunning arch-viewings and outstanding Kufic brick lines. In this report, I present the architectural and decorative features of Kharaqan Towers of Qazvin. This study benefits from analytical and descriptive approaches based on a field research. The purpose of this paper is to better understand the brickwork decoration and art of Kharaqan Towers. In the mentioned building, about thirty different designs have been applied. This reveals an ancient tradition related to the different graphic layout that initially had been done on plaster at the Sassanid era and then was used in the brick works. Composition and different layout adjustment of these towers are admirable. This study gives an insight to this timeless artwork.

**Keywords:** Iranian Architecture, Decoration, Seljuk, Kharaqan Towers, Qazvin.

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## **Introduction**

Documents and historical evidence suggest that the Turkish Seljuk dynasty had caused dramatic changes with short-term and long-term outcomes in various fields in terms of influencing the history of Iran and even world history. This Islamic golden age has borne fruit in culture, academia, military, science, literature, art and architecture.

In valuable Seljuk architecture period, all buildings used brick, including caravanserais, water storages, royal monuments, public buildings, mosques, tomb towers, tomb bars, and long bar of mosques, as a principle structure. Also for building façade, brick had been used in the form of Amood (covering separate from the frame) or graft and combination with skeleton of building. Majesty of good taste and creativity had been created in the art of brickwork. These examples of the art of brickwork would be seen scattered across the country during this period of time. Where two Qazvin Kharaqan Towers located, there are more than thirty types of brickwork with very beautiful arch building facades and outstanding Kufic brick lines.

This qualitative study combines descriptive and analytical methods by examining literature. This study examined the history and basics issues about the Seljuk period. Then introduces features of Qazvin Kharaqan towers decoration particularly the brickwork.

## **Historical, Cultural and Artistic Background of Seljuks**

Seljuks were from GhuzTurks tribe, which took its name from Seljuk, one of their superiors. Seljuks after conversion to Islam separated themselves from the main trunk and served Sassanian and settled in the suburbs.

Sultan Mahmoud Ghaznavi in 1025/416 formed Seljuks by creating a coherent but tentative Empire within half a century. This Empire had gradually covered large areas, including Asia Minor and triggered wide ethnic and linguistic developments in different areas. From this time onwards, the Turks have taken all over the Anatolia and imposed their race and language in the region. Significant changes also occurred in Azerbaijan territory. In addition, the central Iran had particularly attracted Turks (Rezvan, 1393: 32).

Seljuks period had continued nearly two centuries in Iran that began in the second quarter of the 5<sup>th</sup> century by Seljuk conquests and continued up to establishment of Ilkhan in the second quarter of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. This historical background did not present apparently a desirable and suitable environment for artistic developments; however, this period was very prominent in terms of large-scale outcomes in all art fields (Kanely, 1384: 3 and 7).

The Seljuks were Sunni Hanafi and wanted to take existing powers of Iran territory such as Ghaznavids and the Deilami Shi'ite dynasties of North and West Iran and took out the Abbasid Caliphate from pressure and subjection of them and took advantage of them without loosing military results and political victory achievements (Bosworth et al., 1380: 70). As a result of political leadership, the Great Seljuks had strengthened authority of Sunni Islam in central lands of the Muslim world. These Turks knew how to take advantage of Iranians and Arabs. The old bureaucratic structures and ministers that they had as Kandri, Nezamolmolk and Toghrayi left such a cultural influence on their masters that overtook the 4<sup>th</sup> century's ministers of Buwayhid.

During the Seljuk Empire, the Arabic language had lost its main position, which had a central position in the then-Muslim world, while the Persian language had gradually become prominent. The Seljuk migrants, who came from Transoxiana, contributed domination of Persian language since it was dominant in that area. Therefore, it took a long time for Turkish language to prove itself in the fields of governance and literary. Persian language had continued its importance during the Ottomans, so that kept its authority and power until the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Bosworth et al., 1380: 72).

Arrival of the Seljuks to Iran influenced the development of arts. This influence might be summarized under the following subtitles;

1. Balance between racial and linguistic groups
2. Analysis of political power within the framework of the Abbasid Caliphate
3. The resurgence of Sunni and Shiite threat and prosperity of Sufism
4. The development of Persian language and Iranian traditions.

After coming to power and extend their domination from Central Asia to Egypt, the Seljuks regenerated art-science and initiated renaissance in the Muslim world, especially in Iran. At this time, the scientific, political and cultural space of Iran provided a suitable context for growth and excellence in science, culture and art with the advent of rare personalities such as Khaje Nezamolmolk in politics and governance; Omar Khayyam, Nezami Ganjavi and Khagani in literature; and Naser Khosrow Ghobadiani, and Imam Mohammad Ghazali in philosophy (Razani Bakhshandeh Fard, 1389: 56).

Although after the spread of Islam in Iran where an Islamic art arose, it would be claimed that since the early Hijri centuries this art was under the influence of Sassanid art even under the Seljuk Empire. That is why it would be named as an Iran Islamic art. It was promoted as a model for the artists of later periods. This template or style is called Seljuk style or method (Shirazi, 1362: 166 and 167).

The Seljuk before mastering the Iran was familiar with civilization, industry, art and architecture of Ghaznavids and therefore the Seljuk sultans always promoted themselves as supporter and encourager of art. Many architectural masterpieces of Iran were fulfilled during of their government. Even Bosworth et al. claim that in the arts and crafts of the Seljuk, there is no outside source or element except Iranian ones. While the Seljuk was a Turk dynasty, Turkish elements hardly can be found in Iranian art in this period. This point suggests dominance of Iranian artists on visual arts (Bosworth et al., 1380: 160).

### **The Seljuk: Building Epitome of Beauty**

Seljuk architecture was dignified by its strong and complicated structure. But all these were neither sudden nor accidental, but also was transcendent expression of resurrection of Iran that began in the early tenth century with Samanids. This resurrection had culminated at the time of the Seljuk. This issue often is true when the momentum of a great era reaches to final and monuments and heroic work tends to be replaced by storytelling and memory.

### **Strength and Gentleness of Seljuk Architecture in Iran Buildings**

Seljuk period can be considered as a turning point in Iranian architecture. The use of brick and stucco elements as material and as part of the decoration is the most important indicators of this period. Artists found new ways of decorations of the building with putting together the plaster and brick, while incorporating artistic features and applicable properties of these two materials (Dadvar, Misbah Ardakani, 1385: 26).

One of these styles is Razi style. This style began in the time of Ale Ziyar and had gone on during Buwayhid, Seljuk, Atabak and Kharazmshahian times (Pirniya, 1384: 158). It was established in Rey city. In Razi style, construction of arches and dome developed and fasten-sharped species were used for arch and dome. Four different kind of arch design, Karbandy, Kalanboo, Chahar, and Tark, were used instead of Saade Ahang arch, which was common in Khorasani style (Pirniya, 1384: 163). The Great Mosque of Qazvin is interesting because of

the quiet courtyard space that is located beneath the great dome (diameter 15 m). Simple long Azade emphasizes its sheer simplicity. But this is not the result of weakness or design errors, because in fact almost across the qiblah wall was covered with a large altar (Pirniya, 1384: 163).

The use of brick and its role in decorating the exterior sculpture of minarets can be seen clearly in the minarets of Seljuk era. At first the appearance of minarets was very simple. The minarets are generally made round. At first the minarets were not incorporated in mosque maps and were acting as separate towers without a certain place within a mosque complex. Thus, from the first century to the fifth century, minaret was built individually and adjacent to mosque. Sometimes they joined each other, sometimes they did not. Even minarets might be built as separate structures in later phases. Moreover, a minaret might be built at first, then a mosque take place around it in later periods. The first example of a single minaret is Khosrow Gerd minaret. Arsalan Janeb minaret and the minaret of Saveh square mosque would be mentioned as other examples (Kiyani, 1379: 330). In this period, mosques did not have chambers but instead porches. Throughout time, four porches were added. The Seljuk architecture working with brick had matured in both terms of beauty and structure in a way that might not have a rival at that time. The shape and color of the bricks in the decorative towers and textured wall view were so attractive that sometimes Seljuk architectures have regarded as stucco decorations. Serador Lutyens (E. Lutyens) delineates the charm of this art by saying, "Do not say brickwork of Iran, but it must be said Iranian magic brick" (Poop, 1377: 145).

### **Kharaqan Towers of Qazvin**

Many history-lovers describe Qazvin as paradise. The city comprises many historical attractions in every inch of it from different eras. The Kharaqan Towers are among the most famous ones. The tomb towers of Kharaqan are located in about a mile of Hesar Arzy and 32<sup>nd</sup> km of Qazvin-Hamadan road. These spectacular twin towers have remained from the Seljuk period.

Tomb towers of Kharaqan are considered among masterpieces of Iran brickwork architecture, with more than 30 brick designs. The towers are located in a wide area in a short distance from each other and they are similar in many respects, but the east tower is older than the west one.

Kharaqan Rural District is located in the south-western of Qazvin city and Qazvin-Hamedan midway. This area was very important and prosperous in Islamic eras and has known among the most important settlements. The Persian historian Hamdollah Mustowfi describes Qazvin by its convenient weather, which is cold and has good precipitation level, and suitable for having lots of fruit. According to writings of him, Kharaqan village has joined Qazvin city in 241 Hijri. Although historical and archeological researches have not been done in the area of Kharaqan, but the contributions and ancient scattered hills indicate that mentioned area had great importance during the Islamic period, especially the Hijri fifth and sixth centuries with the Seljuk governing.

### **Decoration of Kharaqan Towers of Qazvin**

Kharaqan has twin tomb towers, which are particularly important in terms of architecture and decoration. They are located in an isolated area and over a thousand years after their construction, yet have retained their greatness more or less. These twin towers, or more accurately tombs, are located in a distance of thirty meters of each other and according to the inscriptions, have been constructed in a distant of 26 years (Image 1 and Image 2). The construction time of the first tower is 460 AHS and the second tower is 486 AHS. However, little difference is seen in the architecture of Kharaqan Towers, the building and decoration of them are very similar to each other.

Kharaqan Tombs are built with an octagonal plan and eight circular columns are located in their eight sides. Dome of towers had internal and external coating. Unfortunately, over time, external dome or the second coating of towers collapsed. In addition to the beautiful brickwork of the Kharaqan Tombs, decorative tile is also recognizable. The use of tile as decorative factor in buildings has been usual by the end of the Hijri fourth century and has played an important role in Iran architecture in terms of design and strength of the building. The tiles of the Twin Kharaqan Towers, which can be considered as the oldest decoration tiling, are turquoise color and applied in the front of the building. The interior decoration of the tombs also has great importance. The inside of two towers is also built as octagonal and there are valuable works of mural paintings belonging to the Seljuk era. The inside has eight sides and inside of the dome of the old tower is unique and very important with its kind.

Painted decorations inside the tower are done in three parts including inside arch, eight earrings and also in part of work under dome and under roof of the building. Paintings are mostly with blue, black, dark and light brown colors and show the picture of Kandil, peacock,

six-pointed stars, eight-pointed stars, pomegranate tree and flower and bushes. Generally, these mural paintings are very important either in terms of antiquity and a diverse set of designs and roles of decorating by natural or sterilized means. There is an altar inside the newer tower 486 AHS that is decorated by brickwork.

In the not too distant past, there was a wooden enshrine of Safavid era in each two tombs that was considered as beautiful artworks in Safavid era in terms of inlaid. Unfortunately, one of two shrines has been lost and another shrine is held in the Kharaqan village. Writing on the shrine is very important and shows that the two Kharaqan Towers belong to two religious characters. According to the inscription on the wooden shrine, it was built in the year of 946 AHS and was placed in the Kharaqan Towers; the tomb belongs to someone named "Muhammad ibn Musa al-Kadhim," and her sister "Jadida Khatun bint Musa Kazim".



*Image 1. Kharaqan Towers in Qazvin, the Seljuk period*



*Image 2. Kharaqan Towers in Qazvin, the Seljuk period*

The tomb building is in height of about 15 meters and a diameter of about 11 meters. According to Kufic text in this building, this tower was built in the year 460 AH, lunar calendar. In this building, the architect has built a staircase instead of two-spiral staircase. There are rectangular windows with pointed arches in the exterior casing to provide the required light for the stairways.

The second tower, which is approximately 30 meters away from the first tower, is almost the same size as the first tower in terms of shape and dimensions. This building has a dome with two covers and a staircase leading to the space between these two covers. To get to the staircase you should pass from a short rectangular door that is located inside of room of tomb.

The number of steps of each staircase is 22 and with regarding to the historical characteristics of building of tower, it can be said that among the two-shell domes that their second shell is not cone-shaped. This building is considered as first two-shell dome of the fifth century AHS and in this sense it is important.

There are more decorations over the entrance side of the tower. In this location, there are special decorations, which consist of two-line inscription. The theme of the two-line inscription states: "To the seven year date and Arbaeen (460) Amal Mohammad bin Makki Alzanjany al Qubbah".

## **Brickwork**

Chinese knot and geometric designs of brickwork in Seljuk period reached its perfection in these buildings. Implementation of brickwork of these towers suggests skills of their creators and materializes the art of the fifth century AH (Picture 3). A new method has been applied in brickwork of the building that was then used in making buildings such as Maragheh Red Dome (Amini, 1393: 53).

The Qazvin Kharaqan Towers are built in thickness of 60 cm with simple bricks in dimensions of  $5 \times 19 \times 19$  or  $5 \times 20 \times 20$  cm that decorative brickwork in thickness of 21 cm has been done on it (Amini, 1393: 64). There are about 25 types of decorative brickwork with different designs in towers that the mat, wishbone, dormant straight, square knot Dan Kohl, narrow feet square and four-bergamot are among them.

Circular columns have decorative brickwork also. Dome stem is made up of two parts which contains brickwork geometric designs and an inscription in Kufic with verses from the Holy Quran Sura 59. Eight sides of towers are divided into two parts and have different brickwork



designs. Brickwork designs of towers have over 25 types that each of these designs has a rather specific letter (Image 4 and Image 5).

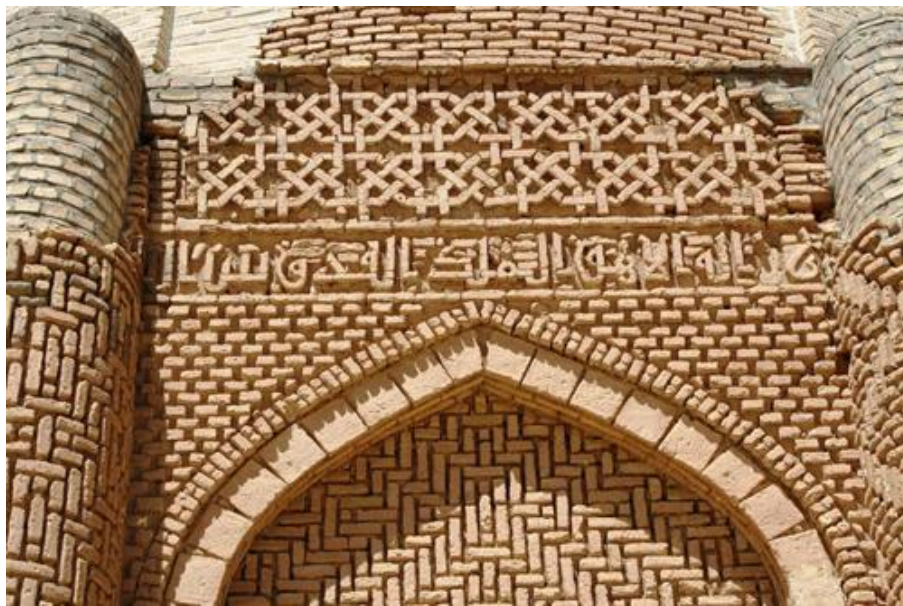
Exterior view of the building of the tower entirely is of decorative bricks. This brick view made the building one of the most beautiful and striking architecture works of Iran. These decorations have been taken on the dome stem and all over eight sides.



*Image 3. Qazvin Kharaqan Towers, the Seljuk period, decorative brickwork*



*Image 4. Qazvin Kharaqan Towers, the Seljuk period, brickwork*



*Image 5. Qazvin Kharaqan Towers, the Seljuk period*

## Instead of Conclusion

In terms of arts development, especially architecture, Seljuk era is one of the most brilliant art periods. Architecture of Seljuk era has great strength and beauty. Although about a thousand years has passed since that time, the remaining buildings from that period indicate the skills of master artists and craftsmen and their knowledge of various architectural styles. During that time, many masterpieces of brickwork scattered around the country, in which the Twin Kharaqan Towers are among them. These towers have continued their shine and magnificence over hundreds of years with their beautiful arches, prominent Kufic lines, and design.

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