An Analytical View on the Stucco Decorations of Ilkhanid Religious Buildings: A Case Study of Pir-i Bakran, Isfahan, Iran

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Stucco decorations are among the major decorative elements of the religious structures of the Ilkhanid period in Iran. Typical examples of these decorations are found in the mausoleum of Pir-i Bakran, located some" 30 km" southwest of Isfahan. Owing to the importance of the decorative technique and its great stucco decorations, several contemporary Islamic scholars have described the mausoleum as a real museum of the stucco art; therefore, it can be a subject for several, related scientific studies.

The present paper aims at exploring the structure and themes of the stucco decorations of this building to demonstrate that religious ideas substantially inspired the origination and style of these ornaments in religious constructions, in particular mausoleums.

A descriptive method was adopted in the present study, which builds on library-based research and field observations. Accordingly, proper photos were taken from the decorations and architectural spaces before linear drawings of the decorations were prepared to document the data using Illustrator CS5 and Corel Draw x5 solutions. Given successful execution of the several stucco panels coupled with proper location and composition, the results of the study reveals that the artisans of this period with their unique ingenuity were able to employ this architectural element befittingly in this building, turning it into a masterpiece of stucco work from the Ilkhanid period. Further, a deeper analysis of the themes, which apart from decorative panels using floral and geometric motifs include also frequent use of sacred religious terms and phrases, demonstrates that there was a tendency among the Iranian society under Ilkhanid to employ these themes, and on this very basis, this period can be called one of the most important periods of stucco art in terms of rendering stucco decorations with religious themes.

Keywords: *Islamic Art; Ilkhanid Period; Pir-i Bakran Mausoleum; Stucco*

Introduction

As stated, stucco decorations are among the major characteristics of architectural decorations in the Islamic period in Iran, used occasionally as separate, independent embellishments and sometimes in combination with brickwork, tile work, stone, etc. to generate highly innovative adornments. Using plaster in architecture both as a building material and a decorative element has a long history, and the earliest known plaster work in Iran discovered during excavations at Haft Tape in Khuzestan dates from the Elamite period (Norouzi 2008). The available evidence suggests that plaster as a decorative element in architecture had widespread use in the pre-Islamic era in construction of palaces, halls, mausoleums and temples. In Particular, in the Achaemenid period plaster was commonly used to clad wooden columns of the famous Treasury Hall at Persepolis. During the Parthian period, plaster was in use and

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examples of its use were recorded in Kuh-e Khwajeh in Sistan. The Sassanian remains in Kish palace and other buildings are so numerous that one can claim the decorations were worked for the most part using plaster (Pileh Foroush 2007).

Plaster likewise appealed to the Muslim architects. Plaster (stucco) ornaments of the arches in Na'in Joma Mosque date from the Islamic era (Norouzi 2008). In the early Islamic period, plaster had such a pivotal function in architectural decorations that the related techniques of the earlier periods again came into use (Kiani 1997: 84). The brick structure of the buildings provided the most desirable setting for stucco decorations. Therefore, differing types of stucco ornaments with geometric, inscriptional, floral and occasionally animal patters or a combination of them were rendered in a variety of techniques. The Seleucid period witnessed major accomplishments in stucco art. Properties such as quick formation, flexibility, colorablity and cheapness have made plaster a major material in structural decorations. The technical characteristics of this era include carvings, raised works and strong deep cuttings that have resulted in meticulous shadings. Using plaster to create high raised works and carvings was an approach specific to the Seleucid period, which continued into the Ilkhanid period (Sedaghat, 2008). The Ilkhanid dynasty ruled in Iran after the Mongol conquest of the country, and appropriated the Seleucid artistic heritage, whose modifications in this heritage resulted in evolution of some of the earlier artistic fields, including stucco art. The stucco works of this period, though revealing strong influence of the Seleucid decorations, also show divergences that distinguish the works of the one from the other. Strong tendency towards refined and delicate designs, modeling (Shekofteh 2012) and more complicated designs are among the mentioned variations. As a result of building mihrabs with plaster adorned with a plethora of inscriptional decorations in particular different varieties of ornamental kufic scripts, geometric knots and arabesque designs as well as deep-cut and raised patterns, the stucco art experienced a significant thrive and to great masterpieces were generated in this period (Shekofteh and Oodbashi 2008: 171).

Significant examples of stucco decorations of this period are found at the mausoleum of Pir-i Bakran, which is the case study of the present paper. The shrine is situated "30km" southwest of Isfahan, in Lanjan County, and is considered a distinctive construction from Ilkhanid period. The stucco mihrab of the mausoleum is also among the masterpieces of the Ilkhanid stucco art. Because of the significant historical importance of the Pir-i Bakran mausoleum, in terms of its high rank in the history of the Iranian architecture, several scholars have attempted to study different aspects of this major Ilkhanid structure such as its architecture and related ornaments, some cases of which are cited in the present paper. However, the influence of religious ideas of the period under discussion on creation of the themes of its stucco decorations has rarely been focus of serious studies. Thus, the present paper represents an attempt to show through exploring the structure and themes of its stucco works that religion inspired to a great extent the conception and style of stucco decorations of the religious buildings especially mausoleums.

Given this objective, the hypothesis of the study was defined as:

What were the influences of religious ideason creation and style of stucco decorations of religious buildings in particular mausoleums?

Research Method

In line with the defined objective, descriptive method building on library-based research and field observations of the stucco decorations of the Pir-i Bakran mausoleum was adopted. The present paper first presents a literature review of the subject. The diversity of the motifs and large number of stucco works in different parts of the building required a systematic method to guarantee a detailed study. Therefore, first proper photographs of the individual decorations and architectural spaces were prepared, and then the decorations were drawn linearly using Illustrator Cs5 and Corel Draw x5solutions to document the decorations. The paper follows with presenting the location of the decorations, the relationship between architectural spaces, and decoration types and methods used in structural

composition of motifs and themes of decorations in order to explore the stuccoworks from Ilkhanid period.

Literature Review

Important historical features displayed by Pir-i Bakran mausoleum have led the scholars to study different aspects of this important Ilkhanid monument including its architecture, decorations, etc. After visiting the mausoleum in 1923, Herzfeld gave the following description of the building:

"I myself discovered another remain attributed to Queen Susan in 1923 near the Lanjan helmet in Isfahan. It is called "Bakran, after the large sanctuary or a Sufi who lived and died there in 1307; the building of the Sufi is a sumptuous imitation of the Taq Ksra. In the floor a rock is shown with impression of a horse's hoof " which is attributed to the horse of the Prophet Elijah. It I said that Elijah ascended into heaven from this place" (Herzfeld 1975: 177-178).

Nosratollah Mashkouti was commissioned in 1936 to visit the mausoleum accompanied by Smith, and implement a conservation and restoration project in it after studying its historical aspects (Mashkouti 1964: 227). Donald Wilber paid a visit to the shrine in 1939 and published the results of his observations in his volume The Architecture of Islamic Iran: The Ilkhanid Period (Wilber 1967: 132-135). Lotfollah Honarfar studied the building in 1965 along with a number of its inscriptions (Honarfar 1971: 253-26). Later, AbulQasim Rafiei Mehrabadi referred to this mausoleum and some of its inscriptions in his National Monuments of Isfahan (Rafiei Mehrabadi 1973: 849-853).

Apart from these earlier studies, in recent years the sanctuary has been the focus of frequent studies thanks to its important place in the history of Iranian architecture, among them the following: in 1990, Tabatabaei gives a description on Pir-i Bakran mausoleum and its architectural properties and decorations before discussing the damages sustained by its grave (Tabatabaei 2000). Sheikhi and Ashouri, in 2007, evaluate the aesthetic values of this sanctuary through analyzing the components of the stucco decorations of its mihrab (Sheikhi & Ashouri 2007). In 2009, in their analysis of the design and Pictographs in composition of the mihrab of Pir-i Bakran mausoleum, Baghsorkhi and Halimi demonstrated that the floral and geometric patterns were added after the completion of the inscriptional compositions to fill the empty paces around the letters, and that these patterns in themselves lack any distinct composition (Rajaei Baghsorkhi & Halimi 2009). Ghazi Mir Saied and Safari, in 2009, explored the natural, cultural, historical and artistic aspects of the Pir-i Bakran region and described the mausoleum as a typical architectural monument from Ilkhanid period (Ghazi Mir Saied & Safari 2009). As the above studies suggest, the architecture and related decorations of the Pir-i Bakran sanctuary have been analyzed with differing scientific methods, a fact that hints at particular significance of this structure for the scholars from various disciplines.

Geographical Location and General and Historical Characteristics of Pir-i Bakran Mausoleum

The mausoleum belongs to Mohammad Bakran, popularly known as Pir-i Bakran, a famous theologian and Sufi mystic from Ilkhanid period whose life spanned the seventh and eighth centuries AH (Tabatabaei 2000). The structure lies in the modern village of Pir-i Bakran located some «30km» southwest of Isfahan, in Lanjan County, in a plain with mild and dry climate (Blunt 2005: 37). The historical remains in Pir-i Bakran village include: a very old plane tree, a historical Jewish cemetery known as Esther Khatun[1], and the mausoleum of Pir-i Bakran which has given its name to the village (Mostafavi Kashani 2004: 1358; Honarfar 1997: 92). According to the internal historical evidence, Mohammad b. Bakran passed away in the same year that Sultan Mohammad Khoda Banda (Uljaito) ascended the throne, and was buried in this place where he seemingly used to preach before his

[1] In the vicinity of the mausoleum of Pir-I Bakran lies a cemetery known as Esther Khatun. On the basis of the Hebrew stone inscriptions found at the cemetery, some scholars believe that the cemetery belongs to the Jews and was so named after the wife of Yazdegerd I, who was a Jewish.

death. The building could have been expanded later, probably by his disciples (Wilber 1967). Based on the available evidence, the construction of the building is dividable into three phases:

1- The first phase concerns construction of the space lying in the northernmost part, where Pir-i Bakran used as his classroom to teach his disciples. This section is known as the cloister, and represents the earliest part of the building to which the other parts were annexed in the succeeding phases.

2- The second phase marks the introduction of a vast iwan to the south of the cloister (Godard 1996: 218).

3- During the third phase, the surrounding structures and the house were incorporated into the mausoleum in a manner that makes it difficult to distinguish the grave from the later constructions.

The building consists of different spaces, a description of each follows:

1. The domed cloister room, with its square plan and oval dome formed by concentric circle brickworks. Sheikh might have preached to his disciples in this room (Tabatabaei 2000: 46).

2. The grave of Pir-i Bakran is connected to the domed, square room through a very short doorway. Also, there are two tombstones of which one belongs to Mohammad b. Bakran and the other, as locally believed, to the architect of the mausoleum (Tabatabaei 2000). A lattice wall separates this room from the hall, and the entrance of the grave room is located in its eastern side.

3. The mausoleum's hall, lying opposite the grave, has four small iwans in its eastern and western sides. Surfaces of the all four walls and the domes of the iwans are embellished with stucco decorations of foliated, floriated and plaited Kufic.

4. The passageway (hallway) of the building leads from the nearby alley into the yard of the complex and is perpendicular to the main axis of the building (Behboodi 2011). The complex, with a total area of almost 320 square meters, shows currently an L-shaped plan (figs .1-2).

Description of Stucco Decorations in Internal Spaces

The stucco decorations on interior facades in the passageway, hall, grave room and room of Pir-e Bakran deserve special analysis. They adorn different architectural elements such as arches, triumphal arches, stalactites, panels, mihrab and the entire surfaces of the walls. A description of the current state of these decorative elements follows below along with an analysis of their relation with the other sections.

1. Entrance Passageway

The passageway lies in the southern half of the eastern side of the building, with an east-west orientation and perpendicular to the main axes of the hall and grave room. Stucco decorations are seen occupying all the eastern, northern, western and southern walls.

East Wall

The crescent arch splits this section into two half-stories. The lower half has an arch that contains the entrance to the passageway. The wall of this section is entirely covered in plaster on which like brickwork in a variety of forms were rendered. Similar decorations are seen on most parts of the interior facades. This decorative technique was known as stub hub brick during the Seleucid period and its execution involved leaving wider spaces between vertical and horizontal bonds of the brick revetment, which were filled then with plaster; before the plaster hardened, different designs were executed on it, occasionally using wooden molds. The designs included simple geometric and floral motifs as well as the sacred names Allah, Mohammad and Ali (Wilber 1967: 86). Thus, the brickworks and their bonds decorated with plaster would produce various geometric networks.

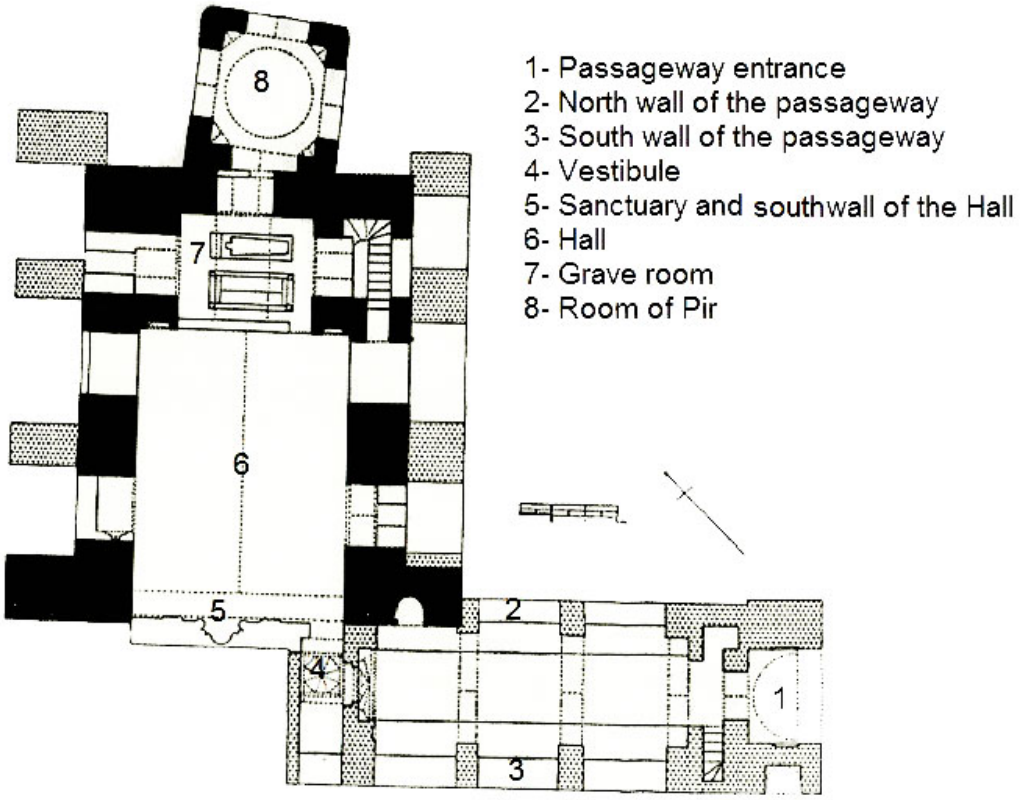


Fig.1: *Plan Pir-i Bakran mausoleum architectural spaces analyzed in the present study (Plan: Behboodi 2011)*



Fig. 2: *A General view of Pir-i Bakran mausoleum (Photo: Authors).*

North Wall

The passageway, from the entrance up to the vestibule that opens to the hall, has three arches at an interval of ca. 2.45 meters. The lower parts of the wall was decorated with tile works in geometric designs 1 meter high from the surface of the platforms, of which at present simply the impressions of the tiles are discernible on parts of wall. Plaster coating like brickworks embellish the upper parts of the wall. Two openings in upper wall provided part of the required lighting.

In western portion of the north wall, an ornamental blind arch, added after construction of the passageway during later phases, was incorporated into the interior façade of the building. The surface of the blind arch consists of two sections: the lower section is decorated with turquoise and cobalt- blue tiles while the upper half bears a stucco inscription in kufic script of verses 1 through 4 of the surat al-Ikhlas (fig. 3 shows one of the blind arches where in the stucco volute spirals round the blind arch and the whole motifs are disposed in a rectangular panel).



Fig. 3: *The blind arch in the passageway entrance (Photo: Authors).*

West Wall

The wall lies at the end of the hall and the best part obit is occupied by a blind arch framed in turn by a rectangular panel. A tile work band extends along the three sides of the blind arch, and the stucco inscription divides it into two upper and lower halves. The inscription exemplifies the mixed floral-inscriptional stucco work executed in though script against a floral scroll ground, giving the date 703 AH which marks the death of Pir-i Bakran. The inscription reads:

This Imaret (building) Al Mobarakeh Sheikh Muslim Mohammad Ebn Bakran in the third and seven hundred.

The ground of the inscription was black and the letters were red in color, but currently only few traces of its original color scheme exist. Above the inscription there is a tile work band, some tiles of which are now missing. The upper part of the above mentioned blind arch decoration in the form of plaster stalactites, interrupted with tile works at some points. corners are lined in plaster with Articles like brickworks.

South Wall

This wall and the east wall are symmetrical in terms of their stucco decorations. It bears a wealth of decorations including plaster lattice networks in vertical and horizontal like brickwork and the plaster embellishment of the rhomboid ground.

2. Hall

It is a rectangular, north-south oriented, room (fig. 1, no. 6) measuring 6.7×9.1 meters and lying

to the south of the grave room; its ogee arch is almost 14 meters in height. A major characteristic of the Islamic decorative traditions, after the third and fourth centuries AH, was thoroughgoing embellishment, which required extensive use of motifs. In keeping with this convention, the stucco decorations of the hall cover the entire surfaces of the walls, the arches, the blind arches and the mihrab. The motifs in general include floral, geometric and inscriptional patterns which enabled the artisans to fashion some harmonious, balanced decorations in different parts of the complex through combining them. The stucco decorations of the four southern, eastern, western and northern sides of the hall deserve special consideration.

South Wall

The stucco mihrab, 6.8 meters in height and 3.8 meters in width, is located at the center of the south wall. Lavish floral, geometric and inscriptional patterns or a combination of floral-geometric-inscriptional designs as well as blue and red paints were used to elaborately adorn the mihrab. The decorations tend to be highly raised and proportional to its dimensions and monumental nature. Its double blind arch with its ogee curve is outlined with two successive, rectangular frames, and stucco volute was rendered on the intrados of the first blind (fig. 4). The tradition of using volute to add to the beauty of the decorations that started from the earlier periods made its way into the Ilkhanid period as well and was employed in construction of the building under discussion. “In the Islamic architecture the volute was used on the edge of the arches of iwans, mihrabs, exterior edge of the side walls of iwans or edge of intrados of halls” (Zamani 1970). As it is clear, the use of various scripts including Kufic and Sols, execution of various geometric knots with serpentine arabesque and scroll arabesque between inscriptions and highly raised or sunken motifs attained utmost refinement during Ilkhanid period. Apart from the slabs ornamented with floral motifs, inscriptional compositions were also used to embellish the mihrab. They are in Sols and rectangular Kufic scripts, rendered in stucco against ground of floral motifs, and include Quran



Fig. 4: *Stucco decorations and the volute of the mihrab (Photo: Authors).*

and religious contents. It is believed that the though script came into common use from the Ilkhanid period onward in most of religious constructions (Abyar 2002).

On the second, exterior arch of the blind arch of the mihrab, stucco decorations were executed in combination with geometric-floral patterns. The rectangular Kufic inscription on the outer edge of the arch contains the repeated phrases God is the Greatest and praise be to Allah in stucco work. Two other stucco inscriptions Sols and Kufic scripts within a single frame run around three sides of the mihrab. The first line, gives, after In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful , the Ayatul from surat al-Baqara in kufic script, while the second line includes the verses 1 to 3 of surat Al-Insan in though script. The whole decorative elements of the mihrab described above are confined within a large frame. The frame circumscribes the entire mihrab and is embellished with raised stucco decorations.

East Wall

The upper decorations of the eastern wall display repeated stucco inscriptions in rectangular Kufic reading, There is no God but Allah, Mohammad is the Messenger of God, disposed within large squares and against a checkerboard ground. On a part of the north section of the eastern wall another stucco inscription in rectangular kufic measuring 2×2 meters reads (Shayestehfar 2007):

Proclaim Salavat (the formulaic praise Peace be Upon Him) upon Muhammad Ali Mustafa and Fourteen Infallibles.

The inscription has obscured the earlier decorations of the wall. Also, stucco inscribed band in though script against a foliated ground runs from the southern corner of the eastern wall to its northern corner, reading the verse 1 to part of the verse 4 of the Surat Al-Insan. Still another Quran inscribed band, containing verses 4 through 8 of surat Al-Insan in though and verses 256 and 257 of Surat al-Baqara in rectangular kufic is visible, which starts from the southern portion of the eastern wall and ends in the southern corner of the western wall. This band does not seen on the northern wall of the hall and the northern parts of its western and eastern walls. The blind arches of this side of the building, with their ogee curves, are confined within a rectangular frame (figs. 5-6). These blind arches feature highly raised and intricate stucco decorations, and their different surfaces show a wealth of ornamentations in the form of stucco works of floral (fig. 7) and floral-inscriptional patterns as well as different sorts of raised rectangular and ornamental kufic, and though scripts. The content of the inscriptions on the mentioned blind arches is invariably religious. On the southern blind arch a Kufic inscription in stucco work reads. In the name of Allah, Glory lives the rest, developed against a foliated ground. The inscription bisects the blind arch; the lower half contains floral motifs while the upper half gives the name Mohammad Bakran and the date 712 AH in though script in a floral ground, which is of high importance.

The inscription in the upper part of the blind arch reads:

This suffa (iwan) sheikh of Muslim Mohammad Bakran holy and Honorable Spirit year twelve and seven hundred.

The date 712 AH appearing in this stucco inscription probably refers to the latest construction phase of the complex or the completion of the decorations. Put it simply, the inscription under discussion gives the latest documented date for the





Fig. 5-6: *(Right and left): Stucco decorations of the blind arches and walls of the hall (Photo: Authors).*

different phases of the construction and decorations of the building. The elaborately combined floral and inscriptional patterns have generated a fascinating complex. On the northern wall of the blind arch, floral motifs in arabesque forms were rendered in stucco work.

North Wall

The north wall is made up of three distinct sections: the middle part and two parts flanking it in either side. The middle part is decorated with arch Kalil, and below it is seen a lattice wall that was added during the later constructions to transform part of the iwan to grave. The entrance to the grave room lies in the eastern part of this wall. On the arch above thelattice Walla stucco inscription reads the verses 1 through 7 of the Surat al-Hamd in Kufic script in a floral ground. Also, the surface of pendentives of the arch is similarly embellished with floral stucco motifs in relief. The whole complex is outlined by a rectangular frame. The decorations of the lower wall include tile works and then another stucco inscription in Kufic script that spiral round the three sides of the arch under discussion bearing verses 1 through 7 of the Surat al-Yasin.

The eastern and western parts of the middle arch feature two vertical rows of blind arches confined within rectangular frames (fig. 8). The surface of the blind arch of this section is covered with stucco decorations of floral and geometric motifs in the form of fretworks. The eastern and western blind arches, though being symmetrical in terms of their structure, show different stucco decorations in upper parts.

West Wall

This wall is in general symmetrical to the eastern wall in terms of its structure but exhibits different ornamentations. The upper part, which is the cover of the hall, is lined in a plaster layer, similar to



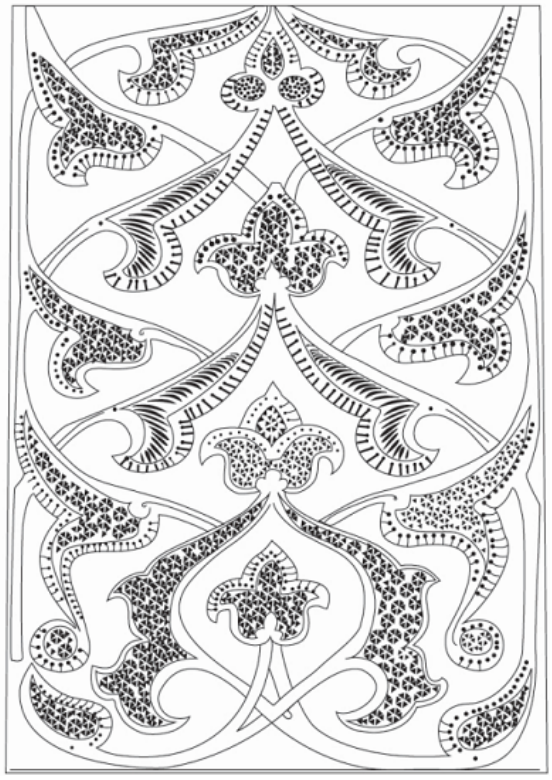


Fig. 7: *Honeycombed patterns are formed through repeating one or more hollow geometric motifs and, when combined, create a lattice pattern (Photo and Drawing: Authors).*

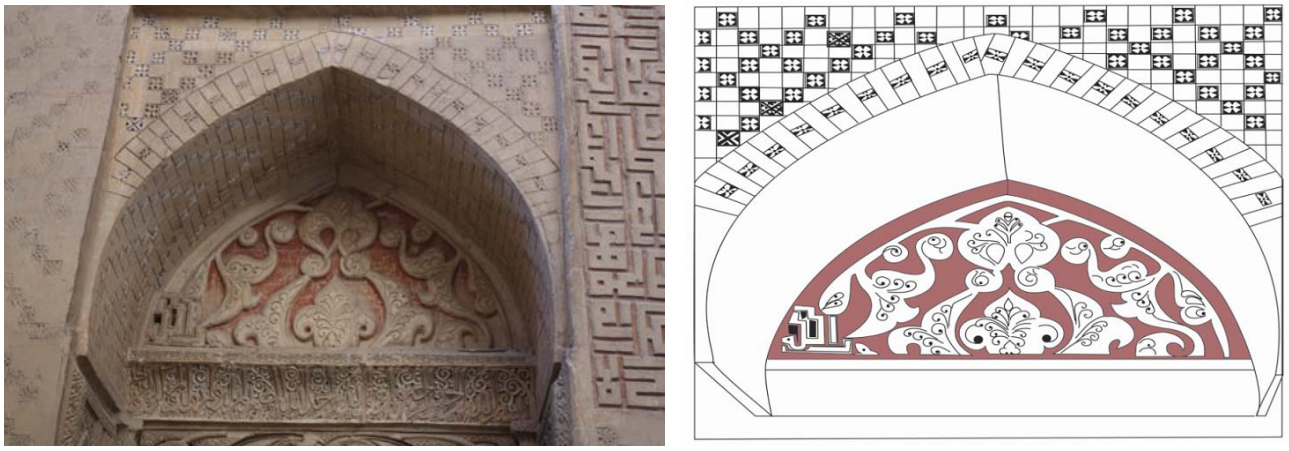


Fig. 8 : *Stucco decorations on the walls and interior blind arches of the hall show that paint was heavily used as a decorative material . (Photo and Drawing: Authors)*

the eastern wall, on which is seen the recurrent phrase There is no God but Allah, Mohammad is the Messenger of God, in rectangular Kufic within large squares against a checkerboard background. The same decorations adorn the surface of the southern and northern walls, where in the southern wall the recurrent term Ali was rendered in stucco in a checkerboard ground. On a part of the northern section of the western wall, in the space separating its southern and northern blind arches, a panel of stucco decorations, framed by a large square which is symmetrical structurally to the inscription of the eastern side, contains in rectangular kufic in relief the following divine attributions:

In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. he is Allah, there is no god except him. he is the king, the pure, the peace, the confirmer, the watchful, the almighty, the compeller, the sublime,…

As said above, an inscribed band starts from the southern section of the eastern wall and ends in the southern corner of the western wall (fig. 9). The inscribed band in though script disposed in a floral ground continues in this section, giving the second part of the verse 4 of the surat Al-Insan to the end of the eighth verse, and the name of the stucco artisan :

Mohammad Shaheh Naghash Builder.

Also, the inscribed band in rectangular kufic in this side of the hall gives the remainder of the verse 256 of the surat al-Baqara up to the end of its 257 .

The southern blind arch of the western side with its ogee arch is disposed in a rectangular frame, and contains highly raised and intricate stucco decorations, similar to the blind arch of the eastern side, and its different surfaces are embellished with a variety of designs including various types of plaster coatings and stucco works of floral motifs and foliated, floriated, and differing types of raised rectangular kufic, ornamental kufic and though scripts.

In the upper part of the southern blind arch an inscription in though script appears against a floral background. The letters of the inscription are in red and feature verses 1 through 4 of the surat al-Ikhlas. Above this inscription up to the top of the ogee arch of the blind arch, floriated patterns in relief are set against a red background in plaster. Also, on the blind arch, between the mentioned inscription and the inscribed band of the hall, floriated stucco decorations in relief were rendered, the various designs of which were also repeated in other parts of the complex. On the northern and southern walls of this blind arch are seen decorations in relief of floral motifs within a rectangular frame; on the upper southern wall the term Allah had given him the kingship is visible in raised kufic script in a floriated ground. The northern wall of the blind arch bears arabesque decorations in relief, paralleled in other parts of the building.



Fig. 9 : *The "mother and child" inscription. The lower inscription is bigger while the more delicate one is located above it (Shekofteh 2012). (Photo: Behboodi 2011)*

3. Grave Room

The grave room is a rectangular space (fig. 1, No. 7) and has an arch Kalil. In the southern side of the room a lattice wall was built that includes the entrance from hall in its eastern section. At the point where the eastern and western walls of the grave room meet the lattice wall, parts of the decorations are obscured, suggesting that the lattice wall was added later after the completion of the decorations of the walls in order to transform part of the iwan to grave. Arch elements such as drop arch Kalil, either as bearing arch or a decorative blind arch, cover the four sides of the room, creating a harmonious juxtaposition on its interior façade. The decorative elements of the grave room on all surfaces include stucco works and tile works or a combination of them in various schemes, showing variety of patterns. The surface of the arches and the blind arches are covered in a plaster layer, on which sacred names Allah, Mohammad and Ali in triangular kufic script recurrent against a checkerboard background. In these decorations, white color is used for the letters and blue and gray for background. In the northwestern section of the main arch of the room parts of incomplete stucco decorations are seen which seem to have been added in later phases so as to create new decorations on the earlier ornamented surfaces, a fact that further corroborates existence of different construction phases in the building. The eastern wall of the grave room features a blind drop arch. In the middle of this blind arch a stucco rectangular kufic inscription in relief against a red background reads:

Exaltation to Allah, praise is to Allah, Allah there is no god except he, Allah is the Greatest, and he is the high, the exalted.

The upper section of the north wall features a drop arch, on the surface of which two stucco

inscriptions in kufic and though scripts were executed at the same time as its floral background. This execution technique is comparable to throne used in the mihrab of Pir-i Bakran sanctuary. The mentioned inscriptional composition was colored in blue and red, with the blue used in the ground and the red reserved for the letters. The kufic phrases consist of the verse 1 through part of the verse 5 of the surat al-Hamd. Another inscription in though script reports that the mausoleum belongs to Mohammad b. Bakran and describes his high scientific and spiritual position, and finally gives the date 703 AH, which marks the death of Mohammad b. Bakran. The transcription and translation of the inscription is as follows:

This Rowza (grave) Holy Sheikh of Muslim sheikhs, the grand officiate of the scholars, detector secrets of the truth, the re-establish her of the emblems of the religion, the revealer of the secrets of the truth, the aware of the God's indications (effects), the God's proof to people, Mohammad Bakran the light of God in his grave, third year and seven hundred.

"This sacred mausoleum belongs to the sheikh of Muslim sheikhs, the grand officiate of the scholars, the re-establisher of the emblems of the religion, the revealer of the secrets of the truth, the aware of the God's indications (effects), the God's proof to people, Mohammad b. Bakran, may God illuminate his grave, in the year 703 AH." On the western blind arch of the grave room an inscription in red rectangular kufic within a rectangular frame quotes the verse 56 of the surat al-Ahzab. The pendentives of the three blind arches in this room bear ornamentations of stucco floral patterns in a blue ground. The corners of the pendentives in each side were embellished with turquoise and cobalt-blue tiles.

4. Room of Pir

The room, with its square plan (fig 1, No. 8), occupies the northern side of the complex. The way in which the squelches were created in the four corners of the room has contributed to the enhanced harmony between the walls and its conic arch, creating an impression of a rotator movement in its interior space. The four sides of the room contain blind overarches. Entire surfaces of the walls and the arch are covered in a plaster layer over which traces of paintings in red, blue, mauve, yellow and ocher, most of which have been lost leaving simply faded paint traces on plaster surfaces. On the southern wall and around the arch remains of stucco decorations in painted rounds and inscriptions in though and kufic scripts are seen. The inscribed band flanking the arch turns at its base, which contains two stucco inscriptions, one in kufic and the other in though script, developed in a blue ground. These inscriptions are now missing for the most part, and the remaining parts in kufic script include the first verse of the surat Al-Insan in though script includes part of the second verse of the surat al-Fath.The upper fringe of the inscribed band shows decorations in stucco of floral motifs disposed in a ground of dark ocher. The stucco works of the upper part of the southern wall display floral motifs and inscriptions outlined by a rectangular frame, with two minarets painted at both sides of the frame in blue and ocher paints. The frame encloses a plaster trefoil arch that is formed by the term part of the verse 137 of the surat Al-baqara. Also, an inscription in Sols epigraph the three sides of these decorations. This stucco inscription, rendered in a blue ground and then colored in ocher paint, narrates the verses 1 through 4 of the surat a-Ikhlas. In the upper part of the inscription floriated stucco decorations are seen against a blue ground.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the study and the characteristics displayed by the stucco ornaments, the artisans were able to ingeniously employ this architectural element in the Pir-i Bakran complex following the earlier traditions. Successful selection of the locations of multiple stucco panels and the structure of the rich, elaborate patterns and designs in relation to the spaces were carried out in a harmonious way. Heavy use of plaster as a decorative material in the building, in particular in the hall, and producing variation in the structural composition of the designs are among the major factors that have

led many modern scholars to describe the complex as an actual museum of the stucco art. Analysis of the stucco pseudo brickworks of the mausoleum and the structural composition of the decorations suggests that color was benefitted from to the fullest extent. Blue, red, light and dark buff, white, gray and bluish gray were used in the decorations. Blue and red colors predominate in most parts of the complex in that they are responsible for the color of the background and letters in the majority of the inscriptions, traces of which are still discernable on parts of the inscriptions.

Analysis of the themes of the stucco adornments of the mausoleum, which apart from ornamental panels with floral and geometrical patters also include sacred, religious terms and phrases such as Quran quotations represented for instance by verses from surat Al-Insan in though script and from surats al-Baqara and al-Ikhlas as well as consecrated designations Mohammad and Ali, suggests that it was not simply an aesthetical ambition to fill the empty spaces that prompted the artisans to create these embellishments; rather they speak of their imaginations and materialization of their spiritual sincerity to help the man reach the Truth and attain exultation. Further, the historical epigraphic evidence that exits throughout the complex serve as valid proofs of belonging the place to imaret (building), suffa (iwan) and rowza (grave). The attributes such as "the sheikh of Muslim sheikhs, the grand officiate of the scholars, the re-establisher of the emblems of the religion, the revealer of the secrets of the truth, the aware of the God's indications (effects), the God's proof to people" ascribed repeatedly to Mohammad b. Bakran in the inscriptions can probably serve to reveal his elevated scientific and spiritual status. As previously stated while describing the stucco decorations, the eastern and western walls of the hall bear relief stucco inscriptions which proclaim salavat (the formulaic praise Peace be Upon Him) upon the Fourteen Infallibles and give the Divine attributes in rectangular kufic script. These inscriptions appear to have been rendered over some earlier plaster coatings.

The results from field study of the stucco decorations of the Pir-I Bakran mausoleum suggest that the artisans of the Ilkhanid period played their most deserving role in spreading the Islamic culture. In addition, the high frequency of the stucco decorations with religious contents in the structures of the Ilkhanid period, in particular the sanctuary of Pir-I Bakran, speaks of the fact that there was a tendency towards creation of these ornamentations in the Iranian society because of a particular sacredness and spirituality believed to be resulted from producing these art works. In this context, the Ilkhanid period can be regarded as a phase in the Iranian stucco art as relates to creation of stucco decorations with religious contents.

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