Plan Recognition and Chronology of Qurtan Grand Mosque

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(Received: 14/ 05/ 2017; Received in Revised form: 11/ 06/ 2017; Accepted: 25/ 10/ 2017)

As one of the ancient regions of Rudasht (Isfahan), Qurtan Village is among the major residential areas in the vicinity of the Zayanderud River that possess many historical works of architecture. One of the most significant architectural works of this region is the Ilkhanid Grand Mosque. This mosque has not been a matter of interest to researchers and has not been properly studied to date. The current paper seeks to investigate the architectural characteristics, ornamental features, developmental stages, and periods of construction of the above-said building, based on field and library research as well as a comparative analysis of other Ilkhanid mosques located in the vicinity of the Zayanderud River and Isfahan district. According to the results of the study, Qurtan Grand Masque, similar to the majority of the other aforementioned Ilkhanid masques, comprises a domed chamber and a columned sanctuary. Regarding the architectural characteristics, ornamental features, kinds of building materials used, measurements, masses, and the rationale of existence, the architecture of this mosque is, on the one hand, inspired by regional and locational conditions and, on the other hand, a reflection of the statuses and purposes as well as political, economic, and social measures dominating the historical eras of the building's construction.

Keywords*: Zayanderud River, Isfahan, Rudasht, Ilkhanid, Qurtan Grand Mosque*

Introduction

As the historical monuments[2] indicate, Qurtan Village had a specific importance and prosperity in the past. Most of the village is contained within the main citadel, which constitutes a myriad of historical buildings including several old mosques. The other monuments of the village are located outside the citadel and its defensive walls. Undoubtedly, one of the most prominent monuments is the building known as the Grand Mosque. Although natural factors as well as human manipulations has caused many parts of the mosque to collapse, compared to other contemporary mosques in the eastern basin of the Zayanderud River, it is in good condition since the remains of the mosque are enough to identify its main areas. In particular, the construction provides sufficient information about its plan and structure and helps to understand the construction of the other mosques in this area, the majority of which have lost their main parts. Despite the extensive research conducted by researchers such as Donald Wilber (1989) and Maxim Siro (1978) in Isfahan and the eastern basin of Zayanderud River within the previous decades, this building has not been of interest to the researchers. Salehi Kakhgy is the only person who has devoted a few lines of his article to its construction (2008: 66-67). Therefore, in this paper, the authors have focused their attention on the aspects such as the architectural features, decorative features, chronology, and construction course of the mosque based on field studies in the Grand Mosque. In addition, they have investigated other mosques in the eastern basin of Zayanderud River and Isfahan and using the information in the geographical and historical texts from the third century AH to the eighth century AH.

Geographical Location of Qurtan

Qurtan Village is located in the longitude of 27 38 and latitude of 32 52 and at an altitude of 1,480 meters above sea level (Papoli Yazdi 1988: 422), on the northern shore of the Zayanderud River and at a distance of 93 kilometers from Isfahan (Fig. 1). This place is one of the villages of the Rudasht Plain with an area of 2,100 square kilometers; and it is limited from the north to Kuhpaye mountainous

[2]Some monuments like Navvab Citadel, Qurtan Castle, Ibrahim Mosque, and Shabestan Mosque as well as many historic houses belong to Alebouyeh and Qajar eras.

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region, from the south to Jarqhoyeh region, from the east to Gavkhuni Swamp and Yazd Province, and from the northwest and west to Beraan fertile plains (Fig. 2). Rudasht, as one of the fertile areas in the eastern catchment basin of the Zayanderud River constitutes the last block of the river with a length of 50 kilometers and a width varying between less than 1 kilometer at the beginning and about 10 kilometers at the end (Hosseini Abari 1997: 32).

Historical Background

It is clear in the geographical texts, Qurtan was previously considered as one of the villages in the Rudasht Plain in Isfahan. Rudasht was also introduced to be a Rostaq or a territory of Isfahan in the historical resources belonging to the third and fourth centuries AH till the Safavid period. Rostaq, or its Persian equivalent village, corresponds



***Fig. 1**: A general view of Qurtan near the Zayanderud River and Gavkhuni Swamp (After: Google Earth, depicted 19/01/2017).*

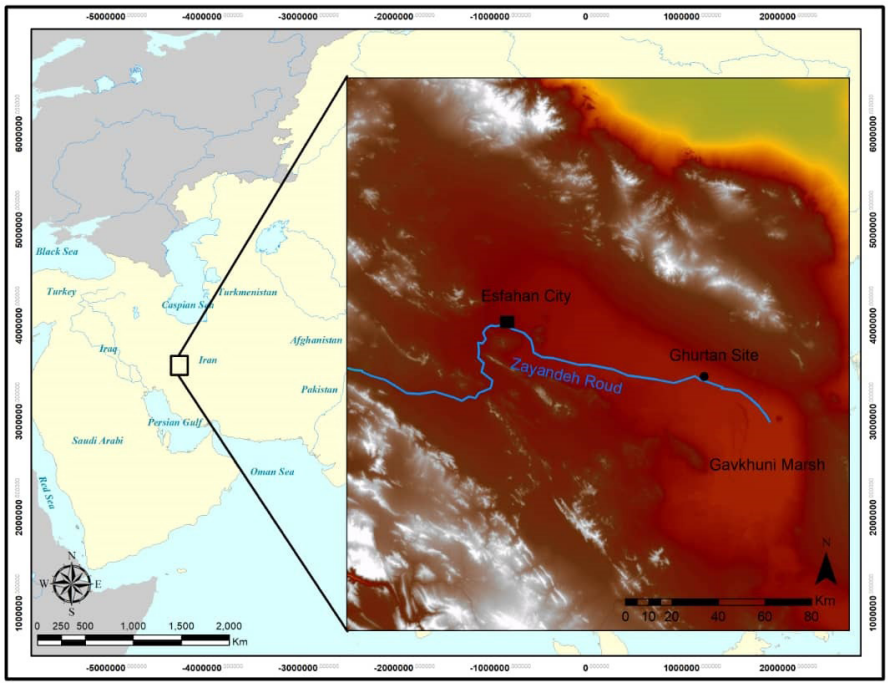


***Fig. 2**: Geographical location of Qurtan in Isfahan Province.*

with the modern district (Kiyani 1986: 208); and according to Yaqut Homavi, it is a place which is smaller than cities and provinces and has lots of farmlands (Yaqut Homavi 2001: 38). During the Safavid period, villages were called blocks and Mahals (Samie 1928: 2). Until the Qajar period, Rudasht has been introduced as a block or Mahal of Isfahan, that is, one of its districts or regions (Mirza Rafia 2008: 571).

In the early centuries of Islam, Isfahan was of great importance for Arabs, who mentioned it as 'the land of purl and saffron' (Abonaim Isfahani 1998: 153). The saffron fields in Rudasht and the existence of a dam known as Marwan Damn, named in memory of Marwan Hemar, an Umayyad caliph and Marwan Abudalaf (Abudalaf dynasty ruled over Isfahan in the third century AH on behalf of Abbasid governors) (Jaberi Ansari 1999: 9) shows that Rudasht has been of great importance due to its rich agriculture in the early centuries of Islam. Furthermore, the Zayanderud River was a key source of water for the region (Sohrab 1997: 230).

Ibn-e-Khordadbeh (1991: 119), Ibn-e- Rosteh (1986: 182-187), Ibn-e- Faqih (1970: 198), Ibn-e-Hoqal (1987: 109) and Muqaddasi (1982: 593) are geographers of the third and fourth centuries AH who have written about Rudasht. In this regard, Ibn-e-Hoqal provided a more detailed description of the place as follows: "The Zayanderud River pours into Rudasht and Beraan Villages for 90 days a year. This village is so precious with plenty of bars and cereals, and it supplies most of the food for people in Isfahan. All the water pours into this village for forty days to help sowing, and it is banned after the end of the cultivation" (Ibn-e- Hoqal 1987: 109). He was also the first one who wrote about Varzaneh (a city in Rudasht which is now its center) and Qurtan: "The Zayanderud River finally reaches Barzand Village which is inhabited by Zoroastrians and is absorbed on the way of Barzand and Qurtan Villages where people set up their stalls.… The place where the water is absorbed is like a desert with a length of 9 milestones on which man can only put his foot with two wooden plates or a mesh; this place is at the end of Khorasan desert area in Kerman" (Ibn-e-Hoqal 1987:109).

From the fifth to sixth centuries AH, the prominent Seljuk monuments such as Barsian Mosque and Minaret, Gar Mosque and Minaret, Ziar and Rahrovan Minarets (Honarfar 1997: 108-113; Godar *et al.* 2005: 182-186) in the eastern basin of the Zayanderud River have reflected the continuing prosperity of the eastern basin of the Zayanderud River and Rudasht at that time. Hafiz Abu-Naeim Isfahani (1998: 144) and Mafzal-Ebn-e-Sad-e Maforukhi Isfahani (2006: 60-62), in the fifth century AH, wrote about Rudasht geographical location as well as its growth and prosperity at that time.

In the Ilkhanid period, in the wake of the amendments done by Ghazan Khan in agriculture, Isfahan witnessed a remarkable growth in its agriculture (Petrozhevsky 1965: 155-181), so that the eastern basin of the Zayanderud River and Rudasht, as the most significant farmlands, had flourished the most since then (Mostowfi 1983: 51). As Mostowfi mentioned, Isfahan Province had three major cities one of which was Farfaan, which is now a village in Rudasht (Mostowfi 1983: 68). The valuable monuments like Kaj Mosque, Dashti Mosque, Aziran Mosque, Ashkavand Mosques (Wilber 1989: 283-286; Siro 1980: 150; Siro 1978: 391-437), and Farfaan Mosque (Kakhgy 2008: 55-70) all confirm this point.

In this period, geographers such as Yaqut Homavi (1957: 78) and Safi-e-Din Baghdadi (1992: 356, 639) provided brief entries about Rudasht and Qurtan. Hamdollah Mostowfi, a famous geographer of the eighth century AH, introduced Rudasht as one of the eight blocks of Isfahan and reported on Qurtan prosperity: "... the eighth area is Rudasht with sixty regions, Farfaan, Qurtan, Varzaneh, Askaran and Kamandan are its districts; these districts are called cities in the other areas as there are more than 1000 houses, markets, mosques, schools, abbeys and bathrooms in each of these villages..." (Mostowfi 1983: 51).

In the texts belonging to the Safavid and Qajar periods, there has been some information regarding Rudasht and Qurtan Villages all of which indicate the fertility of the area, the importance of agriculture there, the distribution of Zayanderud water, and water rights and facilities in the region (Hosseini Abari 1997: 36; Al-Isfahani 1989: 113, 306).

Building Location

Qurtan Grand Mosque is 300 meters from the east of the village defense tower and 20 meters from the northern coast of the Zayanderud (Fig. 3). The mosque is now located outside the residential parts of the village. Considering the evidence including the remainders on the exterior surface of the western wall of the mosque as well as the remainders of the houses and architectural works close to the northern, eastern, northwestern and western sides of the building, it can be estimated that the building belongs to the Safavid and Qajar periods. It seems that the mosque had a cohesive communication with the urban context and its vicinity at least from the Safavid to the Qajar periods.

The mosque is located on an artificial platform with an altitude of 2 meters above the river and its surrounding land (Fig. 4). As the evidence shows, soil and construction waste were used to create this platform. Furthermore, its side walls in the vicinity of the river were covered with rock fragments to strengthen the building and prevent its decay.

Recognition and Description of the Building Architecture

Although today, as a result of severe damage, the spatial cohesion and the original form of the mosque has been destroyed and the altars and entrances do not exist anymore, the main elements of the mosque structure have been maintained, making the diagnosis of the spatial organization of the mosque and its constituents relatively possible. Based on the evidence, the remaining parts of the mosque constitute a rectangular space with the approximate dimensions of 25×33 meters. Structurally, the spatial features and functions of this part fall into 2 categories: the first category includes elements, the form and function of which are accurately detectable; while the second category includes elements, the formal structure and function of which are only estimated based on the assumptions and speculations.



***Fig. 3**: Location of Qurtan Grand Mosque*
(After: Army Geographic Organization, depicted on 1969).

The first category contains a dome chamber along with Qiblah, a small court in front of it, a high portico on the southern side of the courtyard, 4 small porticoes on the eastern and western sides of the courtyard, and a columned sanctuary on the western side of the court. Besides, the second category includes striped spaces in parallel with the small eastern porticoes on the eastern front of the building and the structures and spaces on the northern front of the court, the columned sanctuary and the eastern aisle (Fig. 5). Each of the above-mentioned components will be described with respect to the issues such as the spatial structure and function of the constructions as follows.

Dome Chamber

Destruction in the dome chamber has caused the destruction of its four pillars, so that only two northern pillars and parts of another one in the southeastern side remains. Considering the ruined parts, the external dimensions of the dome chamber are about 10 × 10 meters and its internal dimensions are about 5 × 5 meters. The current height of the dome chamber is about 6 meters, which must have been much higher when firstly developed. The dome chamber is linked to the other parts of the construction through triple ports located in the eastern, western, and northern sides. Naturally, due to the loss of the Qiblah wall, there is no sign of the altar in the dome chamber. In the lower parts of the dome chamber internal walls, some niches have been built, the interior space of which has been



***Fig. 4**: Outside view of Qurtan Grand Mosque.*

divided into two parts through creating a counter ceiling in the triple ports. The upper spaces are also linked to each other through the corridors embedded in the inner wall of the dome chamber (Fig. 6).

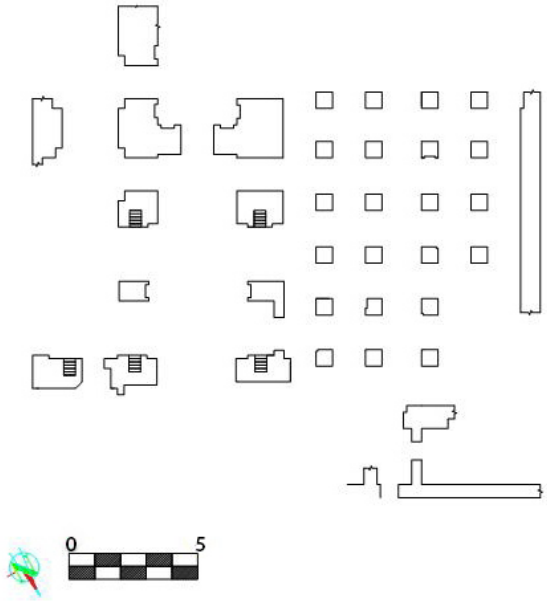


***Fig. 5**: The plan of the remaining works of the ground floor of the mosque.*

Courtyard

Along with the dome chamber axis and in front of the southern portico, there is a small rectangular courtyard with dimensions of 5 × 8 meters. This courtyard has been diagnosed based on its location, the physical appearance of the porticoes, and the absence of evidence proving its coverage (Fig. 7).

Porticoes

As previously mentioned, there are two large porticoes at the northern and southern sides, and four small porticoes on the western and eastern sides of the courtyard. The large southern portico has a span of 5 meters width and approximately 6 meters height; it is located between the courtyard and dome chamber and linked to the eastern and western spaces of the court through two ports. The mentioned ports are divided into two floors by a counter ceiling. The ports are linked to the second floor of the dome chamber and to the embedded stairs in the portico, which finally end to the courtyard. Due to the similarities between the northern courtyard and the southern portico structures in elements such as the placement of



***Fig. 6**: South view of the south porch and the remains of the dome chamber.*



***Fig. 7:** Courtyard view from above.*

the stairs on the eastern and western walls, the two floors of the place (which is characterized by the counter ceiling heat), and the dimensions of the constructions, the northern construction could be assumed to be the great northern portico of the Grand Mosque. Diagnosis of the other parts of the portico and the spatial condition of its northern side is difficult due to the damaged areas. Thus, it may only be possible to diagnose them through archaeological excavations.

There are two porticoes in each of the eastern and western sides of the courtyard which are smaller in dimensions and lower in heights than the

porticoes in the northern and southern sides. The current height of the porticoes is approximately 4 meters and each of them has a span with 5.3 meters width and 2 meters depth. With the exception of the western porticoes, which are blocked from the rear wall and linked to the columned sanctuary through the ports, the rear spaces of the other small porticoes are open and, thus, facilitating communication with the rear space.

Columned Sanctuary

The remainder of this square sanctuary, with approximate dimensions of 16 × 18 meters on the western side of the building, is parallel to the dome chamber and courtyard and includes five aisles perpendicular to the Qiblah. The columns of the sanctuary are square with variable dimensions of 1 × 1 meters and 1.10 × 1.10 meters and a current height of 3 meters. The central aisle of the sanctuary has a span with an average of 2.40 meters width; it is wider than the other aisles with 2 meters width and ends in the southern side to the altar, which has been completely destroyed by now. Some of the pillars have been completely destroyed and some are detectable thanks to the remainders (Figs. 8-10).

The sanctuary is connected to the small western porticoes and the dome chamber from the east and is blocked by a mostly-destroyed wall from the west. Due to the severe destructions of the building, it is difficult to identify whether the northern and southern sides of the sanctuary have been in the current form or with broader dimensions. There is a different construction 2 meters from the northern side of the sanctuary which is more similar to the entrance complex. This structure indicates that the northern front of sanctuary was limited to the current boundaries; however, if it is assumed that symmetrical construction was of high importance for the architects, the northern pillars must have been beyond their current state and continued toward the north just as the southern pillars that were tangent to the western wall of the great northern portico. Nonetheless, due to the destruction of the upper parts of the pillars and, subsequently, the inability to recognize the hot-arches and the above-mentioned factors, the continuation or discontinuation of the sanctuary and the areas of the northern front are clearly distinguishable by archaeological excavations.



Fig. 8: *South front of columned sanctuary from above.*



Fig. 9: *Interior space of central aisle in columned sanctuary.*

Such a situation can be seen on the southern side of the sanctuary. The evidence shows that there is no trace of any arches on the southern sides of the pillars (it should be noted that the upper parts of the pillars have remained) and the horizontal arch spans of the pillars, which have been designed by putting the imposts on the top and bottom of the arches. These all do indicate that the sanctuary structure ended at this spot. On the contrary, the continuation of the lower platform to 2.5 meters toward the south of the sanctuary, the unblocked space of the sanctuary along with the direction of Qiblah[1] , the excessive protrusion of the dome chamber from the western wall of the mosque, and the lack of a logical explanation of the spatial relationship between the western port of the dome chamber and the columned sanctuary all indicate the continuation of the sanctuary structure.

Another point making the correct interpretation of the final estimations of the sanctuary boundaries on both sides difficult is its coverage. In other words, the traces of the arches, the span covering of the arch carriers, and the other spans were



Fig. 10*: Interior view of one of the aisles in columned sanctuary.*

[1]Typically, the prayer hall of the columned sanctuary and even the summer columned sanctuary, which were open from one or more sides but blocked by a wall and an altar, were embedded in it.

made of domical vault which in spite of all the mentioned evidence, could support the hypothesis that the initial space of the sanctuary is limited to its current dimensions. Regarding the latter issue and considering focusing on this assumption that the sanctuary was constructed later than the other parts and did not follow their symmetrical structure, the hypothesis which limits the initial space of the sanctuary to its current dimensions is further confirmed.

Eastern Aisle

This space is severely destroyed except for the western parts of the great southern and northern porticoes as well as the small eastern porticoes. The other sides have also been destroyed except for a part of a wall on the eastern side of the port and a pillar of its northern wall. The traces of the arches on the western wall of the space indicates that it was covered in the past (Fig. 11).

Assuming that the building space has continued to the southern wall of the dome chamber, the approximate dimensions of the internal space are estimated to be about 19 × 4.20 meters. The spatial features and geographical location of the construction as well as the similar structures in the majority of other mosques indicate that the construction was used as a summer sanctuary. Almost certainly, the northern and eastern sides were surrounded by walls and connected to the court through the small porticoes and to the destroyed northern parts of the mosque through the northern port. The two staircases at the northern and eastern bases of the sanctuary, including the great northern and southern porticoes and the dome chamber, indicate that it had two floors in some parts.

Constituents of the Structure and its Implementation

Except for a few ribs on the arches of the columned sanctuary, the other building coverings have been damaged; however, the traces of the arches reflect the application of dome coverings, domical vault arches, and tunnel vaults in different parts of the building. The eastern aisle or the eastern sanctuary has been covered with domical vault and ribs, while the large and small porticoes have



***Fig. 11**: Interior view of eastern aisles.*

been covered with tunnel vaults. The coverage of the columned sanctuary spans in the adjacent aisles on each side has been tunnel vault, while the other spans have been covered with domical vault and rib. The arch type used in the bearing sections has been ogee arch and non-bearing sections have been of all kinds of basket-handle arches. Due to the thin pillars and thick-based corridors, it seems that a conscious effort has been made to reduce the size and style of the building.

The materials included bat, brick, and wood used in building the structure with mud mortar, plaster and lime. The most important materials used in the bearing walls and pillars and covering the building were multi-size bats, with the sizes 26.5 × 26.5 × 5, 26 × 26 × 5, 30 × 30 × 5, 28 × 28 × 5, and 27.5 × 27.5 × 5 cm. Bricks were also widely used in decking with the sizes of 24 × 24 × 5 cm. They were also used limitedly in the four corners of the scaffolding holes with the sizes of 26.5 × 26.5 × 4 and 25 × 25 × 4 cm. Another interesting use of bricks was in the single-row or double-row arch imposts. The bricks used in constructing the bat structures which were normally and repeatedly used with the wooden beams in the lower parts of the arch imposts increased the tensile strength of the arches and prevented their destruction or sinking. Crushed rocks and alluvial rocks were only used for underpinning the buildings; and due to the lack of mountains in this region, they have undoubtedly been supplied from the Zayanderud River sediments.

Construction of this mosque on a high platform not only reflects the visual importance of the building but also shows the architectural scheming of the building to consolidate its foundation bed. It also prevents its flooding risk against the possible outbreaks of the Zayanderud River and preserves its foundation from the ingress of progressive moisture of the river banks.

Decorations

Exact determination of the whole raw materials and decorative techniques used in the building is not possible due to its severe damage; however, what is obvious is that the remainders on the internal surfaces of the mosque walls indicate that its inner surface was covered with plaster. Moreover, the remaining parts indicate that in some cases, the plaster is dyed in red. The decorations might have been in the form of bands on the edge of the plaster surfaces. The interesting point is that some parts of the painting have deliberately been covered with a layer of thatch. The most significant decoration of the mosque can be seen in the inner entrance doorway of the dome chamber. These decorations with a combination of bricks and tiles[1] constituted octangular roundel ties and four armband arches (Fig. 12). The other decorations of the building, which are only visible on the inner port span of the dome chamber, are the Karbandi non-bearing plaster decorations.

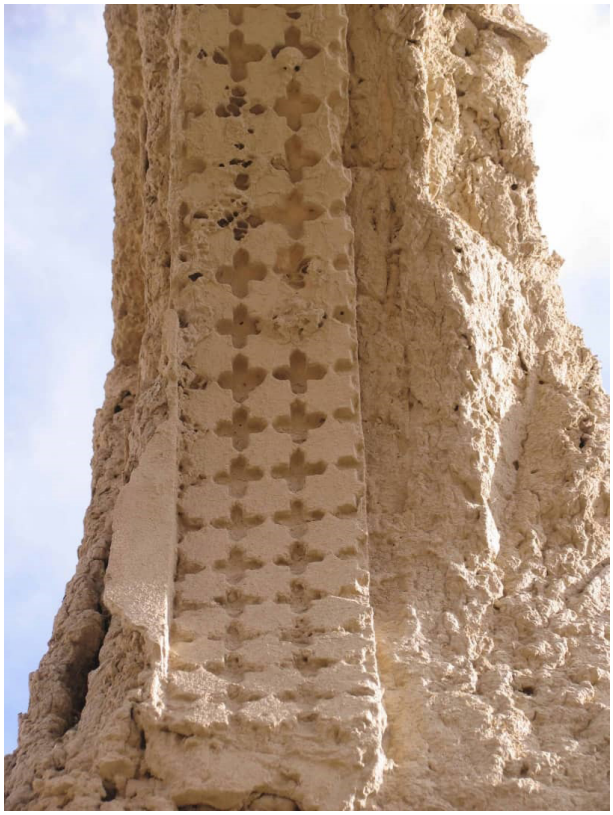


***Fig. 12**: Traces of tile work decorations.*

The Chronology of the Construction

There is no inscription to identify the construction course or courses. With regard to cases such as the overall difference of the construction volumes and techniques, the lower height of the columned

[1]As these tiles cannot be found anywhere nowadays, their diagnosis has only been possible through the remaining traces on the walls and with respect to similar cases in other buildings.

sanctuary and its one floor, the lack of proper spatial and logical connection with the other sectors and especially with the dome chamber, and the lack of fastening of the eastern walls and the walls of the large southern and northern porticoes as well as the small western porticoes, it seems that the columned sanctuary was added to the other parts of the mosque as an additional space in the later courses. On the other hand, the use of thatch to cover the colored plaster decorations and the construction of a smaller port under the entrance of one of the northern seraglio courtyards indicate another course in constructing the building which is mostly in the form of partial and limited interventions (Figs. 13-14). Accordingly, it may be possible to assume three courses for the construction:

Constructing the mosque on an artificial platform is like the construction of other Ilkhanid mosques around the Zayanderud River such as Kaj, Dashti, Aziran, and Ashkavand Mosques. The structural characteristics of the building such as its thinness, high altitude, light walls, and small courtyard have been the common characteristics of the Ilkhanid mosques. A similar construction with larger scale can be seen in Varamin Grand Mosque (722 AH) while Kaj and Ashkavand Mosques have the same scale[1].

Second course: In this course, the columned sanctuary was added to the western front. It cannot be precisely determined whether the sanctuary was established on the ground or on the structure



***Fig. 13**: Effects of rebuilding in northern structures.*

First course: In this course, the dome chamber, the courtyards, the large and small porticoes, and the eastern sanctuary have been built. According to what is mentioned below, the structures of this course may belong to the 8th century AH coinciding with Ilkhanid governance. There is a similarity between the impost decorations of the dome chamber port and similar constructions in Oshtorjan Grand Mosque (715 AH), Dashti Mosque (8th AH century), Amu Abdullah Graveyard in Kolahdan (715 AH), and Pirbakran Monument (698 AH). Moreover, this dome chamber is completely similar to the dome chamber of Dashti and Kaj Mosques (8th AH century). Furthermore, the composition of the dome chamber and the eastern sanctuary is similar to the composition of Aziran, Kaj, and Haftshuye mosques (8th AH century).



***Fig.14**: The use of thatch to cover the colored plaster decorations.*

[1]Kaj, Dashti, Aziran, Farfaan, and the four Ashkavand Mosques are all located on the eastern coast of the Zayanderud River; and Haftshuye, Kuhpaye and some parts of Gar Mosques are located in eastern Isfahan. These buildings reflect the widespread constructions in the Ilkhanid period from the late 7th century AH to the early 8th century AH.

of the first-course mosque. Perhaps symmetrical to the eastern aisle (sanctuary), just like, Kaj and Aziran Mosques, there was a similar construction in the place of the present columned sanctuary in the first period which was destructed for a variety of reasons. Then, the current columned sanctuary has been established on its place. Qurtan Grand Mosque can be attributed to the Safavid period just as in that period, most of the Ilkhanid mosques around the Zayanderud River basin, such as Dashti (Siro 1978: 428-430), Ashkavand (Siro 1978: 300-394), and Kaj (Honarfar 1971: 284), had been repaired and renewed (fig. 15).

Third course: Considering the type of interventions carried out during this course, which is closely associated with minor repairs done due to economic weaknesses, the latter repairs can be attributed to the Qajar Period during which the eastern basin of the Zayanderud River waned.

Conclusion

According to the information provided above, Qurtan Grand Mosque is an Ilkhanid building with a two-portico style which was established outside the city Qurtan. Such a Grand Mosque with impressive dimensions beside the other mosques emphasizes the increasing population of Qurtan on the one hand and the expansion of urban areas in its suburbs on the other, both indicating its increasing importance in the Ilkhanid period. What Hamdollah Mostowfi wrote about Qurtan as a great village (which was considered a city in other territories) confirms this

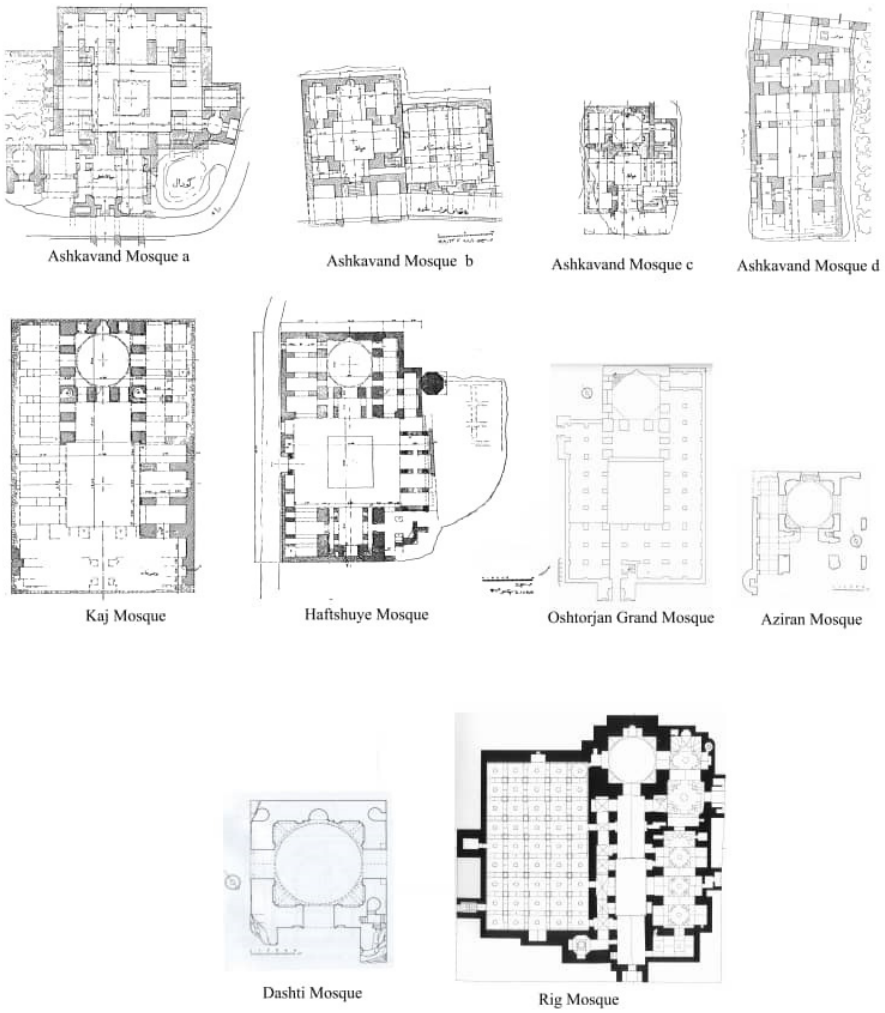


***Fig. 15**: Plan of the compared mosques (After: Siro 1978; Wilber 1989; Khademzadeh 2005).*

claim. As the historical texts indicate, the eastern region of the Zayanderud River enjoyed good agricultural conditions due to the presence of water and fertile soil, so that it was of high importance for people during different periods. In the Ilkhanid period, particularly when Ghazan Khan was the governor, constitutional reforms were made for improving the agricultural conditions. Therefore, special attention was paid to the agricultural industry; and the result was the increasing construction of numerous buildings such as mosques. In terms of the materials, the development of the local effects, and the scale and architectural features, there are many similarities between Qurtan Grand Mosque and Kaj, Dashti, and Aziran Mosques, while the use of a two-portico style in smaller scales makes it similar to the two Ilkhanid mosques of Oshtorjan and Haftshuye. Outside Isfahan, Rig Mosque in Yazd is one of the Ilkhanid mosques which has the most similarities with the Qurtan Grand Mosque in terms of plan composition and construction course.

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