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# The Role of Monumental Structures in the Genesis of Routes in the Medieval Islamic Bijar (Garrus) Region

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**Abstract**

Monumental structures are certainly the most common public buildings in Islamic architecture, being second only to mosques. Eight such structures were recorded during the survey of Bijar County of eastern Kurdistan province. These monumental buildings tend to share common plans and building materials. Given their position on the routes linking northwestern and western Iran as well as their proximity to the major political centres of Maragheh, Soltaniyeh and Takht-e Soleyman, these buildings, apart from a memorial function, perhaps beaconed caravans along the regional routes. Yet, these structures largely remain unaddressed by any systematic work. The main objective of the present study is to publish these buildings so as to give a more refined picture of the regional route networks in the Islamic period. The comparisons and discrepancies detected between these structures in the study area and the nearby regions, notably the Zanjan plain, characterized by environmental and cultural settings almost identical to the Garrus region, can be of great help in this regard. Accordingly, the questions considered here are: 1) What factors played a role in the emergence of these monuments in the region? 2) How did previous architectural traditions affect their formation? And, 3) To what extent are these buildings effective in reconstructing the ancient routes, and where in the region do they find comparisons in form and building materials? Social, religious and political factors have informed the development of towers in the region during the Seljuk and Ilkhanid rules. Adjacency to major coeval political centres, safety of the routes thanks to vigorous local rulers, and favorable environmental conditions (access to water and the presence of numerous villages along the routes) are the most remarkable of such factors. Previous traditions and modeling on earlier standing towers from the historical (Sassanian) and Islamic periods played a notable part in the construction of the regional guidance towers. Affinities to the standing structures in the neighboring regions, including the Khoein Tower, the mausoleum of the Prophet Qeydar, the tomb tower at Kahriz Siah Mansur (Ijrud) in Zanjan province, and their comparisons with the monumental structures of the Bijar region, apart from contributing to the reconstruction of the past route networks, attest to their original function as navigational aid. The study adapts a historical-descriptive approach and builds on field surveys, documentation in photo, and looking up related information in historical texts and library documents.

**Keywords**: Islamic Era, Ilkhanid Period, Bijar (Garrus), Monumental Structures, Architecture, Route Networks.

**Article Type:** Research Article

## Introduction

Architecture as a phenomenon has had a constant presence in different spheres of the cultural milieu. An architectural form with a large number of extant cases is tower buildings which are attested as tombs, towers and landmarks. At a certain point in the Islamic era, towers began to top the graves of distinguished and even undistinguished individuals from both religious and non-religious domains (Durant 1993: 20). The history of tomb construction in Iran goes back to the pre-Islamic times. By the Achaemenid period, construction of open air mastabas, e.g. the tomb of Cyrus, and rock cut tombs were popular (Hillenbrand 2000: 58). While under the Sassanians interment of body in the soil was not a popular practice given the Zoroastrian interdictions, religious funeral buildings, i.e. towers of silence, are known from the period (Amouzgar and Tafzzoli 1996: 57). In Islamic Iran, construction

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of tower tombs and guidance mils started at the same time as other religious buildings such as mosques and would go through almost the same trajectory. The varying construction methods characterizing these structures in style and decorations, inspired by various cultural and non-cultural factors, have followed a same path as the society's rituals and beliefs (Hosseini and Pourkarimi 2016: 58). In fact, geographical settings, and social, political, religious and ritual circumstances were recapitulated in different ways in architecture. Tomb towers and guidance mils as religious and service buildings, usually sitting along the routes to guide caravans, culminated under the Seljuk rule (11th and 12th centuries AD), when such structures in various plans emerged throughout the kingdom (Moshabaki Isfahani 2018: 26). The Ilkhanid era marks a second major period in the construction of related buildings. The Ilkhans' religious tolerance coupled with the surge of novel sects and religions led to a higher diversity of tower tombs in structure and decorations. At the time, different swathes of northwest Iran (Maragheh, Tabriz, Soltaniyeh) as the capital district acted as the focal point of art and architecture in Iran, and exercised a great impact on the adjacent regions. Towers served different purposes depending on their provenances. In the medieval Islamic world, towers played in certain Iranian districts the role of a navigational aid for travelers, while at the same time preserving their original utilitarian function, mostly interpreted as burial structures.

Hence, the construction methods and decorations of the eight monumental buildings, i.e. guidance mils, recorded in the Bijar (Garrus) region, which reflect a profound sense of peace of mind on the part of their builders, to put it another way, a political stability, in the wake of a protracted period typified by broad transformations and frequent warfare, will be studied here comparatively. The merit of this study lies in the fact that it addresses a prominent architectural form (tomb towers and guidance mils) from the Ilkhanid period that occurs in different geographical and cultural milieus but few researches has so far set to pinpoint the correspondences and disparities between the related buildings in different landscapes.

The Islamic written sources, especially from the medieval centuries, speak of the Bijar region as a source of major political, social, artistic and historical inspirations for Persian Iraq or Jibal (Mustawfi 1985: 779). The presence in the region of a great many of Islamic historical and architectural monuments attest also to some extent to the works of artists from different Islamic centuries, crystalized under the auspices and support of the royal courts, most notably of the Seljuks and Ilkhanids', and more particularly their local rulers. The relevant buildings from Bijar County can be addressed from the perspectives of the location, form, function, and the use of locally available materials.

This research sets to answer the following questions through studying the monumental buildings (towers) identified during the survey of the Bijar region: 1) What factors played a role in the emergence of these monuments in the region? 2) How did previous architectural traditions affect their formation? And, 3) To what extent are these buildings effective in reconstructing the ancient routes, and where in the region do they find parallels in form and building materials?

The hypotheses are as follows: social, religious and political factors informed the erection of these towers under the Seljuk and Ilkhanid dynasties. Adjacency to the major political centres of the day, secured routes controlled by vigorous local governors, and propitious landscape (access to water and existence of many villages along the routes) are the most remarkable of such factors. Former traditions and modeling after the standing towers from the historical (Sassanian) and Islamic periods were also central to the construction of regional guidance mils. Affinities to the standing structures in the neighboring regions, including the Khoein Tower, the mausoleum of the Prophet Qeydar, the tomb tower at Kahriz Siah Mansur (Ijrud) in Zanjan province, and their comparisons with the monumental structures of the Bijar region attest to their original function as landmark, and also contributes to the reconstruction of the past route networks linking Takht-e Soleyman and Soltaniyeh.

**Research Method**

This historical-analytical study adopts a comparative approach to analyze and summarize the dataset deriving from library research as well as field observation of the buildings. The paper will proceed as follows. An outline of all the eight considered buildings will precede the comparisons drawn between their architectural features and

decorations. The dataset will then be discussed and analyzed to finally enable drawing conclusions.

**History of Research**

Towers are embedded in the texture and culture of the Iranian society and one can hardly find there a city without such structures (Hillenbrand 2012: 76). The Achaemenid ossuaries at Persepolis and the Parthian dolmens of the Moghan plain epitomize pre-Islamic tomb buildings, notwithstanding Hillenbrand's assertion that the prevailing (Zoroastrian) burial customs in Iran prior to the advent of Islam excluded any independent funerary architecture barring the tomb of Cyrus. With the arrival of Islam and the associated shift in mortuary traditions, monumental buildings came to the fore. Certain scholars have credited the first Islamic tomb to Qubbat aṣ- Sulibiyat, the mausoleum of the Abbasid Caliph al-Mustansir's mother in Samarra, dated to the second half of the 8nd century AD (Hillenbrand 2012: 34). From the 9th century AD, there is no extant monumental building in Iran datable to this century with any degree of certainty. To some scholars, the holy shrines of Imam Reza, Fatima Masumeh, Abd al-Azim, and Seyed Jalaledin Ashraf (in Gilan) represent the earliest Iranian tombs. While Harun al-Rashid's burial in Khorasan might be regarded as an earliest attestation of the tomb building tradition in Iran as well as a precursor of the later mausoleum of Imam Reza, most scholars regard the mausoleum of the Samanid amir Ismail in Bukhara as the first real tomb within the scope of Iranian culture (Gheravi 1997: 131). From the 10th century AD onwards, the construction of tomb buildings spread to different regions, most notably as a result of the migration of imamzadehs and sayyids to Iran, their martyrdom or death there, and the establishment of local governments and administration centres (Grabar and Ettinghausen 2012: 62). Among the Shiite practices to have become particularly important during the Buyid dynasty were pilgrimage to the Imams' tombs and building domes and shrines on them. The practice culminated under the Seljuks and Ilkhanids, as the use of crypts underneath the tomb buildings became widespread, and bricks, apart from practical use, began to fulfil decorative purposes (Shahriari 2008: 54).

Regarding the description of the buildings considered here, in addition to their registration files, which mainly consist of the documentations made in the 1970s, a brief summary is also furnished by the volumes A Profile of the Cultural Heritage of Kurdistan (Zarei 2002) and Archaeological and Historical Cultural Heritage of Kurdistan (Zarei 2013). The paper "Re-identification of Three Tomb Towers: Ashghon Baba, Och Gonbad-e Khan, and Yengi Arakh" (Zarei 2017: 77) is the sole publication addressing the regional monumental structures. In 2022, during their revisiting and surveying of Bijar County, the present authors managed to identify a handful of other towers, which have been studied here to complement the 2017 study. As an independent research, the present paper aims to highlight the import of a complete study of these buildings from the medieval Islamic world.

**Natural and Historical Geography of Bijar**

As the centre of the historical region of Graus, Bijar County is situated at latitude 35°52', longitude 47°36'. The region is bordered by Divandarreh and Sanandaj Counties to the west, Qorveh County to the south, Zanjan province to the northeast, West Azerbaijan province to the northwest, and Hamadan province to the east. As regards administrative divisions, Bijar County consists of three districts (Central, Korani, and Chang-e Almas), eleven rural districts, and five cities. With a total area of 4350 sq k and an elevation above sea level of 1947 m marking the highest point across the province, the county features a semi-arid climate with cold winters. Its major rivers are Qizil Uzan, Talwar and Qamcheqāy, which together with a profusion of springs have made the region a primary centre for human settlement from the remote past until the present.

From the early Islamic period until the 13th century AD, the Garrus region, with Bijar now regarded as its centre, was a dependency of Sohrevard (a prominent urban centre in the early Islamic period). Given its obvious location on the routes of Ecbatana, Zanjan, Sojas, Dinevar, and Shiz coupled with its lavish pastures and strategic location, the region has strongly appealed to the rulers throughout history, in particular in the Islamic period. The term "sohrevard" is arabicized form of "Sura Bard" meaning red stone in Kurdish (Mardukh Kurdistani 1973: 36). Written sources include many references to the city of Sohrevard. In the early centuries of Islam, the city formed a part of the Jibal province until the mid-10th century AD before it fell into the hands of the Jafarid and finally the Buyid dynasties.

In the 10th century AD, Abu Dulaf catalogues the regional urban centres while describing Shiz as "a city halfway between Maragheh, Zanjan, Sohrevard and Dinevar" (Abū Dulaf 1975: 38). In his volume Sūrat al-Arḍ, Ibn Hawqal puts that, "Sohrevard is a fortified city on the way to Hamadan to the south of Zanjan, similar to Shahrizor and with the same expanse. An affluent city, populated by Kurds, and both cities have city walls" (Ibn Hawqal 1987:113). While describing the cities of Jibal, Al-Masālik wa-l-Mamālik informs us that, "Shahrezor is a small town. The Kurds have conquered it, as have Sohrevard. These two are in the hands of the Kurds" (Al-Istakhri 1961: 165). Barthold in his An Historical Geography of Iran refer to the Hamadan-Zanjan route as follows: There were no cities to the north of Hamadan and Qazvin. In northern Hamadan a road ran from the city of Sohervard to Zanjan, which was the most direct, but was not safe due to the presence of Kurds in Sohrevard (Barthold 1929: 261). With the rise of the Seljuqs in the 11th century AD, the term "Kurdistan" was employed to distinguish the regions with Kurdish populations. At the time, Kurdistan's boundaries stretched from Hamadan to Sharezor. At that time, Garrus was known as Sohrevard and formed a part of Iraq-e Ajam and a dependency of Qazvin Kureh (Mustawfi 1985: 778). In 606 H/1209 CE, Kolul Beig, the Ardalan ruler of the western regions of Kurdistan, vowed to quell the turbulences, following which the control of all Kurdish regions was entrusted to him by Abaqa Khan. The regions of Garrus, Saqqez, Siyahkuh, and Esfandabad were under his rule, and would later pass to his son Khezr, who ruled until 710 H/1310 CE (Mardukh Kurdistani 1973: 91). Once Soltaniyeh became the capital of the Ilkhanid empire, Sohrevard and Garrus were detached from the Kurdistan jurisdiction to be incorporated into the Tuman of Soltaniyeh. With the demise of the Ilkhanid empire, Bijar, as with other regions, changed hands constantly between local Iranian dynasties. The cities of Sohrevard and Sojas were devastated during the Mongol invasion of the 7th century, and afterwards Sohrevard became a dependency of Garrus province (Mustawfi 1983: 64). To the west of Soltaniyeh, the two nearby towns of Sohrevard and Sojas flourished to a certain extent by the time of Hamdallah Mustawfi, i.e. the 8th century A.H., but both declined shortly afterwards (Le Strange 1985: 241). On the authority of the written sources, Sohrevard, later renamed as Qara Qūsh, flourished prior to the 13th–15th centuries AD, but later began to dwindle gradually, and finally Bijar supplanted it as the centre of the Garrus region.

**The Islamic Sites in the Bijar Region**

Pursuant to a preplanned project, Bijar County was visited and surveyed anew in 2022. The objective was to enhance the resolution of the available picture of the valleys of the Qizil Uzan and Talwar rivers within the county through an intensive survey. Apart from the valleys, this fresh work encompassed other areas covered by the previous surveys. As a result, some 512 sites and features were identified, representing a sequence that unremittingly spans the mid-Chalcolithic to the present. The sites dating from the Islamic era are the most abundant. The most notable of these include the towers of Ashghon Baba, Yengi Arakh, Moghanlu, Hadi Gheib, Qavsohq, Fazel wa Habel, Och Gonbad, an outline of which will follow (Figure. 1).

**Ashghon Baba**

The site known as the tower of Ashghon Baba is 2 km southeast of the village of Yengi Kand a dependenciy of Siah Mansour District, about 60 km north of the city of Bijar. According to local informants, the tower once bore the name Baba Shah, and was restored last time in 1942/43 AD by a certain Ali Ashraf (mentioned in the stucco inscription at the building's entrance). Placed as monument no. 1643 in National Heritage Register, the building dates back to the 12th century AD (Pazouki and Shadmehr 2005: 310). Perching on a relatively low hill, the tower was constructed in an octagonal plan using brick. The footings consist of stone and lime mortar, and are topped with a plinth made of cubic stones up to a height of 60 cm. The overlying main structure is formed, up to the imposts of the domed roof, of typical Seljuk bricks measuring 5x26x26 cm and laid in stack bond with aligned joints. The building exhibits brick decorations and brickworks in its entire octagonal sides in the shape of ogival blind arcades and brick squinches of varying sizes. Interior architectural decorations include pointed arches, stucco frames and gypsum plaster. Judging from the registration records, there was a tilework uniformly in lajvardina colour above the blind arcade, at the eaves. The blind arcade was constructed out of simple bricks. The height of the original building exceeded 14 m. Judging from

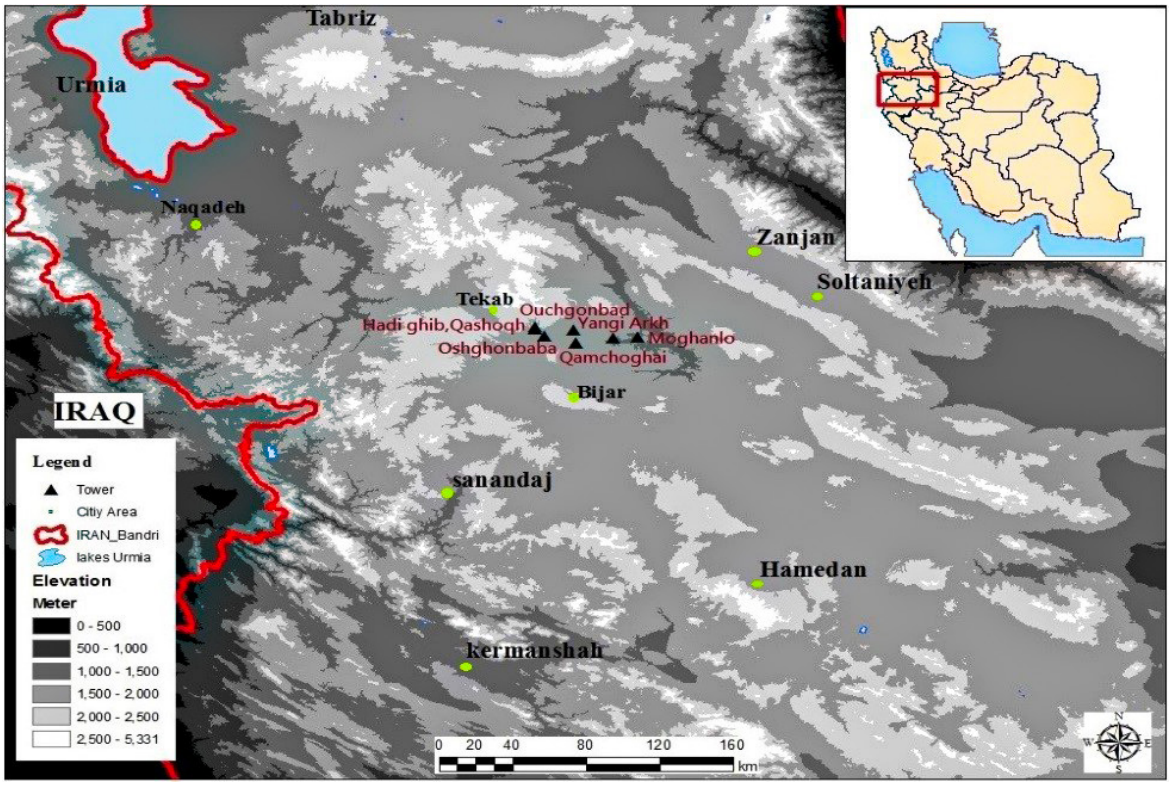



***Figure. 1:*** *Map showing the location of Bijar and its geographical features*

the employed building materials, the structure was covered with a dome with triangular muqarnases in each corner. Sitting in the upper corners, these were decorated with a bit of gypsum plaster and were worked in the form of detached double shell with the squinches of the domed roof, which is in turn made of a polygonal frank dome. Its plan and construction technique suggest a date in the Seljuk period for the tower (Zarei 2017: 80). The building has an inner diameter of 5 m and outer diameter of 6.17 m, measuring 2.3 on a side. Four sides of the building each have an ogival opening to provide the internal tower with lighting (Figure. 2). The tower was most possibly a midway station and a navigational aid. In plan and overall form, it parallels the concomitant buildings like Imamzadeh Jafar (Qom), Chalabi Oglu (Soltaniyeh), and Imamzadeh Jafar (Isfahan) (Figure. 3). All these buildings date to the Ilkhanid period, and one should not lose sight of the fact that they were primarily constructed as tomb towers and later began to be put to use as landmarks.

### Yengi Arakh

The monumental building of Yengi Arakh lies in a namesake village in Korani District. As an isolated structure, it sites in the eastern village some 150 m from the asphalt road leading to the ruins of Choleh Arakh . The building is 17 km northeast of Och Gonbad-e Khan and 11 km west of Moghanlu building in Bijar County. In 2001, it entered Iranian national heritage list as monument no. 5081. Some 12 km separate this building from Yasukand to the southeast. Its circular plan has an inner diameter of 5.2 m and outer diameter of 8.3 m. The 1.1 m thick outer wall is made of gypsum plaster and local flagstones. The roofing has fallen victim to inadequate maintenance, though indications of its gypsum karbandis are still in evidence. The extant height is 8.1 in the outer building, and 5.90 m in the interior building up to the imposts. The double shell dome, with evidences of several episodes of restoration, is 2.2 m high (Figure. 4). There are no evident exterior embellishments, though gypsum decorations are attested in the interior. While there is no writing evidence in the building to give the date of its construction, the registration files attribute Yengi Arakh to the Safavid period (Pazouki and Shadmehr 2005: 314). However, given the similar examples like the towers of Khoein in Mahneshan and Kahriz Siah Mansour in Ijrud, it was perhaps erected at the same time as the other stone-built towers considered here in the Ilkhanid period. This tentative date might be modified with new data coming to light from future excavations.

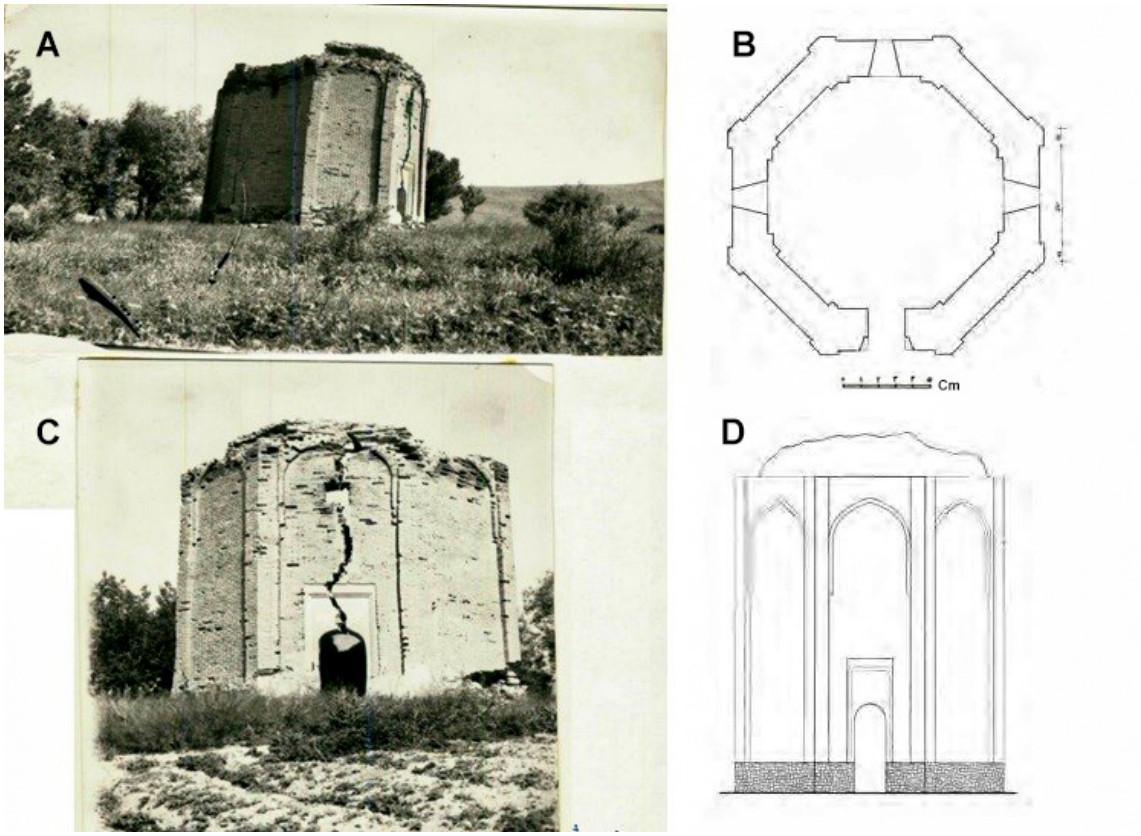



***Figure. 2:*** *Ashghon Baba tower, A: view from South, B: plan, C: view from West, D: façade*
*(After: Archives of Kurdistan Cultural Heritage Directorate 1973)*

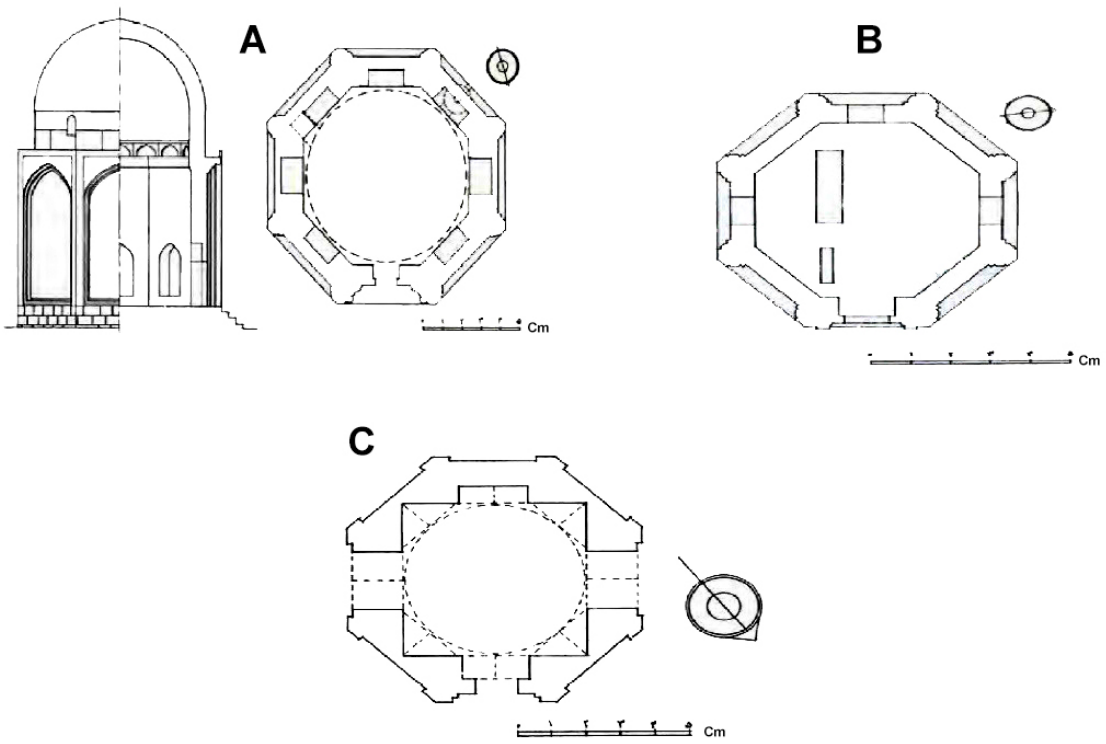



***Figure. 3:*** *A: Plan of the tomb of Chalabi Oghlu, B: Plan Imamzadeh Jafar, Isfahan, C: Plan Imamzadeh Jafar, Qom*
*(After: Wilber 1986: 30–32)*

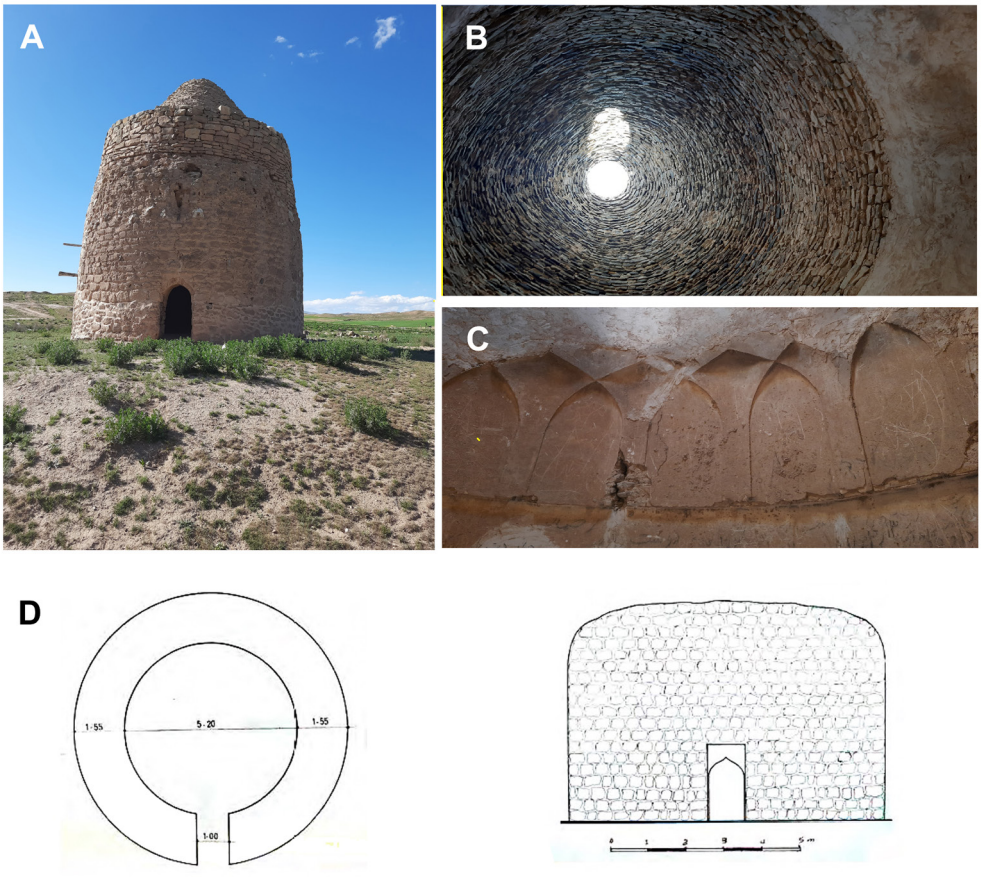



***Figure. 4:*** *Yengi Arakh tower A: General view of the site, B: The interior of the dome, C: Gypsum Karbandi, D: Plan and façade, (After: Archives of Kurdistan Cultural Heritage Directorate 1973; 1984)*

## Och Gonbad

This tower occupies the western quarter of the Och Gonbad-e Khan village of Taghamin Rural District, Korani District, Bijar County. It is made from stone and saruj in a circular plan. Reaching a height of 6 m, the building was registered as the 5082nd Iranian national heritage in 2001 as a Safavid monument (see Pazouki and Shadmehr 2005: 314). Today it gives the impression of a building erected as a mausoleum or a guidance mill during the Seljuk or Ilkhanid period by the local rulers, paralleling in visual appearance the Round Tower in Maragheh (Hillenbrand 2000: 720). The appellation is not unrelated to the shell of its dome, although the outer shell is missing. The framing wall matches those of Yengi Arakh, Moghanlu, Hadi Gheib and the Lower Ghashog in construction technique and even materials. The stone-built entrance of the building is 0.9 m in breadth and 1.30 m in height. The building's inner diameter measures 4.3 m, and the extant height reaches 6 m in the exterior. The 75 cm thickness of the walls give an outer diameter of 5.8 m for the tower (Figure. 5). A notable point about its construction is the use of flagstones in which the local craftsmen were fully skilled judging from the circumstantial evidences at hand. The building seemingly had a double shell dome, with the outer probably being of the frank type (Zarei 2017: 83). Based on the other surviving examples like the Khoein and Kahriz Siah Mansour towers, an Ilkhanid construction date appears the most plausible.

## Moghanlu Monumental Building

Some 300 m east of the Qizil Uzan and 1.2 km west of the asphalt road linking Moghanlu and Bayanlu sits a monumental building that, like its counterparts in the Garrus region, shows a circular plan and is made of local flagstones set in a mortar of half-beaten gypsum and clay . The wall diameter

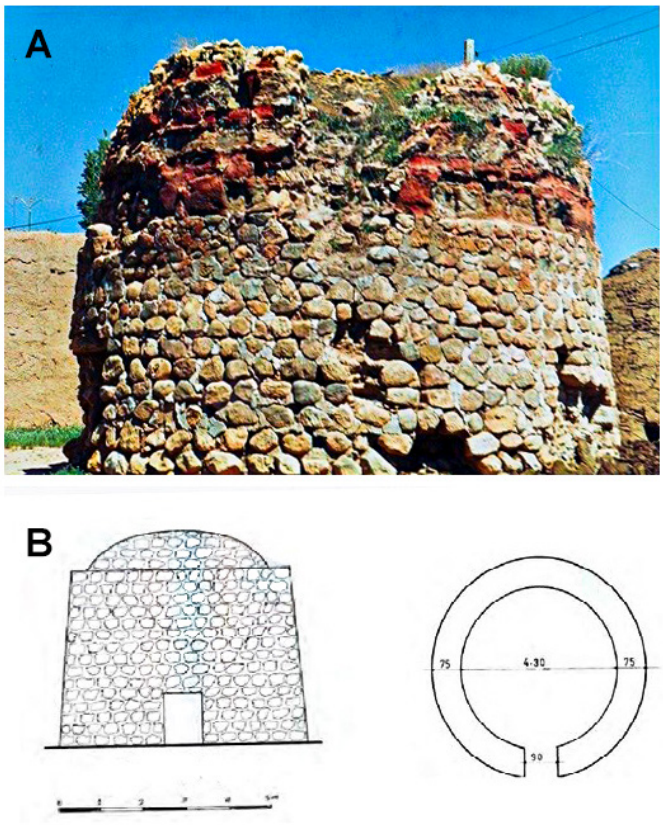



***Figure. 5:*** *Och Gonbad tower, A: General view of the site, B: Plan and façade (After: Archives of Kurdistan Cultural Heritage Directorate 1973; 1984)*

in this tower is 0.7 m, and the building survives to a height of 6.1 m. Clandestine excavation next to the building has disclosed footings made of large stone slabs 1.3 m in height. The building has an inner diameter of 4.30 m and outer diameter of 5.7 m. A brick oval dome tops the stone body, and the plaster layer coating the inner dome is still existent. There is an entrance in the eastern side, measuring 1.9 m high and 0.85 m wide (Figure. 6). An ogee arch covered the entrance, which seemingly bore a now vanished inscription. Plaster coating was applied to the building's interior, which does not show any sort of decorations, as is also the case with the exterior that lacks in any blind arches or the like. Negligence has caused severe damages to the building, reducing parts of it to nothingness. Again, the regional comparisons suggest a date in the Ilkhanid period.

**Towers of Fazel wa Habel, and Tayyebeh Khatun (Northern and Southern)**

Some 200 m to the south of the village of Qamcheqay, Korani District, there are two monumental buildings. Lying about 35 m apart from each other, they are locally attributed to the imamzadehs Fazel and Habel, and Tayyebeh Khatun (Figure. 7). The Qamcheqay river runs between the village and the buildings. The one lying closer to the river to the north of the second is almost intact, while the second tower is merely represented by the stubs of its walls. The southern building is 230 m south of the village. Their architecture tallies with the stone-built architecture of the other buildings in the Garrus region, such as the towers of Moghanlu, Och Gonbad and Yengi Arakh, somehow testifying to the continuity of the tradition.

***Northern Building***

The stone-built superstructure reaches a height of 3.98 m (including the plinth) at the base of the dome, which continues for another 2.4 m. Under this superstructure occurs a cellar, the entrance of which also lies under the main entrance of the building. At the time of our visit, its doorway was blocked with stones and mortar, excluding any documentation of the cellar. The building has a circular base with an inner diameter of 4.2–4.23

m, framed by a 0.8 m thick outer wall. The interior has similarly a circular base. The building has a door opening to the east and 3 symmetric windows topped with a circular arch. The western window is against the door. Within the building, there are 5 large niches below a row of several smaller ones. Its brick dome roof is single shell, with its imposts resting on the surrounding walls. The exterior façade is divided into four sections. The lowest part, the plinth, consists of several courses of stone. The bipartite main body is part brick and part stone, and the upper section (dome) is comprised of bricks (Figure. 8). A restoration work was carried out at the building by Kurdistan Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Directorate in 2011.

***Southern Building:*** As stated above, the structure has suffered severe damages, and is now represented by only the lower parts of its walls, which were made of stone and gypsum mortar. The southern half is in a better state of preservation, standing to a maximal height of 2.42 m. The inner diameter of the building was 4.22 m, and 0.77 to 0.83 m thick walls surrounded it (Figure. 9). A small wall niche is also in evidence. Gypsum mortar was used between the stones to level the courses of the wall.

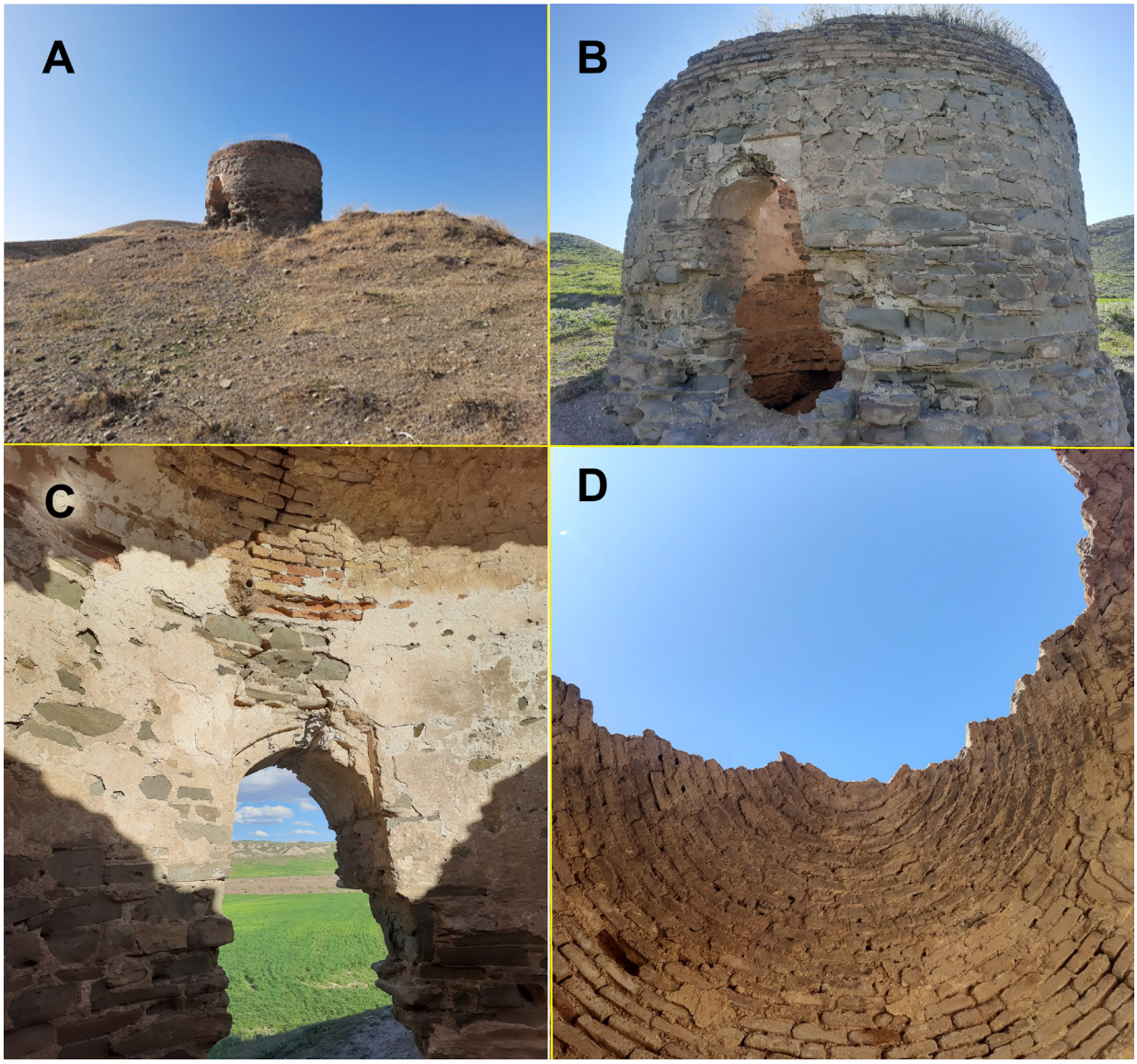



***Figure. 6:*** *Moghanlu tower, A: General view of the site, B: view from West, C: Gypsum Karbandi, D: The interior of the dome*



***Figure. 7:*** *Aerial photo of the northern and southern towers of Qamcheqay*

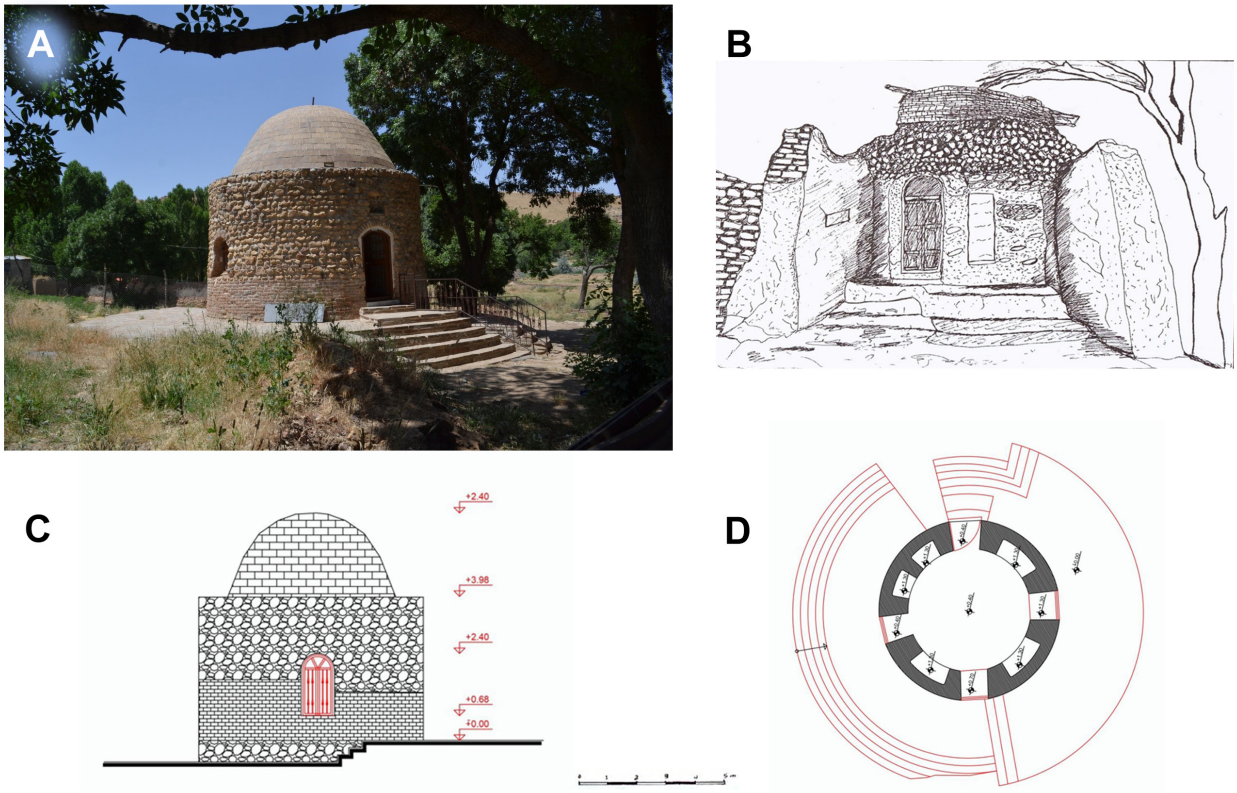



***Figure. 8:*** *northern tower at Qamcheqay, A: General view of the site, B: Hand painted façade, C: façade , D: plan section of the before and After restoration*

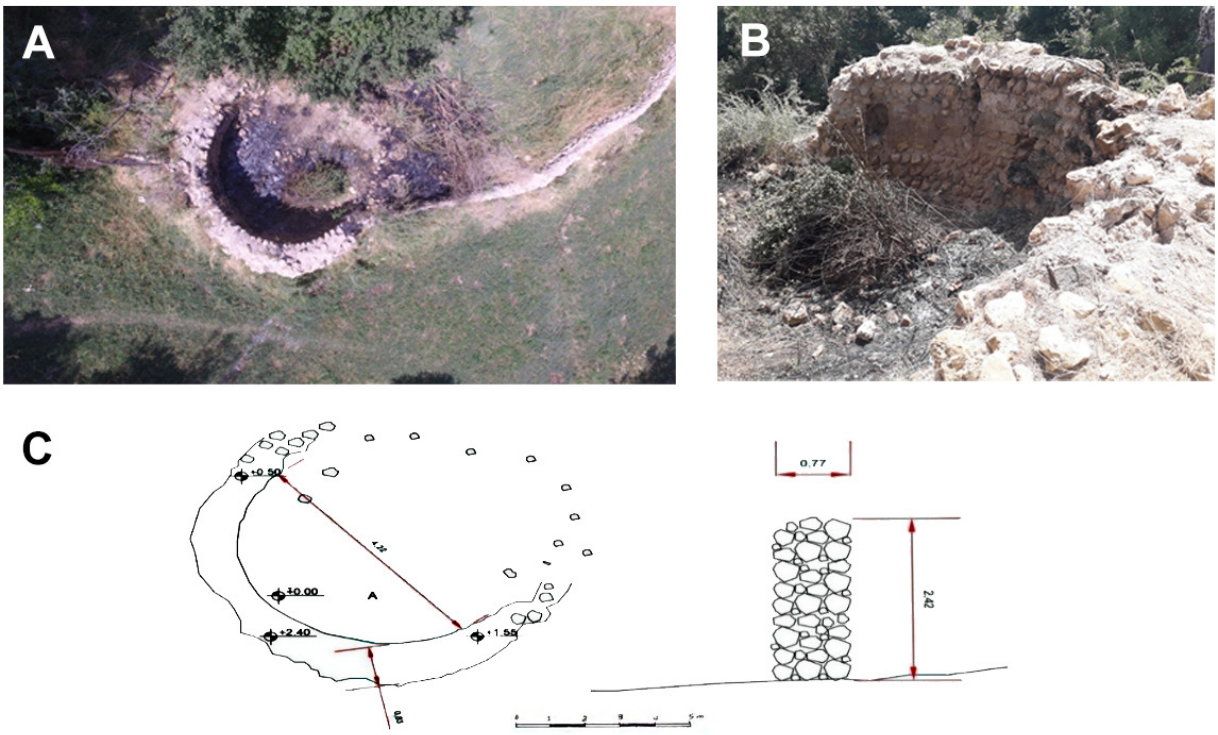



***Figure. 9:*** *Southern tower at Qamcheqay, A: General view of the site, B: view from South, C: Plan and façade*

**Round Tower at Lower Qavshoq (Hadi Gheib)**

To the northwest of the village of Lower Qavshoq in Siah Mansour Rural District, Bijar County, there is another monumental tower. It exhibits the same circular plan, and the construction materials include cobbles, flagstones of varying sizes, half-beaten gypsum mortar, gypsum, and straw. Judging by the preserved inner wall, the building had a plaster coating. The building's walls, measuring 1.1 m in diameter, survive to about 2 m of their original height. The inner diameter of the building is 2.3 m, while the outer diameter was estimated to be 4.5 m (Figure. 10). As with its counterparts, this building was once topped by a double shell oval covering. The tower is only a short distance from the seasonal river to the west, and is separated from the monumental building of Upper Qavshoq to the north by 1 km. Around this monumental building occurs a surface scatter of river cobbles along with bricks, which stem from the destruction of the building over time. The building at Hadi Gheib or Upper Qavshoq is identical to those at Yengi Arakh and Och Gonbad in form and materials. It marks the beginning of the reconstructed route here that links Takht-e Soleyman and Soltaniyeh.

**Round Tower at Upper Qavshoq**

At the village of Upper Qavshoq of Siah Mansour Rural District a monumental building sits close to the ruins of the abandoned village at a distance of 200 m, next to the cemetery of the village. This building is in the typical circular plan and constructed of local materials, including cobblestone, flagstone of varying sizes, half-beaten gypsum mortar, plaster and thatch. The existing part (inner wall) is coated in gypsum plaster, suggesting widespread use of gypsum decorations at the building. The only extant portions are walls standing 2 m high, measuring 1.15 m thick. The inner diameter of the building is 2.4 m and its outer diameter is 4.7 m (Figure. 11). This building was definitely roofed with an oval double shell covering made of brick as with Moghanlu's structure. The tower is separated from the seasonal river to the west by 1.5 m and from the Hadi Gheib structure at the village of Lower Qavshoq by 1 km. It compares on all counts with the tower of Lower Qavshoq and other monumental buildings within the study area.

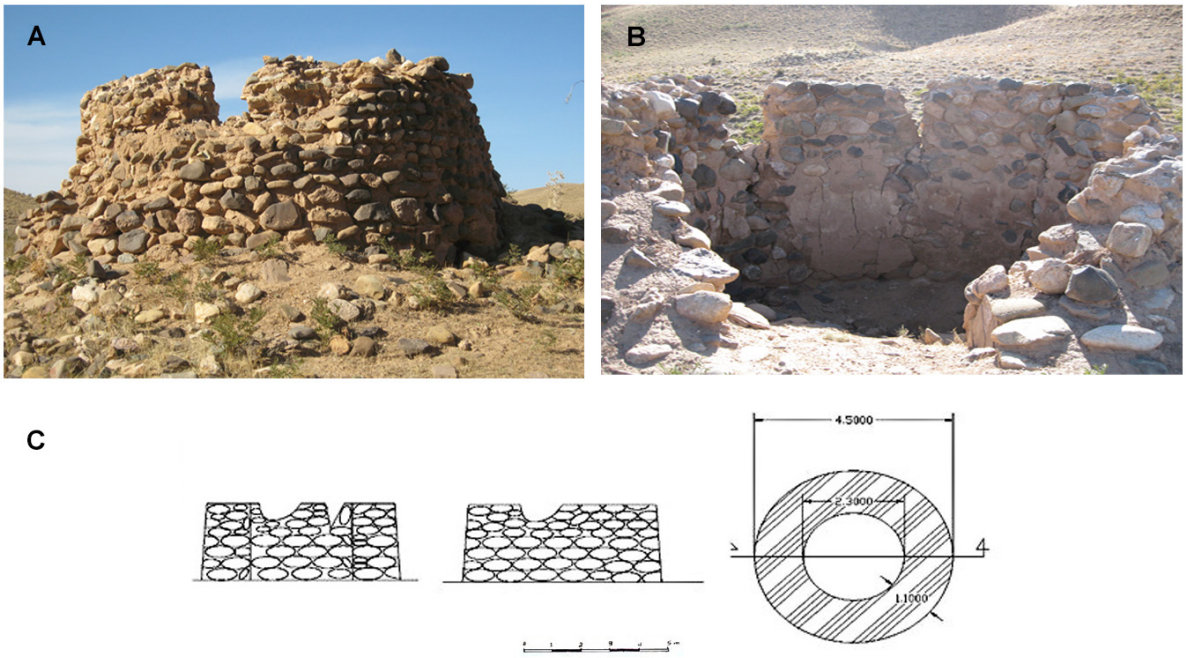



***Figure. 10:*** *Hadi Gheib tower, A: view from West, B: view from East, C: plan and section*

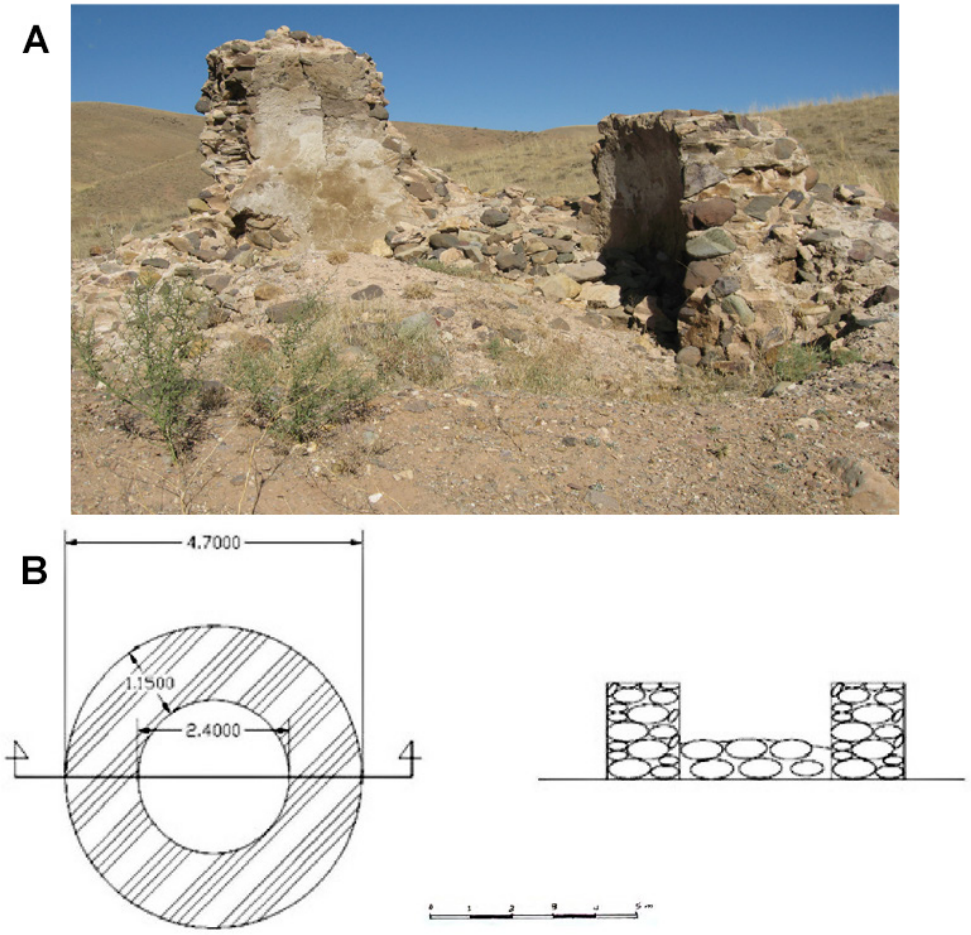



***Figure. 11:*** *Tower at Upper Qavshoq, A: General view of the site, B: plan and section*

**Attributes of the Monumental and Landmark Buildings in the Garrus Region**

Apart from the established specifications of the Ilkhanid and Timurid traditions, the architecture of the monumental structures in question has acquired some indigenous idiosyncrasies. A notable departure from the tower tombs in other districts of Iran is that none of the tombs here have a burial crypt. Also, the construction materials consist largely of brick, stone, gypsum mortar, and saruj. Barring a single polygonal instance, the plan is always circular. The domes are of double shell type as a response to the regional climate. The inner dome furnished a befitting setting for embellishing, while the outer segmental vault conferred a sense of grandeur and awe on the tomb. To create the internal shell, the typical squinch approach was invoked. Inscriptions in one or two rows were generally placed above the entrance. In most cases the interior tower was coated in gypsum plaster, while the exterior was left undecorated. The brickworks of the domes exhibit elegantly pointed mortar joints. The entrance often faces south or east. Despite their shared aspects, the guidance towers (mils) in Bijar reveal discrepancies in dimensions, height, architectural decorations, and dome construction. At least three major factors were responsible for these disparities: 1) geographic location and local climate, 2) local styles and tastes, and 3) local governments and ruling dynasties.

**Similar Monumental Buildings in Neighboring Areas**

The buildings under study find parallels in the adjacent regions, among them being the tower of Khoein, the dome of Kahriz Siah Mansour, the mausoleum of the Prophet Qeydar in Khodabandeh County, and the mausoleum of Chalabi Oghlu in Soltaniyeh of Zanjan province. Situated in the neighboring Zanjan province, the tower of Khoein and the dome of Kahriz are in absolute agreement with those published here in building materials and plan.

**Descriptions of the Tower of Khoein and the Dome of Kahriz**

Characterized by a circular plan, the shaft in both buildings are made of the locally available materials, including flagstone, gypsum and lime. The brick double shell domes covering them are of frank type. The tower of Khoein currently has an entrance in the north side which is reached through ascending three steps. It has two windows in the north and south sides. Both the interior and exterior facades were most likely adorned with inscriptions or other decorations, which were sadly either destroyed or veiled with cement layers during unsystematic restoration interventions (around 1971 AD) (Figure .12a). The dome in Kahriz is a cylindrical, domed building. Its exact date of construction is uncertain. There is an empty panel on the north face above the entrance, which according to the local informants once contained a stone inscription that gave the construction date of the dome. The inscription is missing today, but another existing inscription relates the restoration of the building to the Safavid period. This building is designated as a dome because of its domed roofing. The building has a circular plan with a diameter of 4.43, and is 25.7 m high (Figure. 12b). The construction materials are flagstone, brick and gypsum mortar. The builders raised the cylindrical shaft using fairly regular blocks of stone and worked the dome with bricks. Yet, in light of the available evidence, this brick dome was probably added to the building at a later period, and was never finished completely. The building is entered through a small door topped with an ogee arch in the north face. The interior space is completely circular, and the walls bear a gypsum coating.

It is clear from above descriptions that these buildings are identical to their counterparts in the Bijar region in materials and plan. Khoein and Kahriz, today administratively forming parts of Zanjan Province, historically belonged to the Garrus region and were properties of the Siah Mansours, a major clan of the Garrus tribe. Therefore, this style of landmarks or monumental buildings is specific to the Garrus region and was mainly meant to satisfy the needs of caravans, and of course, was modeled on other contemporary buildings such as the tomb of Prophet Qeydar in the city of Qeydar and the tomb of Sheikh Boraq at Chalabi Oghlu in Soltaniyeh. Nasser Khosrow, who crossed the area between Na'in and Tabas in the 11$^{th}$ century AD, refers in his travel account to the existence of domes at 2 farsang intervals to provide caravans both with navigational aid and drinking water (Nasser Khosrow 1977: 138). Thus, they were mainly needs-oriented structures required by the local geography. Likewise informed by the local geographical conditions (long cold

season), such buildings in the Bijar region could have equally served as guidance towers for caravans and tombs for prominent indigenous personages.

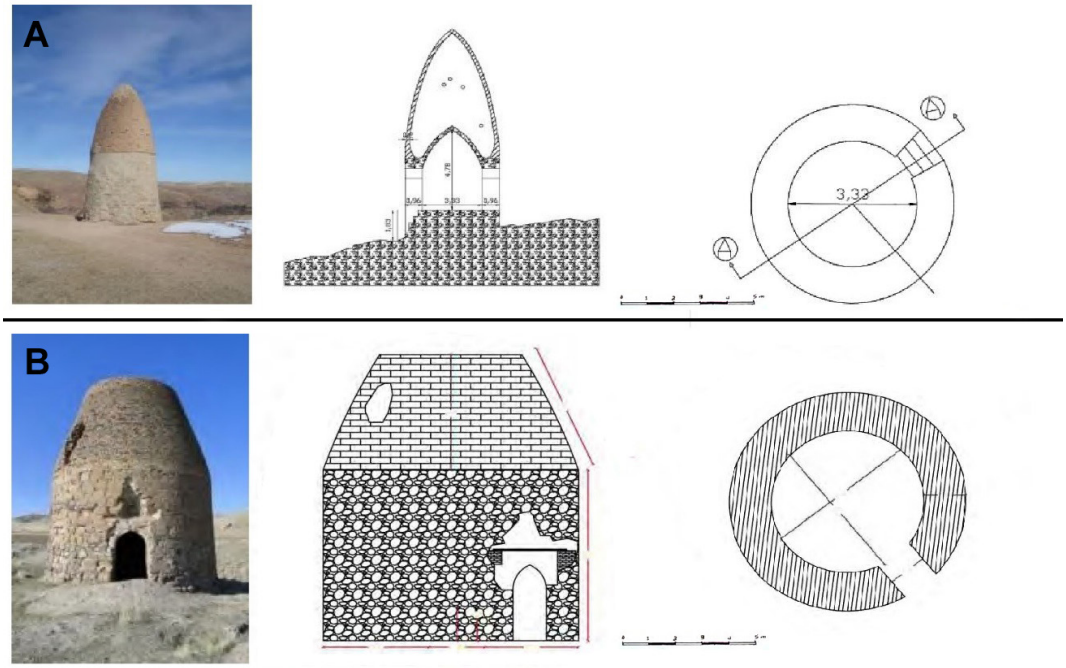



***Figure. 12:*** *A: The tower of Khoein, B: The dome of Kahriz Siah Mansour (After: Bagdeli and Torabi 2017: 51)*

**Routes of the Region in the Islamic Period**

Investigation into the ancient routes is possible through two venues. One is the textual evidence that furnishes a general picture of the region. The other is the aerial and old photos taken before the disturbances made by urban and agricultural encroachments. Nowadays, Corona satellite imagery is widely used by archeologists in tracing ancient route networks. However, the lack of access to such images from the study area severely hinders the restoration of the regional communication routes. The deficiency can be somehow mitigated if one focuses on the texts and standing architectural structures (towers). The increased importance of the Jibal region and its route networks in the Islamic centuries also had a bearing on the Garrus region, which was either directly or indirectly linked to some routes of Jibal. Early Muslim geographers have described the region and its communication routes. In his travelogue written in the 10th century AD, (Abu Dulaf 1975: 38) puts that Shiz (Takht-e Soleyman) is "a city halfway between Maragheh, Zanjan, Sohrevard and Dinevar." In his *An Historical Geography of Iran*, Barthold, quoting Al-Istakhri, states about the northern cities of the Jibal province that there were no cities to the north of Hamadan and Qazvin. In northern Hamadan a road ran from the city of Sohrevard to Zanjan, which was the most direct, but was not safe due to the presence of Kurds in Sohrevard (Barthold 1929: 261). The route was chosen as an alternative road linking Hamadan and Soltaniyeh and then Zanjan, which was shorter. Of the other contemporary routes is the Dinevar-Azerbaijan road that passes through Dinevar, Khabazan, Tal Van, Si Sar, Barzeh, etc., and is cited in *al-Masalek al-Mamalek* (Ibn Khordadbeh 1992: 121). This road definitely crossed the Garrus region.

Among the other major roads, notably in the Ilkhanid times, was the one that connected Basra and Baghdad before proceeding towards Maragheh and Tabriz through Erbil (Hawler), the highlands of Kurdistan, and the Garrus region. The road to Lesser Armenia crossed the mountainous passes of Kurdistan or Erzurum and Sivas or Van and Diyarbakir to finally reach Lajazzo port of the Gulf of Alexandretta, a major trade centre for Italian, French and Spanish merchants.

There were two major lines of communication around Garrus from which the region benefitted: the Great Khorasan Road, and the Soltaniyeh routes network. Following the demise of the Abbasids, the city of Soltaniyeh prospered and became the capital of the Ilkhanid dynasty. While this shift was generally

associated with a change in the order of the roads, the main highways majorly remained unchanged. In the early Abbasid period, roads branched off from the right and left sides of the major cities on the Great Khorasan Road leading to different parts of Iran. In the environs of Kermanshah, a road ran northwards to reach Tabriz and the cities on the littorals of the Lake Urmia. While discussing the Hajj routes during the Abbasid rule, Le Strange provides a map that shows the route in question passed through the Garrus region before proceeding towards Tabriz (Le Strange 1985: 11). In the Ilkhanid period, the rise of the city of Soltaniyeh halfway between Abhar and Zanjan prompted increased economic importance of the northwestern quadrant of present-day Iran. Hamdallah Mustawfi describes the local highways in the following order—the southern highway: to Hamadan and thence to Baghdad and Mecca; the eastern highway: to Qazvin, Varamin and Khorasan; the northern highway: through Zanjan to Ardabil and Caucasia; the western highway from Zanjan to Tabriz and Asia Minor, etc. (Mustawfi 1983: 163).

Thus, the Bijar (Garrus) region lay on the periphery of such routes as the Hamadan-Baghdad, Kermanshah-Azerbaijan, and Soltaniyeh-Baghdad roads (Figure.13). However, field observations in the course of regional surveys led, in light of the guidance towers described in this paper, to the rediscovery of an important medieval Islamic route spreading from Shiz (Takht-e Soleyman) to Soltaniyeh. Indeed, other structures such as the Qojur bridge, built in the same period, were also of great help in this regard. While no references to this road occur in written evidences, it connected the Garrus region to the Great Khorasan Road through Azerbaijan. The route was marked by monumental buildings commissioned by the Ilkhanid local governors to help guide caravans to their destinations in all weathers. The entire route stretches through points with lower elevations. Studies suggest that the reasons for this were the harsh climate and the location of the region at the highest altitude. After crossing Takht-e Soleyman, it extends for 40 km through the valleys of a permanent river (Qizil Uzan) to reach the village of Qavshoq. At this forking point, it splits into two branches, one apparently having been quite busy (judging from the higher frequency of guidance towers). One branch reaches the monumental building of Hadi Gheib at the village of Lower Qavshoq after extending for 1 km. After 7 more km towards the south, it meets the monumental building of Ashghon Baba, whence it proceeds another 15 km to reach the monumental building of Qamcheqay. Travelling for another 30 km through the middle of the valley, it takes us to the Moghanlu monumental building and finally, crossing the Gol Qeshlaq bridge, we will be able to approach Soltaniyeh. With regard to the second branch, running past the monumental buildings at Upper Qavshoq it continues north for 15 km through the river valley to reach the monumental building of Och Gonbad, and whence, after about 20 km, it meets the monumental building of Yengi Arakh. A short distance from there, it joins the first branch and the route crosses the Moghanlu monumental building. After traversing over the Gol Qeshlaq bridge, the construction of which was definitely prompted by high traffic, the route continues towards Soltaniyeh (Figure. 14).

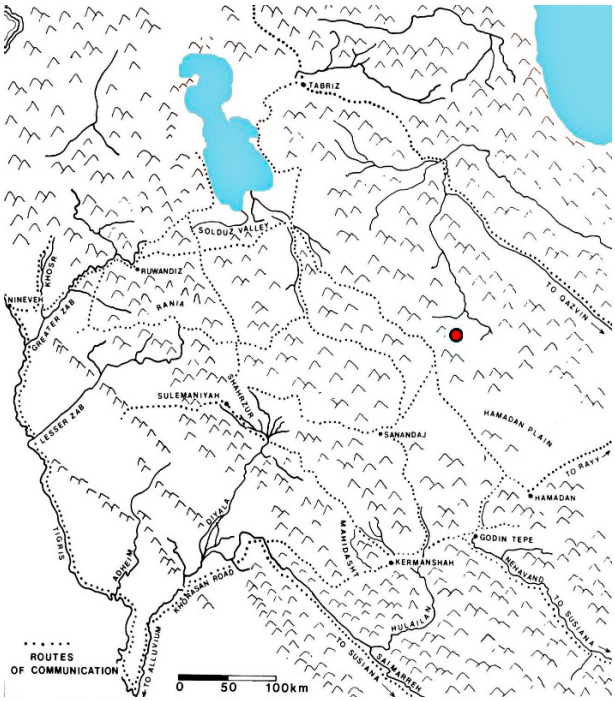



***Figure. 13:*** *Routes of northwestern and western Iran (After: Algaze, 1989: 582).*

## Discussion and Analysis

Drawing on the study of eight monumental buildings in the Bijar region, the tower of Ashghon Baba stands out in the Islamic architecture of West Iran in terms of form and structure. With its octagonal plan, a height of above 14 m, and the construction materials of bricks, stones and tiles as well as various gypsum stucco decorations, this tower along

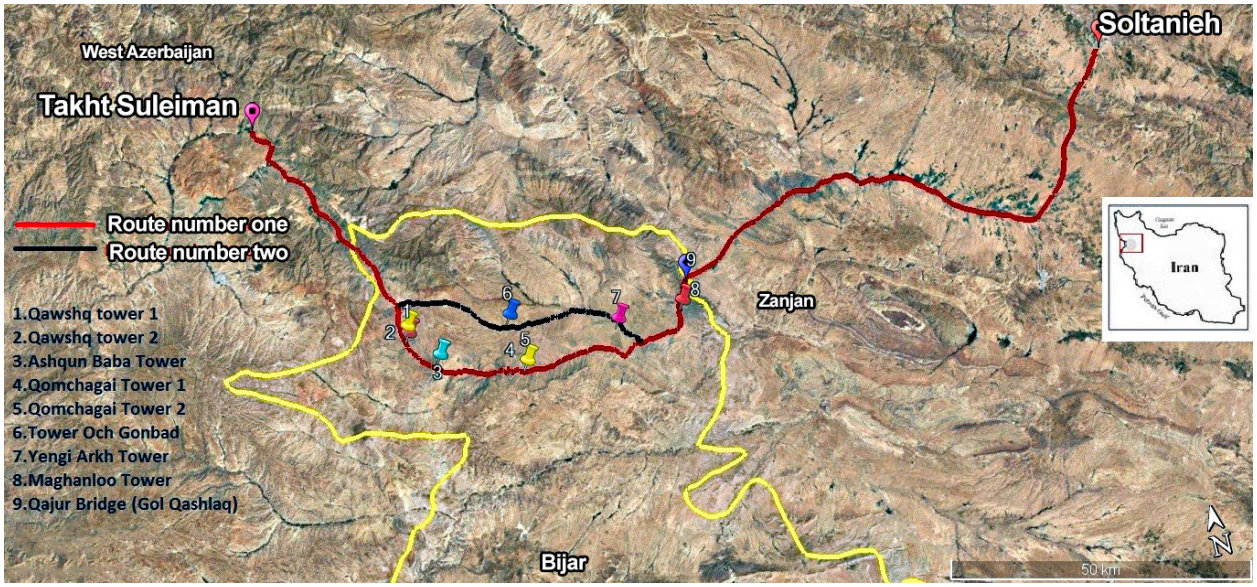



***Figure. 14:*** *Plan of the communication routes linking the considered monumental buildings (After:Google Earth, 14/04/2023)*

with the other monumental buildings considered here represent a distinct class of navigational guides from the medieval Islamic centuries. The pointed and ogival arches, internal and external blind arches of brick and gypsum, tileworks at the eaves, a detached double shell dome, a polygonal frank dome decorated with turquoise glazed tiles and bricks, and the use of muqarnases are the hallmarks of the structure. The registration files attribute its construction to the 11th century AD (Pazouki and Shadmehr 2014: 310), though one should exercise caution in this regard because the tower is in general comparable to buildings like the dome of Sheikh Borag or Chalabi Oghlu in Soltaniyeh, Imamzadeh Jafar in Qom and Imamzadeh Jafar in Isfahan, and therefore its construction can well be credited to the Ilkhanid dynasty. Yet, the other seven monumental towers feature a different architectural style. These buildings are characterized by a unique and local style with a circular plan. These towers are made of stone and saruj mortar, and indications at some of these structures suggest that their double shell domes (roofs) conceivably consisted of flagstones. They are of almost same dimensions, measuring a diameter of 4–4.5 m in the interior and 5–6 m in the exterior. The main wall is usually nearly 1 m thick. The entrance tends to be in the south or east side, and judging from the surviving instances, there was an inscription above this low entrance introducing the building or giving the date of later restorations. The interior walls in most cases are adorned with gypsum while the exterior façades were left undecorated. While a number of these towers have been dated to the Safavid period in the registration files, the impression one gets from their appearance and plan, which parallel those of the Round Tower of Maragheh (Hillenbrand 2000: 20), is that they were put up in the Ilkhanid period. Other comparanda in structure and form include the towers of Khoin and Kahriz in Zanjan province. The towers identified in the Bijar region have led to the reconstruction of a line of communication in the medieval Islamic period previously unknown to the scholars. Connecting the locations of these towers together suggests that within the boundaries of the county there existed two roads that as a major caravan route linked Takht-e Soleyman and Soltaniyeh through the Qojur bridge, a significant construction from the Ilkhanid period built on the Talwar river.

## Conclusions

The Garrus region, now largely forming the present-day Iranian province of Kurdistan, witnessed pronounced and profound political developments during the middle to late Islamic centuries. These developments, which included conflicts between ethnic and political groups, migration of Kurdish populations, the foreign invasions and bloody warfare, etc., have left impressions on the local populations' behaviours and beliefs, and ultimately on their artistic creations, including architecture. The existence in the region of a series of buildings with a domed circular plan locally known as tower or

dome, though their exact function remains unclear, could have been resulted from the impacts on the tomb architecture of political developments which emphasized the deceased's body and the construction of a tomb for it in certain periods and led to the negligence of the existing tombs in other periods. At any rate, remnants of such buildings dating from past centuries are found all across Kurdistan province, in rural areas and in different dimensions. The region's tomb towers considered here are typical examples of landmarks on communication routes. Their architectural structure and affinities of their elements, in particular the shape of the dome, the shaft, and the plinths, with related buildings both within and outside the province suggest that all the eight buildings date between the 11th to 14th centuries AD or slightly later, and have derived from the coeval architectural traditions. What is clear is the fact that these structures are designated by local residents as tower or dome, and there are no certain evidences on their exact function. However, their architectural comparisons with the buildings of the mausoleum of Sheikh Borag (Chalabi Oglu), the mausoleum of the Prophet Qeydar, and the tower of Kahriz Siah Mansour seem to suggest a similar construction date in the timespan of the 11th–14th centuries AD. Yet, this is merely a relative date, and future fieldwork including sounding and horizontal excavations will hold the key to the more precise dates and functions of the buildings in question.

On the other hand, these monumental buildings have contributed to the reconstruction of and supplemented the map of regional routes network in the medieval Islamic world, to which no references are found in the written sources. As stated earlier, thanks to the existence of two important political centres near the study area in the medieval (Ilkhanid) period, the Garrus region used to play the role of a communication route between these centres. Given the environmental conditions, the described route linked Takht-e Soleyman and Soltaniyeh through the northern quarter of the Bijar region, and therefore the caravans would use the monumental buildings placed along the route at regular intervals as navigational guides. Barring a single building of the Seljuk period with unique brick decorations, the remaining structures lack any sort of embellishments and are constructed using local materials, most notably stone which is more resilient to harsh weather conditions. Even to cross the Qizil Uzan river, which at that time had a very high water discharge, a bridge, namely Qojur (Gol Qeshlaq), was constructed. Accordingly, the route to Soltaniyeh passes through the low altitude points within the natural valleys of the region.

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