

Typology and Classification of Monumental-Burial Spaces from the Islamic Period in Maragheh (East Azerbaijan): Islamic Period Mausoleums of Maragheh

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Abstract: *Monumental-burial spaces, as components of ritual architecture, reflect the beliefs and values of the community associated with the deceased. These structures exhibit diverse architectural forms, necessitating comprehensive scientific research. In the northwest region of Iran, studies have predominantly focused on mausoleum structures such as tower tombs and square-domed structures, despite the broader diversity in their architectural designs. Archaeological evidence and historical records suggest that Maragheh, during the Islamic era, was home to a variety of ritual spaces, influenced by its multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition. This cultural diversity played a significant role in shaping the approaches to the creation of monumental-burial spaces in the city. This research, conducted through field and library-based studies using descriptive-comparative and analytical-historical methods, aims to address the following questions: 1-What are the architectural characteristics of monumental-burial spaces in Maragheh during the Islamic era? 2-Which burial architectural traditions influenced the monumental-burial spaces in Maragheh? The findings reveal that monumental-burial spaces in Maragheh can be categorized based on their structural form into two types: troglodytic structures and constructed buildings. Additionally, in terms of spatial placement, they are divided into two groups: surface-level spaces (visible) and subsurface spaces (concealed). The findings also indicate that the Mongol Ilkhanid*

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period witnessed the greatest diversity in architectural structures and the spatial arrangement of these spaces. During this time, the ritual-religious framework of Maragheh's society underwent significant political and religious transformations. These changes played a pivotal role in shaping the diverse architectural styles of the mausoleums from this period.

Keywords: *Maragheh, monumental-burial spaces, typology, Islamic era.*

1-Introduction

Graves and burials are among the most significant archaeological discoveries, offering invaluable insights into the spiritual dimensions of human cultures. A notable form of burial involves placing the deceased within mausoleum structures. These architectural creations not only served as final resting places but also functioned as monumental space out of respect and reverence for the deceased; such spaces were created as either troglodytic structures or constructed buildings in various sizes. The dimensions of these mausoleums often reflected the social and religious status of the deceased.

The origins of burial spaces in northwest Iran trace back to the Neolithic and Chalcolithic Ages. Notable examples of human burials have been uncovered at archaeological sites such as Hajji Firuz and Dalma Tepe. By the Bronze Age, particularly during the Middle and Late phases, the development of cemeteries—or monumental-burial spaces—became more organized and systematic. In later periods, cemeteries featuring diverse structures and monumental sites, such as Shahr-e Yeri, came into existence. The architectural variety of tombs in this region reflects the beliefs and cultural practices of its communities. This diversity resulted in a wide array of tomb forms, including cromlechs, kurgans¹, stone-enclosure structures, megalithic structures, pits² and several other types.

With the advent of Islam, burial traditions underwent significant changes. The most prominent features of these changes included the absence of objects placed in graves, the use of simple pits³ and positioning the deceased's face toward the Qibla. While during the early Islamic period, mausoleums were built over the graves of certain companions and prominent figures of the Islamic community, such as Harun al-Rashid⁴, the predominant burial tradition was burying within pits. Starting from the 4th century AH

¹ Farshid Iravani Ghadim and Soleyman Mamizadeh Gighlu, *Typology and Introducing the Iron Age Ceramics of Jafar Abad Kurgan's in Khoda Afarin Area (The First Excavation)*, 2013.

² Reza Rezalou and Yahya Ayremlou, *Iron Age Graves I, Gilvan Khalkhal Cemetery*, 2017.

³ Saeid Sattarnezhad and Tayebhe Hoseinpoor Derakhshesh, *An Analysis of the Stones of the Islamic Era of Onar Meshkinshahr Cemetery (Northwest Iran)*, 2021, p. 29.

⁴ Mehdi Ghoravi, *Mausoleums in the Scope of Iranian Culture*, 1997, pp. 100–101.

(913–1010 CE), the creation of mausoleums gradually gained prominence⁵. In the Seljuk and Ilkhanid eras, numerous monumental-mausoleum spaces were erected in the northwestern Iran⁶. However, most studies have focused on surface-level, constructed mausoleums—such as tower tombs and domed-square buildings—leaving other types of monumental-burial monuments in the region relatively understudied. Archaeological excavations and surveys of some Islamic-era mausoleums in the Maragheh county have provided a solid foundation for studying such ritual-burial spaces. This research is particularly significant since Maragheh served as the administrative center during the Mongol Ilkhanid period, which facilitated the arrival of groups with non-Islamic beliefs into the region. Consequently, the importance of this study becomes evident. Chronologically, the research focuses on the Islamic period, while its geographical boundaries are confined to Maragheh. Based on archaeological surveys conducted by the first author, approximately 10 sites in Maragheh were surveyed and excavated as part of the archaeological investigations. Following this, the findings were examined through library-based research, employing a descriptive-comparative and analytical-historical methodology. This study seeks to address the following questions: 1-What characterizes the architectural style of monumental-burial spaces from the Islamic period in Maragheh, and which architectural traditions does it adhere to? 2-How can the monumental-burial spaces of the Islamic period in Maragheh be categorized in terms of type and form?

2-Research Background

The study of burial or mausoleum spaces in northwestern Iran can be divided into two time periods: pre-Islamic and post-Islamic. Research to date has studied various pre-Islamic cemeteries in this region, including Khanqah Cemetery in Khalkhal⁷, the megalithic and kurgan graves in Ardabil Province (Hesariy & Aliyari, 2012), Khorramabad in Meshginshahr⁸, the Masjed Kabud of Tabriz, Sarand-Daghdaghan in Heris, Jafarabad in Khoda Afarin⁹, and others. The chronology of these cemeteries predominantly spans from the Middle Bronze Age to Iron Age I and II. During the Islamic era, tomb structures in the Azerbaijan of Iran have been studied by both Iranian and international scholars, including prominent figures such as Ismail Dibaj,

⁵ Richard Ettinghausen, Oleg Grabar, and Marilyn Jenkins-Madina, *Islamic Art and Architecture 650-1250*, 2003, pp. 129–130.

⁶ Abbas Daneshvari, *A Stylistic and Iconographic Study of the Persian Tomb Towers of the Seljuk Period*, 1977; Mohammad Mehdi Oghabi, *Encyclopedia of Historical Monuments in the Islamic Period*, 1997.

⁷ Rezaei and Ayremilou, *Iron Age Graves I, Gilvan Khalkhal Cemetery*, 2017.

⁸ Reza Rezaei, *The Final Report of the First Season of Excavation of Khoram Abad Cemetery*, 2013.

⁹ Iravani Ghadim and Mamizadeh Giglu, *Typology and Introducing the Iron Age Ceramics of Jafar Abad Kurgan's in Khoda Afarin Area (The First Excavation)*, 2013.

Mohammad Yousef Kiani, Mohammad Karim Pirnia, Abbas Daneshvari, Arthur Pope, Blair and Bloom, Hillenbrand, and others.

Within the written sources from the Islamic era, several monumental-burial structures in Maragheh are mentioned, including the Mausoleums of Amid al-Din Abu al-Fazail Sa'id ibn Muhammad Baghdadi¹⁰, Muhyi al-Din Muhammad ibn al-'Arabi al-Ta'i al-Hatami¹¹, Muhyi al-Din Maghrebi¹², 'Ala al-Din Arslan ibn Korpe Seljuqi¹³, and Caliph Al-Mustarshid Billah, the 29th Abbasid caliph¹⁴. Qajar-period travelogues also offer brief descriptions of some tomb structures, such as the Kabud Mausoleum Tower¹⁵ (De Morgan, 1896) and the Gonbad-e Sorkh¹⁶. In modern times, various researchers have studied the burial monuments of Maragheh, including André Godard¹⁷, Blair and Bloom¹⁸ (Kiani 2006) Mohammad Yusef Kiani¹⁹ Ismail Dibaj²⁰ and others.

Closer analysis of these studies reveals that the research has predominantly focused on surface-level mausoleum buildings, such as Kabud Tower-Tomb, Modavar Tower, Gonbad-e Sorkh, Gonbad-e Ghafariyah, and Guy Burj (Juy Bush). However, an entire category of subsurface monumental-burial structures that remains unexplored. Additionally, rock-carved burial structures have been largely overlooked in scholarly work. Notably, a segment of burial traditions during the Islamic Middle Ages, particularly the Ilkhanid period, involved rock-cut burial structures. This study, therefore, stands as the first attempt to classify and categorize the monumental-burial spaces of Maragheh. It also delves into the origins and factors driving the development of these architectural traditions within the region.

3-Description and Analysis

Maragheh is situated in northwestern Iran, on the southern slopes of the Sahand volcanic mountain range in East Azerbaijan Province. Today, the county is divided into two districts: the central district and Saraju. However, during the Islamic Middle Ages, the county of Maragheh was classified as

¹⁰ Kamāl al-Dīn ibn al-Fuwaṭī, *Majmaol Al-Adab Fi Mojam Alalqab*, 1995, p. 222.

¹¹ Abu Abdollah Ibn Arabi, *A Brief History of the State*, 1985, p. 3.

¹² Muḥammad Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, *Ilkhani Tansukhnameh*, 1989, p. 20.

¹³ Kamāl al-Dīn ibn al-Fuwaṭī, *Majmaol Al-Adab Fi Mojam Alalqab*, 1995, p. 343.

¹⁴ Nakhchivani Hindushah, *Tajrib Al-Salaf*, 1978, p. 296.

¹⁵ Jacques de Morgan, *Mission Scientifique En Perse*, 1896.

¹⁶ James Justinian Morier, *A Second Journey through Persia, Armenia, and Asia Minor, to Constantinople, between the Years 1810 and 1816 (Etc.)*, 1818; Robert Byron, *The Road to Oxiana*, 2007, p. 58.

¹⁷ Andre Godard, *The Art of Iran*, Frederick A. Praeger, 1965.

¹⁸ Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom, *The Art and Architecture of Islam, 1250–1800*, 1996.

¹⁹ Mahmmad Yusuf Kiani, *Iranian Architecture in the Islamic Period*, 2006.

²⁰ Ismail Dibaj, *Historical Monuments and Monuments of Azerbaijan*, 1967.

part of the fourth²¹ and fifth province²². In that period, the county of Maragheh included regions such as Saraju, Banajun, Dizjerud, Gavidul, Hashtrud, Behestan, Anguran, and Qezel Ozan. Its tuman (a town consisting of one hundred villages) encompassed Maragheh, Basui, Dehkhwarqan, and Nilan²³. Topographically, Maragheh consists of both mountainous and plain regions. Its position on the southern slopes of the volcanic Sahand mountain range has led to the formation of easily workable tuff stones (Figure 1). Four main rivers flow through this county: Sufi Chay, Mordi Chay, Leylan Chay, and Quri Chay. Around these rivers, sites from various cultural periods have developed over time. Historians and geographers of the Islamic era frequently described Maragheh as situated beside the Sufi Chay River (also known as Safi Rud) and surrounded by lush gardens²⁴. Today, the city remains surrounded by gardens and enjoys a moderate climate. These favorable natural conditions attracted the attention of early Ilkhanid rulers, resulting in the construction of numerous monuments from that era, which still endure in Maragheh²⁵. These historical and cultural elements provide a rich foundation for various scientific studies.



Fig. 1 The Geographical Location of Maragheh (Authors, 2022)

²¹ Hamdallah Mustawfi, *Nuzhat Al-Qulub*, 1975, p. 99.

²² Zakaria Ibn Mohammad Ibn Mahmoud Qazvini, *Athār Al-Bilād Wa-Akhhbār al-'Ibād*, 1994, p. 641.

²³ Hamdallah Mustawfi, *Nuzhat Al-Qulub*, 1975, pp. 99–100.

²⁴ Shahab al-Din Yaqt Hamavi, *Mu'jam al-Buldan*, 1979, p. 172; Muḥammad Abū'l-Qāsim Ibn Hawqal, *Ibn Hawqal's Travelogue (Surat al-Arz)*, 1987, p. 335.

²⁵ Sa'ed Sattarnezhad, Mohammad Rahmatpour, and Javad Jaleh Aghdam, Preliminary Report of Archaeological Excavation of Kaboud - Circular Site of Maragheh (East Azerbaijan, Iran), 2021, p. 64.

4-Typology of Monumental-Burial Spaces

The monumental-burial spaces of the Islamic era in Maragheh are categorized into two primary types based on their structural and physical characteristics: troglodytic spaces (dakhme or rock-cut tombs) and constructed buildings.

Troglodytic spaces are divided into: Subsurface troglodytic spaces, Surface-level troglodytic spaces. Constructed buildings are classified as: Surface-level constructed buildings and subsurface constructed buildings (Figure 2). Each type of structure exhibits a distinct architectural style, setting it apart from other categories.

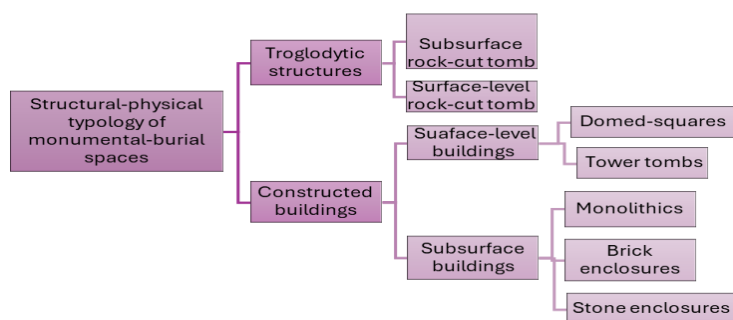


Fig. 2 Structural-Physical Typology of Monumental-Burial Spaces in Maragheh during the Islamic Era

4-1-Troglodytic Monumental-Burial Structures

Troglodytic monumental-burial structures, commonly known as rock-cut tombs, are chamber-like spaces hewn into the earth or rock formations. Influenced by the beliefs of the deceased's community, these structures can be categorized into two types: subsurface and surface-level troglodytic structures. Surface-level structures are typically carved into cliff slopes. Access to these spaces may be achieved via rock-cut stairways, such as the Goyjeh Qaleh rock-cut tomb in Maragheh²⁶, or without stairs, requiring the use of ropes for entry. An example of the latter is the Fakhrika rock-cut tomb in Mahabad, which lacks steps and is carved into a cliff slope. The floors of these spaces featured burial pits where bodies were placed, later covered with stone slabs. The edges of the pits were carefully carved to ensure the slabs fit securely. The use of such spaces in northwestern Iran dates back at least to the Iron Age II and III. Examples of rock-cut tombs from this period have been discovered at sites such as Esmail Aqa²⁷, Goyjeh

²⁶ Wolfram Kleiss, *Planaufnahmen Urartaischer Burgen In Iranisch Azarbaijan Im Jahre 1972, 1973.*

²⁷ Yildiz Van Hulsteyn, *Urartian Built and Rock-Cut Tombs*, 1981.

Qaleh in Maragheh²⁸, Fakhrika in Mahabad, Qabirli Kohul in Ajabshir, and other areas. During the Islamic era, limited research and knowledge of burial traditions resulted in a poor understanding of troglodytic monumental-burial structures (dakhme). However, historical sources from the period indicate that the construction of rock-cut tombs was a notable burial tradition in Islamic territories, particularly during the Ilkhanid era in Iran²⁹. Specific burial traditions during this time often involved troglodytic structures and subsurface burial buildings, yet these traditions have received little attention due to their obscurity. As a result, prior to this study, information on the architectural design and burial methods of these structures remained highly fragmented and incomplete.

4-1-1-Subsurface Troglodytic Burial Structures

These troglodytic structures have been carved out of the earth and rock formations, entirely concealed beneath the surface. Access to them is possible only through stairways or sloping corridors. The interior spaces of these tombs have been carved in square shapes and, in some cases, circular forms. The walls are plain, devoid of decorative or functional elements. Preliminary surveys by the first author in Maragheh identified examples of such tombs at the Durbaduran (Dobaradaran) and Pirhashem sites. The Pirhashem site, located in the village of Varju'i (Vara'u'i) near Maragheh, served as a ritual-ceremonial space. Evidence of an Ilkhanid-era mihrab (prayer niche)³⁰ and several subsurface troglodytic graves have been preserved within this site. The rock-cut tombs at the Pirhashem site were carved into limestone bedrock. Unfortunately, these tombs have been completely looted by illegal excavators, leaving no information about burial traditions. However, the general layout of these burial spaces consists of chamber-like structures carved into the rock bed. It appears that access to the chambers was provided through sloping corridors.

Another example of such tombs was identified at the Durbaduran site, approximately 500 meters to the north and northeast of the Maragheh Observatory mound. This subsurface rock-cut tomb was carved into limestone bedrock and features a subsurface chamber accessed via hewn stairs. The tomb includes burial platforms on the northern and southern walls, with its entrance facing east. The interior walls are plain and undecorated; however, a stone coating was applied to the walls, particularly around the entrance. Similar coatings have been observed on the walls of the Ilkhanid-

²⁸ Wolfram Kleiss, *Planaufnahmen Urartaischer Burgen In Iranisch Azarbaidjan Im Jahre 1972, 1973*; Saeid Sattarnejad, Samad Parvin, and Maryam Mastalizadeh, *Stylistic Study of Gowijeh Qaleh's Rockcut Tomb from Maragheh*, 2020.

²⁹ Abu Soleiman Banakati, *Tarikh Banakti, the First Shrine of Al-Albab in the Introduction of Histories and Genealogy*, 1969, p. 425.

³⁰ Farhad Pourianzhad, Saeid Sattarnejad, and Samad Parvin, *Buddhist Remains from Times of Il-Khanate in North-Western Iran*, 2023.

era troglodytic sanctuary at the Imamzadeh Masum of Varju'i³¹. These coatings, consisting of a stone-like layer, covered the walls entirely and served to enhance the structural integrity of the space. In these rock-cut tombs, bodies were likely placed on stone platforms, and after the burial ceremonies, the entrances were sealed with carved stone slabs. Finally, the corridors leading to the tombs were completely filled with soil from the surrounding area. These rock-cut tombs are located directly beneath the surface, remaining entirely concealed (Figure 3). The origins of subsurface burial troglodytic architecture and the tradition of creating Islamic-era subsurface rock-cut tombs in Maragheh appear to date back to the Ilkhanid period³². These tombs were influenced by burial architectural traditions from northern China and Mongolia, where similar subsurface rock-carved tombs have been preserved.

4-1-2- Surface Troglodytic Burial Structures

Another type of troglodytic burial space takes the form of rock-cut tombs, intricately carved into mountain slopes or cliffs. These structures are highly visible from great distances. Similar examples of such troglodytic sites were prevalent during the Iron Age, particularly within the Urartian and Mannean cultures of northwestern Iran³³. However, in the Islamic period, burial within troglodytic rock-cut tombs emerged as a novel tradition, indicating the introduction of a new cultural influence and non-Islamic beliefs in the region. Notable examples of surface-level rock-cut tombs have been identified on the western slope of Observatory mound, dating back to the Ilkhanid period. The rock-cut tombs on Khajeh Nasir al-Din Observatory mound are designed as independent chambers with rectangular plans, featuring semi-circularly carved corners. The floors of these chambers contain burial pits, which were covered with a stone slab after the body was placed inside. These spaces are devoid of decorative elements or intricate architectural features, with the walls carved in a simple manner. The entrances of all the tombs face westward, toward the setting sun, while the burial pits are oriented along an east-west axis (Figure 3). Islamic-era written sources mention the burial of adherents of Christianity in these tombs³⁴. As a result, the local population remained well-acquainted with these burial spaces and the adjacent troglodytic church up until the Qajar period. Similar

³¹ Mehdi Razani and Yaser Hamzavi, *Characterization of Historic Mortar from the Architectural Decoration and Plaster of Rocky Temple of Verjuy in Maragheh, Iran*, 2018.

³² Rašīd-ad-Dīn Faḍlallāh Hamadani, *Jamī' al-Tawarikh*, 1994, p. 1053.

³³ Yildiz Van Hulsteyn, *Urartian Built and Rock-Cut Tombs*, 1981.

³⁴ Samuel Graham Wilson, *Persian Life and Customs* Student Missionary Campaign Library, 1895, p. 78.

examples of such rock-cut tombs have been discovered around the troglodytic churches of Cappadocia, Turkey³⁵.



Fig. 3 Right image: Subsurface rock-cut tomb at the Pir-Hasham site (Authors, 2022); Left image: Rock-cut tomb at Maragheh Observatory mound (Authors, 2022)

4-2- Monumental-Burial constructed buildings

These structures represent the most prevalent type of burial-monumental buildings in the region. The mausoleum in question was constructed using locally sourced materials such as hewn stone (Sinjan), brick, and lime mortar. Based on the materials used in their construction, these structures can be categorized into three groups: 1) Monolithic structures, 2) brick enclosure structures, and 3) Composite structures. The most notable examples of surface-level constructed monumental-burial buildings are tower tombs and domed-square mausoleums. Extensive research has been conducted on these monuments, providing a relatively comprehensive understanding of their architectural features. Constructed monumental-burial buildings are classified into two types based on their placement: surface-level structures and subsurface structures. The choice of placement was influenced by the beliefs and social status of the deceased. Some of these structures were constructed entirely underground, and after the burial ceremony, the tomb was fully covered with soil.

Mausoleum buildings account for the majority of such structures. In many villages, surface-level built mausoleums are locally known by names such as 'Imamzadeh,' 'Olia,' and 'Ojagh.' Examples include the Olia or Imamzadeh structures in the villages of Ahagh, Sarujieh, and Qarababa in the city of Khodajoo. These spaces are held in high spiritual regard by the local communities.

³⁵ Fatma Gül Öztürk, *A Comparative Architectural Investigation of the Middle Byzantine Courtyard Complexes in Açıksaray–Cappadocia: Questions of Monastic and Secular Settlement*, 2010, p. 319.

4-2-1-Surface-Level Burial Structures

Surface-Level Burial Structures are buildings erected above ground, directly over graves. This distinctive feature has led to their architectural details being documented in Islamic-era written sources, particularly from the Qajar period³⁶. The most significant examples of such mausoleums in Islamic architectural studies are referred to as "āramgāh." These structures are categorized based on their design and construction into two types: tower tombs and domed-square mausoleums. The architectural design of these structures, despite their burial nature, is well known to the local population. Some Ilkhanid-era mausoleums are located within cemeteries. Examples include the Imamzadeh of Sheikh Jan village, Khormazard, Ahagh, Aqajari, and Varju'i. These sites served as ritual-burial spaces, around which cemeteries gradually emerged. In this context, the graves surrounding these mausoleums share a deep spiritual connection. The mausoleums belonged to spiritual or sectarian leaders, often referred to as 'Sheikh' or 'Pir,' such as the Imamzadeh of Sheikh Jan village or the Imamzadeh Pir-Hashem of Varju'i village. Spiritual-religious leaders were buried within these mausoleums after their passing. In subsequent periods, their followers were also buried nearby, gradually forming cemeteries. Examples include the cemeteries of Pir Avhad al-Din Maraghi, Sheikh Baba, Imamzadeh Masoum, Sheikh Jan, and Aqajari. These cemeteries feature gravestones of various shapes and decorative styles, examples of which can still be observed across many regions of Iranian Azerbaijan. In the author's first surveys, approximately 15 surface-level mausoleums were identified in Maragheh. Over time, some of these structures have been partially or entirely destroyed due to natural and human factors, leaving behind only traces. However, several of these mausoleums have preserved their sacred essence over the years and continue to hold ritual significance for the local community.

4-2-1-1-Tower tomb

A tower tomb is a building built over a grave, typically with a circular plan, although some, like the Gonbad-e Kabud in Maragheh, feature a polygonal cylindrical design. Archaeological evidence and Islamic-era written sources suggest that the construction of mausoleums in Maragheh dates back to at least 530 AH (1135–1136 CE). The earliest example from the Seljuk Atabegs period was built over the grave of al-Mustarshid Billah, the 29th Abbasid caliph (Khwandmir, 1/2001: 181). While limited information exists about the architectural features of this site, some Ilkhanid-era sources reference the location of this mausoleum. The Borj-e Modavar Tower (563 AH/1167-1168 CE), Kabud Tamb Tower (593 AH), and the Goy Borj Tower (Ilkhanid?) are notable examples of tower tombs in Maragheh. These tower

³⁶ Morier, *A Second Journey through Persia, Armenia, and Asia Minor, to Constantinople, between the Years 1810 and 1816*, 1816; Byron, *The Road to Oxiana*, 2007, p. 58.

tombs can be categorized based on their plans into two types: circular and polygonal. Differences also exist in the accessibility of their basements (Sardab). For instance, the basement of the Kabud Tower tomb is located below ground level and accessed via a stone staircase, whereas the basement of the Borj-e Modavar Tower, like those of tower tombs No. 3 and 4 (discovered during archaeological excavations), is at the same level with the surrounding ground and does not require stairs for access (see Figure 4). Since the burial nature of many of these structures remains uncertain, during the Qajar period, people—lacking sufficient knowledge of regional history—mistakenly attributed them to Mongol rulers. For example, the Kabud Tower tomb was erroneously identified as the tomb of Hulagu Khan's mother, while Gonbad-e Sorkh was recorded as the grave of Hulagu Khan or his vizier. In the villages of Khormazard and Sheikh Jan, remnants of such mausoleums can still be found. Although the main structures have been largely destroyed over time, evidence of their overall architectural design remains intact.

4-2-1-2-Square-Domed Constructed Mausoleums

Square-domed mausoleum buildings and their derivatives have long been among the most esteemed types of monumental-burial spaces in Iran, persisting from at least the 4th century AH (913–1010 CE) into modern times. Among these, Gonbad-e-Sorkh stands out as one of the region's most prominent examples. It is recognized as the oldest surviving constructed square-domed mausoleum in Iranian Azerbaijan region. Historically, the mausoleum was situated along the Maragheh-Tabriz route, near the city gates. During the Ilkhanid period, a cemetery developed in this area, eventually encompassing the dome within its boundaries. Gonbad-e-Sorkh is celebrated for its exceptional brickwork, which features a rich variety of intricate motifs. The decorative brickwork on the facade of the structure's entrance is notably akin to that of the tomb of Iz al-Din Kaykawus in Sivas, Turkey³⁷. After the Seljuk period, square-domed mausoleums continued to evolve in Maragheh. One notable example from the Ilkhanid era is the Gonbad-e Ghafariyeh. Like the Gonbad-e-Sorkh, it was situated near the city gate. Its decorations were a blend of brickwork and mosaic tiles, and the building has been built using brick and hewn stone. Within the southern wall of the structure, a stuccoed mihrab is featured. This tomb was built during the reign of Abu Sa'id Bahadur Khan, the Ilkhanid ruler³⁸. The domed mausoleum of Mir Aghalar belonging to the Zandieh era and the mausoleum of Sadr Kabir are notable examples of domed mausoleum structures in Maragheh (Figure 4). The square-domed mausoleums of the later periods are characterized by simpler decorations compared to those from the Seljuk and

³⁷ Richard Piran McClary, *Brick Muqarnas on Rûm Saljuq Buildings - The Introduction of an Iranian Decorative Technique into the Architecture of Anatolia*, 2014, p. 8.

³⁸ Andre Godard, *Athar-e Iran: Annales Du Service Archeologique de l'Iran*, 1992.

Ilkhanid eras. A significant feature of the mausoleum structures within Maragheh is their integration into educational environments (madrasas). This strategic placement has greatly contributed to their preservation, protecting them from extensive damage. For instance, mausoleums such as the Gonbad-e-Sorkh, Gonbad-e Kabud, Gonbad-e Modavar, and Gonbad-e Ghafariyeh were located within the courtyards of madrasas (Islamic schools) and have remained relatively well-preserved. In contrast, the Göy Tower Tomb, positioned outside the educational spaces, was completely destroyed.

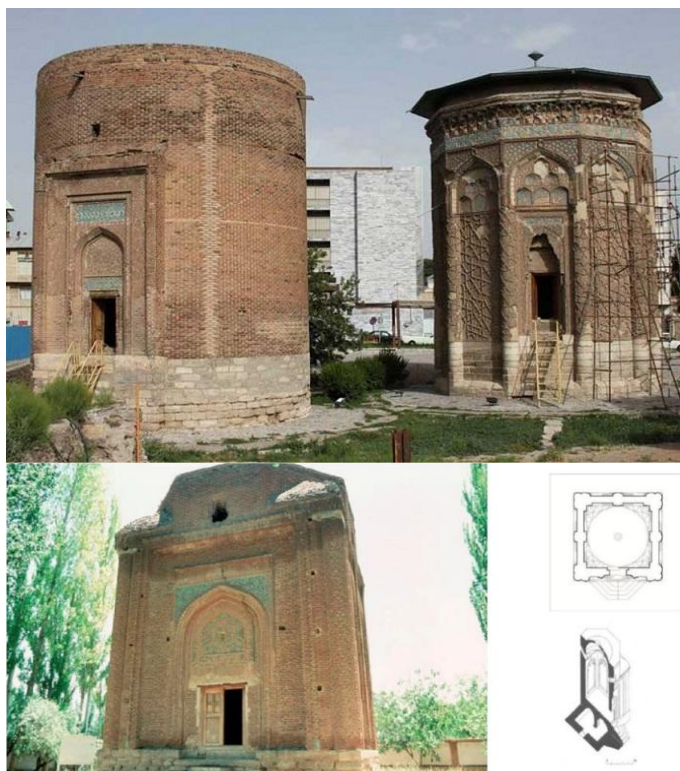


Fig. 4 Examples of square-domed mausoleum structures and tower tombs in Maragheh³⁹

4-2-2-Subsurface Constructed Buildings

These structures have been constructed below ground level. Their construction typically utilizes bricks and hewn stones. Fully buried beneath the surface, these graves are covered by a layer of soil. Examples of such

³⁹ Saeed Sattarnaejad and Samad Parvin, *Manifestation of Islamic Decorative Arts in the Architecture of Gonbad-e-Kabood and Gonbad-e-Ghaffariyeh*, 2019; Saeid Sattarnezhad, Samad Parvin, and Elham Hendiani, *The Symbolism of Swastika in the Gonbad-e-Sorkh Tomb*, 2020.

graves have been uncovered during excavations at the Aghalar Cemetery and the Dorbaduran site. The Aghalar Cemetery was one of the main and largest cemeteries of the Islamic era in the city of Maragheh. Based on the inscription on the Gonbad-e-Sorkh, its use as a burial site dates back to the year 542 AH (1147–1148 CE). Burial activities continued intermittently in this cemetery until the late Pahlavi II era. The identified mausoleums in this cemetery exhibit architectural forms such as monolithic, brick enclosure and stone enclosure.

4-2-2-1-Brick enclosures

Brick enclosure graves also known as entirely brick-constructed structures, were rectangular in shape and built into the ground. These graves consisted of four brick-lined walls, with bricks of varying sizes—most commonly measuring 5×20×20 cm—secured with mud mortar. The average dimensions of the graves were a length of 160 cm, a height of 74 cm, and a width of 36 to 40 cm. The bricks were well-fired, with one featuring decorative embellishments. The graves were sealed with stone slab coverings. Within one of the graves, four distinct burial layers were discovered, highlighting that burials were performed intermittently, as in other grave types. Examples of these graves have been unearthed at the Dorbaduran and Aghalar sites, and they are thought to date back to the Ilkhanid period and beyond (Figure 5).



Fig. 5 An example of brick-enclosure graves

4-2-2-2-Monolithic Graves

These graves were constructed as four-walled using monolithic limestone blocks. The limestone slabs, finely hewn and measuring approximately 20 to 30 cm in thickness, were carefully crafted. The dimensions of the stones matched the graves, with an average length of 200 cm and a height of 100 cm. After a body was interred, a hewn stone slab was placed on top as a cover. The presence of these covers suggests that multiple burials were conducted within the same grave over time. For example,

excavations at the Aghalar Cemetery documented and recorded at least three distinct burial layers within a single grave. Also, examples of these graves have also been discovered during illicit excavations at the Dorbaduran and Pir-Hashem sites. While the graves are oriented in an east–west direction, the burials within them are positioned in varying orientations. The alignment of the skulls shows no consistent standard; however, in some cases, the skeletons were found facing the Qibla. These graves are entirely subsurface, with no visible traces on the ground’s surface (Figure 6).

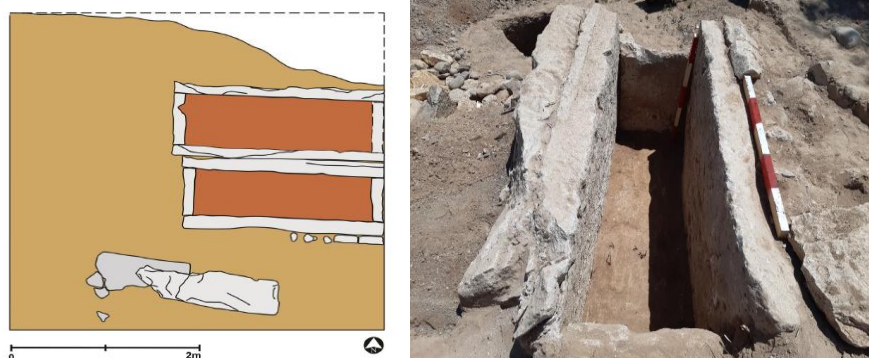


Fig. 6 An example of monolithic graves in Maragheh

4-2-2-3-Stone Enclosure Graves

These graves are rectangular in shape and were constructed below ground. They feature four walls made of hewn stones. The stones used in their construction measure approximately 222 cm in length (aligned east–west) and stand about 1 meter tall from the base to the edge. Carefully hewn, the stones are stacked using a dry-stone technique, without the use of mortar. Despite this, the walls maintain a relatively even alignment. The materials for these grave structures are sedimentary stones sourced from the surrounding areas of Maragheh. Many of these stones are repurposed from the plinths of historical buildings within the city. The graves are aligned in an east–west direction, with the remains within them arranged in a disorganized manner. One of the most notable examples of these graves was uncovered during the excavations at the Aghalar Cemetery (Figure 7). Although parts of the grave have been damaged, the northern wall remains intact. This grave is constructed as a dry-stone enclosure, with the body placed on a platform. The face of the body is oriented northward and covered with a layer of soil. It is believed that the grave featured a platform, and its opening was sealed with a stone slab. Based on this design, this grave appears to belong to the category of graves that facilitated repeated burials over time.



Fig. 7 An example of stone enclosure graves

5-Discussion

The monumental-burial spaces of the Islamic era in Maragheh exhibit remarkable structural diversity. Recent studies highlight that the most significant variety can be observed in the burial spaces of the Ilkhanid period, which is considered the most pivotal political and cultural era in Maragheh's history. During this time, the arrival of the Mongol Ilkhanids and designation of Maragheh as a governing center spurred significant urban and scientific advancements in the city. The influx of groups with diverse religious beliefs—such as Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism—introduced profound changes to Maragheh's political and religious framework. According to written sources from the Islamic era, during the Ilkhanid period, Maragheh was characterized by notable political and religious diversity. Adherents of religions such as Islam (Shia and Sunni), Buddhism, Christianity, and even Judaism established their own ceremonial and worship spaces. This diversity of beliefs within the city contributed to the development of a wide array of burial spaces. Some of these burial sites closely adhered to the architectural traditions of burial found in northern China and Mongolia. For instance, the subsurface mausoleums identified in sites like the Observatory mound, Pirhasham, and Dourbadouran reveal clear influences from these traditions. Similarly, sub-surface rock cut tombs of comparable types have been documented in the regions of Turfan, China, and Mongolia. These mausoleums were created into the ground, accessible solely through stairs or inclined pathways leading to the burial chambers. Inside, two platforms were constructed along the walls, serving as sites for burials. This burial tradition appears to have been customary in the subsurface tombs of Dourbadouran and Pirhasham, as well. Thus, the tradition of mausoleum construction can be traced back to Mongolian origins, gaining prominence in Maragheh following the arrival of the Mongol Ilkhanids, particularly in the early period

of their rule⁴⁰. Historical Islamic sources also reference the burial of notable Ilkhanid figures, such as Hulagu Khan, within a rock-cut tomb located in the Azerbaijan region⁴¹. During the early period, when the Ilkhanid khans had not yet converted to Islam, they were buried in the subsurface rock-cut tomb after their deaths. This tradition continued until Ghazan Khan embraced Islam. Following this transition, the tradition of constructing prominent, surface level mausoleums (*āramgāh*) became widespread. Ilkhanid rulers, such as Ghazan Khan in Shanb, Tabriz, and Sultan Mohammad Khodabandeh in Soltaniyeh, Zanzan, commissioned magnificent mausoleums for themselves. Constructed subsurface mausoleums represent another category of burial structures in Maragheh. Architecturally, these mausoleums differ from troglodytic subsurface mausoleums. They are constructed as small chambers made of brick or stone and situated below ground level. Examples of such tombs have been identified in the Dourbadouran site near Observatory mound⁴². In terms of architectural design, these mausoleums show striking similarities to those found in the Turfan region of China, which are associated with Uyghur culture (Figure 8). The mausoleums in these regions were constructed as brick enclosures beneath the ground's surface. Following the migration of a group of Uyghurs to the Azerbaijan region during the Ilkhanid period⁴³, it seems that they introduced some of their burial traditions to this region. These graves are situated near the Observatory mound. According to Islamic-era written sources, Uyghur scholars were actively engaged in scientific endeavors at this observatory⁴⁴. Consequently, the origins of the constructed subsurface mausoleums from the Ilkhanid period in Maragheh can be traced back to regions in northern China and Mongolia.

⁴⁰ Hamadani, *Jami' al-Tawarikh*, 1994, p. 1053.

⁴¹ Banākati, *Tarikh Banakti, the First Shrine of Al-Albab in the Introduction of Histories and Genealogy*, 1969, p. 425.

⁴² Saeid Sattarnezhad, Behrouz Omrani, Hossein Naseri-Someeh, and Seyed Mehdi Hosseininiya, *Study and Classification of Ritual-Religious Rock Architecture in the County of Maragheh*, 2020.

⁴³ Roxann Prazniak, *Ilkhanid Buddhism: Traces of a Passage in Eurasian History*, 2014, p. 664.

⁴⁴ Kamāl al-Dīn ibn al - Fuwaṭī, *Majmaol Al-Adab Fi Mojam Alalqab*, 1995, p. 367.

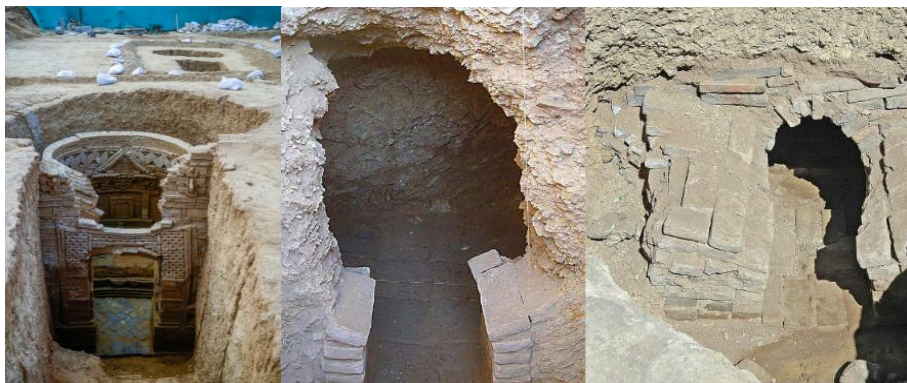


Fig. 8 An example of Uyghur brick enclosure mausoleums in Mongolia

Constructed square-domed mausoleums and tower tombs are among the most remarkable examples of burial spaces in this region. The construction and expansion of these structures flourished in Maragheh during the Seljuk and Ilkhanid periods. Scholars have proposed various theories regarding the origins of these burial structures, suggesting influences such as ancient Iranian traditions, jihad, Shiism, and Turkic Asian traditions. However, one aspect that seems overlooked in studies of their origins and history is the ideology of the patrons who commissioned these structures. Significantly, the peak period for the popularity of mausoleums in the Azerbaijan region corresponds to the Seljuk era and, more notably, the Mongol Ilkhanid period. The Mongols and Uyghurs, before adopting Islam, were largely influenced by Buddhist and shamanistic beliefs. According to the traditions prevalent among these groups, the tombs of kings and prominent tribal figures were intended to remain concealed. In regions such as northern China and Mongolia, subsurface brick-enclosure mausoleums have been discovered, entirely constructed below ground level. This burial tradition persisted when the Mongol Ilkhanids first arrived in Maragheh. Even today, the precise locations of the mausoleums of early Mongol and Ilkhanid kings in Iran remain unknown⁴⁵. Following the adoption and formalization of Islam, the tradition of concealing mausoleums was completely abolished by the order of Ghazan Khan⁴⁶. The exact locations of the mausoleums of Ghazan Khan Mahmoud Ilkhanid and Sultan Mohammad Oljeitu are well-documented. It seems that the expansion of mausoleum construction in this region began precisely when the Seljuks and Ilkhanids embraced Islam. After converting to Islam, the tradition of concealing graves was abandoned, and burial sites became fully visible and accessible to the

⁴⁵ Banākati, *Tarikh Banakti, the First Shrine of Al-Albab in the Introduction of Histories and Genealogy*, 1969, p. 375.

⁴⁶ Ahmad Ibn Ali Maqrizi, *Behavior for the Knowledge of the Kings*, 1997, p. 375.

public. Kings and prominent figures of society constructed tombs in the form of mausoleums, with clear architectural influences from pre-Islamic Iranian designs⁴⁷. However, the concept of creation of mausoleums was a prevalent tradition among some East Asian societies. After adopting Islam, these societies promoted the creation of constructed surface-level mausoleums. This cultural influence contributed to the remarkable abundance of Ilkhanid-era mausoleums in the northwest region of Iran, surpassing those from other historical periods.

6-Conclusion

As noted, during the Islamic era in Maragheh, a variety of architectural methods were employed to bury the deceased. Research on the monumental-burial spaces of this period reveals that these structures can be categorized into two main types: subsurface (concealed) and surface-level (visible) structures. The placement of these structures was heavily influenced by the beliefs of both the designers and the deceased. Islamic-themed structures commonly feature Quranic verses and Islamic motifs, while non-Islamic burial structures were discreetly created into the ground. A chronological study of these mausoleums highlights that the greatest diversity is evident in those from the Ilkhanid period. The burial spaces from the pre- and post-Ilkhanid periods can largely be divided into two main categories: constructed mausoleum buildings reserved for distinguished members of society and simple pit graves designated for ordinary individuals. The architectural diversity seen in Ilkhanid-era burial spaces in Maragheh reflects the city's rich cultural and religious diversity, partially shaped by Mongolian-Buddhist influences. For instance, concealing graves from public view, an ancient Mongolian tradition, became widespread in early Ilkhanid Maragheh. However, after the Ilkhanids embraced Islam, this practice was abandoned. Instead, surface-level constructed mausoleums and graves adorned with prominent tombstones became prevalent. This trend of making graves more visible continued in the subsequent periods. The overall findings of this study reveal that during the Islamic era, tomb architecture showcased significant diversity, with a substantial portion attributed to the Mongol Ilkhanid period. This research can serve as a stepping stone for future studies on monumental-burial spaces of the Islamic era in other regions.

⁴⁷ Javad Neyestani, *A Research on the Tomb Buildings of Central Mazandaran in the 9th Century AH with Emphasis on the Features of Indigenous Architecture*, 2004; Hassan Hashemi Zarjaabad, *Religious Buildings of the Sassanid Era and Its Impact on Khorasan Tomb Architecture in the Islamic Era*, 2011, p. 71.

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All permission granted

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