

Analysis of Architectural Structure (Mosque - Shrine) of Khwaja Abu Nasr Parsa in Timurid Period of Iran in Balkh, Afghanistan

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Abstract

The shrines are monument of the deceased person which are constructed for respecting and honoring the memory of the deceased person and rely on spiritual concepts such as eternity, death, etc. In this paper, an attempt has been made to analyze architectural structure of *Khwaja Abu Nasr Parsa* in Balkh, Afghanistan which was part of Iran in the *Timurids* period and *Khorasan* (one of the provinces in Iran) region. This period is one of the most important periods for application of the shrine monuments. This shrine is one of the most important shrines in the *Timurids* period and probably is one of the known historical monuments of Balkh and also plays a role of mosque which is called a kind of shrine mosque. Research method of this paper is historical – documentary and its analysis method is descriptive – analytical. So, all types of decorations and architectural physical elements of this monument are studied and results from magnificence are given.

Key words: shrine, Abu Nasr Parsa , Balkh , Timurids period , Iran , Afghanistan

Introduction

Shrine monument for the Iranian great men has been considered more than other Islamic countries because the Iranians respected for their saints and great men and sanctified them and constructed shrines for eternizing names of these great men , humanitarians and famous people. Many of these shrines remained in different periods in Iran and one of the factors of their survival is respect for the great men and the past generations(Hatam, 2000: 102).

Shrine is the building in which one or more religious or political persons were buried. These buildings can be divided into two groups of religious(pilgrimage) shrines and non-religious shrines. Religious shrines have been known as *Imamzadeh*(Shrine of Imam's children) in most cities and villages and have special credit compared with other Islamic monuments(except for mosques). Shrine monuments have been developed over time and have been converted from an ordinary shrine into very splendid complexes like Mashhad , Qom , *Bastam* and Sheikh Safi monuments. Only in Islamic period of Iran, construction of shrines has such long history, unique architectural characteristics and splendid decorations. Such buildings have been known as tower, dome, tomb and shrine(Shateryan , 2011: 363). Shrine construction art reached its highest point in centuries 14 and 15. Century 15 shrines indicate continuous searches for new forms while the most noticeable innovation of *Timurids* period was conversion of the shrine into the main element in an architectural complex (Puganchenkova , 2008: 86&88).

One of the important old monuments in Afghanistan is *Khwaja Abu Nasr Parsa* or Green Mosque which is located in Balkh old city. This monument provided the last opportunity for emergence of *Gūr-e Amīr* Tomb. This architecture is spectacular, explicit and frank. It is unimaginable in artifices, innovation and appearance of disproportionate forms in south and west of Iran. Such condition shows end of renaissance period of the Timurids period(Pope, 1999: 1958).

Tombs in Timurid period

The tradition of respecting Gnostics and Sufis was a problem which was aggravated by Timurids' special respect for their shrines and prevented him from committing all of his crimes to

some extent was strong in post Islamic period of Iran all the time and continued in 9th century and his tombs were competing with Sultan's tombs from the viewpoint of majesty and glory(Pope ,Ackerman , 2008:1358).

Tombs construction art culminated during 15th and 16th centuries. Architects were competing with each other in building these unique grave buildings. Separate graves which were prevalent before were almost rare in Timurid era. One of the separate tombs of Timurid period was *Rokh Abad* tomb which was built in A.D. 1480 for *Sheykh Borhan Addin Sagharchi* in Samarkand. In this period, tomb with its unique saloon which has usually dome and pre – vault (Arch in front) was considered as a part of grave or religious complex buildings including mosque, school and monastery. *Shah Zende* complex is the most interesting example of these buildings. A general change occurred in this era in the shape of these buildings. Shape and size of dome were changed with cubic base: simple spherical – conical domes were replaced by two- layered domes. Its bowl was placed on a tholobate which is a type of long stem with flat or cylindrical angle . Vault and tholobate view was increasingly interesting and ornaments faced similar change. 15th century tombs indicate continuous search for new forms. Some of them were octagonal, some of them had an arch in front pre – vault and others were pyramidal with an arch in front part (Puganchenkova ,2008:86 , 87).

In late 15th century in *Khorasan*, tomb found more complex geometric plan which was as accurate as previous ones. Square and octagonal complex allowed access to concave and convex shapes, examples of which are *Sheykh Zadeh Abdollah* tomb in Herat and *Mumu Sharifan* shrine in *Ghazneh*(a city in Afghanistan). Timurid period architects competed with each other in building more complex graves which sometimes consisted of tens of cells with different shapes and applications. *Cheshme Ayyub* Monument in Bokhara is apparently one of the first samples of these buildings. Complicated tombs of Timurid time took wider dimensions. For example, *Darossyadat* in *Shahre Sabz*(a city in Afghanistan)was built as tomb for Timur and his sons and *Ahmad Yastavi's* (A Gnostic poet) grave located in north of Central Asia in Turkistan which was respected by people . These building are in elongated rectangular form having a long pre – vault in their entrance and one or more domes above of them. The most drastic innovation of Timurid period was change of tombs to a main element in an architectural complex (Puganchenkova ,2008: 88 , 89).

The Timurids period in Iran



Figure 1. Iran in the Timurids period

Geographic location of the tomb



Figure 2. Today's Afghanistan in Timurid period of Iran



Figure 3. Position of Balkh in today's Afghanistan

Balkh is one of the most ancient center of history and religion and human policy and the first place of Arian immigrants (Vaez Balkhi, 1971: 21). In Islamic sources, it is known as *Omo-al-balad*, *Omo-al-Ghara* and *Dar-al-ejthead* and *Dar-al-faghahe*. Its gates are always open to civilization world and this city has been the meeting place of scientific and religious thoughts and views (Mashayekh Faridani, 1997:7). Importance of Balkh was due to its centrality. It means that it is located in western, eastern, northern and southern borders and eastern civilized part and culture of Iran. Balkh is one of the most ancient large cities of *Amudarya* basin (Meftah, 1997: 100). Balkh was the governor's court in long periods. The presence of the strong enclosure of Balkh confirms this claim. At that time, Balkh was not the governor's court but it was sometimes center of provisional government (Meftah, 1997: 121). *Dar-al-emareh* of Khorasan remained from *Akasareh* to the late Taherian period in Balkh and *Merv* (a city in Afghanistan) (Mostofi, 1997: 182).

The sacred shrines and places are abundant in Balkh. Muslims call tomb of the sacred and religious persons "*Mazar*" (shrine). These shrines sometimes had building and some shrines lacked such building. According to writings of seventy sheikhs, many sheikhs were buried in Balkh but shrines of some of them are not specified. Balkh tombs and shrines were located not only inside the city but also out of the city which was near gates of the cities in distance of 100 m to some km from the walls (Meftah, 1997: 182).

Khwaja Abu Nasr Parsa

Mohammad ebne Mohammad Hafezi Balkhari is one of the Sufis of *Naghsh Bandieh* Dynasty in Balkh. He was known as *Burhanuddin*, *Hafezeddin* and *Nasreddin*. Abu Nasr Parsa is a

son and a pupil of the scholar and Sufi of Bokhara, Mohammad Parsa who was known as science and practice (Ligabue, Salvatori, 1990: 189). His father was *Khwaja Mohammad Parsa Bokharaee* was one of the leaders of the disciples and substitutes of Khwaja Abu Nasr Parsa, whose Persian works have been left up to now. Although Abu Nasr reached his own father in religious and mystical path, he did not show his condition and capability. He held narration course sessions and one of his works which is a Persian thesis is available in Toshkent Oriental Institute. He died in 865 A.H. in Balkh (some of the researchers of The Center for the Great Islamic Encyclopedia, 1994: 317).

Khwaja Abu Nasr Parsa Mosque–Shrine

Khwaja Abu Nasr Parsa shrine is located in center of the city and is regarded as one of the great mosques of Balkh and is highly reputable. Khwaja Abu Nasr Parsa shrine is adjacent to this mosque. This mosque is one of the splendid mosques which was renovated and reconstructed in 1005 A.H. and beautiful tiling along with vaulting and the best paints and designs are available in it. Dome and its surrounding walls with porticos and chambers have been tiled and its higher stories and walls have been destroyed over time. Style of this building and its decoration related to Timurids period architecture (Ligabue, Salvatori, 1990: 189).

The mosque had a large saloon which had some gates, altar and podium. Long dome, good decoration, paintings and inscription astonish the spectator though its design and decoration were performed after its construction. It seems that Khwaja Abu Nasr Parsa mosque or Green Mosque has been constructed after his death (Mokhtaref, 1993: 61). Other evidences show that this building is a monumental shrine which is constructed not on tomb of Abu Nasr but on the back of it. According to local narration, an unspecified tomb is located in the precinct in front of Abu Nasr's tomb (Wilber, Golombek, 1995: 406). This mosque was repaired first by command of *Mir Farid Arghoon* in 867 A.H. and the subsequent repairs have been done in 1005 A.H. (Mokhtarof, 1993: 61).



Figure 4. Khwaja Abu Nasr Parsa shrine (view from the eastern side)



Figure 5. Khwaja Abu Nasr Parsa shrine (view from the northern side)



Figure 6. Khwaja Abu Nasr Parsa shrine(view from north)



Figure 7. Khwaja Abu Nasr Parsa shrine(view from the front park)



Figure 8. Khwaja Abu Nasr Parsa shrine(view from east)



Figure 9. Khwaja Abu Nasr Parsa shrine (view from northeast, vault and entrance part)



Figure 10. Khwaja Abu Nasr Parsa shrine(view from the east)

The Study of the entire decorations

All materials and decorations are given briefly in table 1:

Table 1. The study of the entire decorations and materials applied in Khwaja Abu Nasr Parsa shrine-mosque (source: Author)








The entire materials and decorations	Pictures of the materials and decorations
External walls, tholobate , dome : beautiful mosaics with brick and tile .	
Walls : white Dome , side rooms and vaults : decorative paint (Puganchankova , 2008: 222)	
Inside altar : tile work .	
In decorations, there are geometrical designs as thousand- texture style (Wilber , Golombek, 1995: 407)	
In some parts of the shrine b, there are engravings, paintings, designs and Arabic calligraphies (Mokhtaref , 1993: 61).	
Paints and tiling style are different from what is found in other places. Special skill has been applied in tile work. Large planes have been assembled on a brick skeleton. It appears that this skill is not found in another place but Balkh.	
Spiral columns which limit main façade are covered with tile work which is silvery blue (Pope, 1999: 1337).	
Vertex of eight meshy windows and eight closed false arcs have been filled with cornices and are repeated alternatively. They are combined with a cross arcs followed by vaulted instrumentation.	







Figures 11,12,13,14. Images Source : <http://Archnet.org>

Types of decorations

Abu Nasr Parsa shrine-mosque has different decorations. Types of these decorations and where they have been applied are dealt with in this Table and their pictures are studied.

Table 2. The study of all decorations in Khwaja Abu Nasr Parsa shrine-mosque (source : Author)

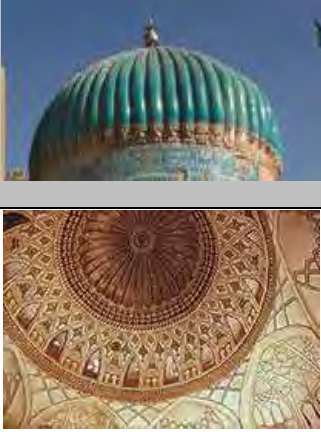




Types of decorations	Symbol and place	Pictures	
Tile work	As inscription	 <p data-bbox="706 682 982 751">Around the portal and entrance door</p>	 <p data-bbox="1057 688 1500 758">On two minarets behind the arc or entrance portal</p>
		 <p data-bbox="760 886 938 919">On Tholobate</p>	 <p data-bbox="1057 907 1474 976">On the wall on the right hand of the patio and entrance portal</p>
		 <p data-bbox="662 1131 1356 1165">In lower parts of the helical columns around the portal</p>	
	It is found as geometrical designs almost in most of the decorated façade.		
	It is found as Islamic designs and floral designs almost in most of the decorated façade.		

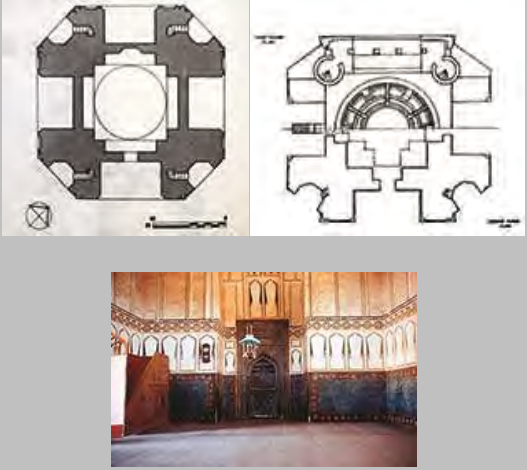

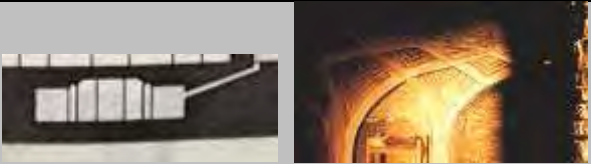
	<p>It has been hidden as insulating materials of the dome with small laminated ceramics which are blue colored.</p>	
<p>Brickwork</p>	<p>Other facades than main façade are made from simple brick.</p>	
<p>Plaster-work Decorative paint</p>	<p>In false arcs available in front façade in internal walls and below the dome inside the building.</p>	
<p>Vaulting</p>	<p>In false arcs available in front façade below the dome inside the internal false arcs.</p>	
<p>Cornice</p>	<p>Grooves of the dome are located on the vaulted patkins. Cornices below the helical columns (rope-like)</p>	
<p>helical columns</p>	<p>Helical columns around the portal on onion bases</p>	

Physical elements of mosque –shrine

Physical elements and the distinguished elements which have been applied in architecture of this building, their application, materials etc and also the horizontal and vertical sections are studied in this Table.

Table 3. The study of physical elements in Khwaja Abu Nasr Parsa shrine-mosque (source: Author)

Physical elements	Pictures
<p>Dome: the grooved dome with 48 concave spoon cracks is completed as Roman pearl method.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The grooved onion dome is 27 m high. - Two-shelled dome - Its internal coat has been decorated with the beautiful earrings in which some openings have been embedded. 	
<p>Long and circular tholobate</p>	
<p>Minarets : There are two volumetric towers which include a stair inside the building.</p>	
<p>Portal or the front arch : Southeastern patio which is the main entrance has been decorated with the portal which has been higher than the dome and converted into a splendid portal.</p>	
<p>Pores on the tholobate: The interesting difference has distinguished between the inner side of tholobate and the external part. The inner part has only eight</p>	

<p>pores. They seem to be 16 pores half of which have been hidden behind the meshes. Even another one third is blind. Real pores are lower than what they meshes show so that the internal dome doesn't interfere with them. they bring light through deep steep pores to the building.</p>	
<p>Internal spaces and plan (horizontal section) : four sides are connected to four alternate directions and two of them climb two stories and are located in portal of the tomb and forms screen –considering the obtuse angles which reach façade of the portal –around front side of the façade(Pope, 1999: 1337). - the plan with axial and central symmetry - octagonal plan and ground floor section based on cross in square - Octagonal plan has been made with dimensions of 30.25× 25 and total height of the building is 27 m. There is square in the middle of dome. This central dome has an altar made from tile. There are low-depth false domes in the middle of the sides of the dome house. These false domes are related to four axial patios which are opened to the external part.</p>	 <p>The image block contains three architectural elements: at the top left, a plan view of the octagonal building with a central square; at the top right, a horizontal section showing the internal dome structure and axial patios; and at the bottom center, a photograph of the interior of the dome, showing the central square and the surrounding arched openings.</p>
<p>Vertical sections: - External dome has been held by poppies on the internal dome. - Base of the dome is located on a three-corner point in the middle of eight arcs (four wall arcs and four arcs in width of angles).</p>	 <p>A vertical section drawing of the dome, showing the internal dome structure supported by poppies, and the base of the dome resting on a three-corner point in the middle of eight arcs.</p>
<p>Catacomb : Catacomb entrance is from southwest. In catacomb is a short dome which has solidified a series of cross arcs and three prismatic corners starting with the false domes. - Crucial catacomb - Catacomb with cross false domes inside the buildings</p>	 <p>The image block contains two photographs of the catacomb: on the left, a photograph of the entrance area showing a series of cross arcs and prismatic corners; on the right, a photograph of the interior of the catacomb, showing a short dome and a series of cross arcs.</p>

Conclusion

Importance of this mosque-shrine has been written in some books. This shrine is one of the important buildings in Timurids period in Balkh as details of decorations, physical elements and their architecture were studied. All are based on architectural specifications of Timurids period.

According to the conducted studies, this building has some unique specifications, for example, connection of tiling decorations inside the building. Type of the building location is such that because kiblah direction in this city is in southwest, the building has leaned to the kiblah direction.

This building has many wonders since the pre-Islamic period. Its material manifestations have spiritual beauty in addition to apparent beauty which originates from Islamic architecture. Islamic architecture has higher meaning and includes elevation and divinity.

At the end, general study of this building and its manifestations shows that all of them anticipate these specifications in mind:

- Order and delicacy in decorations
 - Excessive use of geometrical designs in tile work
 - Extensive use of plasterwork and brickwork
 - Use of paint in embossing designs
 - Excessive use of blue color which was favorable to the Timurids and it is greenish in this building.
 - Excessive use of false dome inside and outside the building and the internal false arcs are deep.
 - Use of axial and central symmetry in the plan which has been converted into cross with deep false arcs.
 - Use of entrance portal and splendid dome
- These specifications have gathered in this building beautifully and created one of the splendid and reputable buildings of Timurids period.

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