

Declarations in Death:

A Brief Overview of the Expressions of Piety, Politics, and Identities in the Islamic Tombs of the Indian Subcontinent

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Abstract

During the medieval period, the function of Islamic mausolea and tombs was not limited simply to places of interment or commemoration, but they had, and some continue having significant social, political as well as religious values associated with them. Using case studies and general observations this paper examines how the form, placement, and ornamentation (including epigraphic content) of Islamic funerary architecture was employed by the patrons for the expression of state ideology, religious values, and dimensions of communal identity. Specimens discussed for this research are limited to those constructed between the twelfth and mid-seventeenth centuries in the Indian subcontinent. Moreover, for the purpose of clarity and conciseness the corpus of tombs examined are mainly the royal tomb of Delhi sultans and Mughal emperors, with some emphasis on the tribal tombs in the lower regions of the Indus Valley. The chronological development of these funerary structures is analyzed with reference to the religious, political and social situation of the contemporary time. Such an analysis provides important information about the history, ideology, religious values and economic status of their patrons in particular and their socio-cultural group in general. The research links architectural design features of Islamic tombs, including both form and function, with the sequential arrival of the rulers and the response of the indigenous Indian people. This correlation evinces their interpretation of the Islamic religion, the development of new construction techniques, in addition to many other social influences.

KeyWords

Indian Sub-Continent, funerary architecture, Islamic history, monumental tombs

Introduction

The disposal of the dead by the living, through various means ranging from cremation to water or earth burial, is an act practiced since pre-historic times. One of the most common method is that of earth burial, practiced by the followers of all Abrahamic religions, including Islam. Islamic doctrines, however, interdict any architectural glorification over the burial sites. Islam's disapproval of commemorative structures mainly arose from its core concept of monotheism and in an effort to separate the burial sites from becoming places of worship. The changes in religious beliefs and cultural habits of Muslims, mainly after the tenth century, are considered to have led to a sudden proliferation of Islamic funerary structures throughout the world.¹ Consequently, despite all the paradoxes, funerary monuments became one of the most ubiquitous of all the Islamic architectural typologies.

1

For details on the early development of Islamic funerary architecture, with reference to religious attitudes and concerns, see Leisten, T. (1990). *Between Orthodoxy and Exegesis: Some Aspects of Attitudes in the Sharia toward Funerary Architecture*. *Muqarnas*, 7, 12-22; Taylor, C. S. (1992). *Reevaluating the Shii Role in the Development of Monumental Islamic Funerary Architecture: The Case of Egypt*. *Muqarnas*, 9, 1-10.

Besides being places of interment or commemoration, the Islamic mausolea and tombs during the medieval period were and continue to have, social, political and religious values associated with them. Islamic tombs could be as humble as horizontal stele or could be as complex as having a variety of sub-structures attached to a magnificent funerary building. One can find in these complex mausolea almost all the significant features of Islamic architecture ranging from dome to *minār*, *iwān*, *mibrāb* and *pishtāq*; and above all, various forms of architectural decorations.



Fig. 1 Dargāh of Abu Turab near Gujjo, Thatta district after recent renovations

for exploring their state ideology, religious values and dimensions of communal identity. To better comprehend the arguments, the examples used are discussed somewhat chronology, all constructed between the twelfth and mid-seventeenth centuries, mainly in the Indian subcontinent. At various

occasions, however, cases from Iran and Central Asian regions are also quoted in support of the arguments.

The Muslim forces initiated the occupation of the southwestern coastal areas of Sindh and Baluchistan in 644, under the regime of the Rashidun Caliphate. These were the first lands in the Indian Sub-Continent to become a part of the Islamic empire. Much larger part of Sindh, later conquered by Syrian Arabs, became the easternmost province “Al-Sind” of first the Umayyads and then the Abbasid Empire. Due to insufficient archeological and textual evidences, very little information is available on the earliest Islamic buildings that were constructed by the Arabs in Sindh as early as the eighth century. As for the funerary structures, according to an eighteenth-century hagiographical source, a domed *dargāh* (shrine) of Shaykh Abu Turab (Fig. 1), a companion of the Abbasid governor of Sindh, was constructed in 171 H/ 788 CE in Gujjo near Thatta, Sindh.² This structure later departed from its original form as it has been renovated several times in the past few centuries. However, if the date that has been quoted is correct, then this could be one of the earliest examples of Islamic commemorative structures built for the dead.³ At present however, the tomb of Nasir al-Din Mahmud (d. 1228) in Delhi, more commonly known as the tomb of Sultan Ghari, is considered to be the earliest standing monumental tomb in the Indian Sub-Continent.

Thus, by studying the Islamic funerary monuments one can acquire substantial knowledge about the history, ideology, religious values and economic status of society during that time period. In this way, we can use the funerary monuments where we lack substantial contemporary literary sources of Islamic history. This research demonstrates how Islamic funerary rituals and monuments of a socio-cultural group could serve as elements

2 Ali Shīr Qāni. Thattavī, *Tuhfat al-Kirām* (1767), ed. N. B. Khan Baloch, trans. Akhtar Rizvi, 3rd ed. (Jamshoro: Sindh Adabi Board, 2006), 86, 765; M. H. Panhwar, *Chronological Dictionary of Sindh (From Geological Times to 1539 A.D)* (Karachi: Institute of Sindhology, University of Jamshoro, 1983), 169, 173.

3 If proved true through further research, this could change the ideas about the earliest commemorative structures built in Islamic history and take us almost 75 years back in placing the evolution of funerary architecture in Islamic history. For now, Qubbat al Sulaybiya built for Abbasid Caliph al-Muntasir in 862 AD, in Samarra, Iraq is considered to be the earliest tomb. See Grabar, O. (1966). The Earliest Islamic Commemorative Structures, Notes and Documents. *Ars Orientalis*, 7-46; Hillenbrand, R. (1994). *Islamic architecture: Form, function and meaning*. New York: Columbia University Press.

The Sultanate Period: Tombs of the Slave Kings

In 1192, Qutb al-Din Aybak (r. 1206-1210), the Turkic slave General of the Ghaurid Sultan from Afghanistan invaded northern Indian lands. Later, in 1206 Qutb al-Din proclaimed independence and laid the foundation of an independent Muslim empire in India, the “Delhi Sultanate” of Mamluks (hence the slave kings). Nasir al-Din Mahmud was the grandson of Qutb al-Din Aybak. His tomb, built in 1231 by his father Sultan Sham al-Din Iltutmish (r. 1211-36), is not merely a tomb as it incorporates a mosque chamber complete with a mihrab and topped by a dome. The whole structure rests on a high plinth with an octagonal platform in the center with stairs, which lead to an octagonal burial chamber hidden below. The tomb lavishly makes use of Quranic epigraphy as part of its decorative program. The mausoleum of Sultan Iltutmish, also built in Delhi but one year after that of his son, is in contrast to Nasir al-Din’s tomb - a rather smaller structure in size, and certainly humbler as compared to the royal tombs built later in India. This tomb is square in plan, was probably topped by a dome that no longer survives, and an octagonal transitional space formed with squinches at all four corners. In form, it resembles the earliest Islamic square tomb - the tomb of Samanids at Bukhara (datable before 943). The Samanids tomb is closely related to the *chahār-tāq*⁴ form of pre-Islamic Sassanian fire temples.⁵ Where the tomb of Samanids is lavishly decorated in *hazār-baf*⁶ technique, Iltutmish’s tomb with its stone carved

epigraphic program is the most lavishly inscribed building of the Sultanate period.⁷

The tombs of Nasir al-Din and Sultan Iltutmish both use indigenous post-lintel trabeated construction techniques. The corbelled domes and arches of trabeated construction techniques, used in Hindu temples, were utilized in the early period Islamic structures of northern India. The corner squinches in Iltutmish’s tomb, however, suggest that the dome above was a true dome rather than the indigenous false-corbelled dome.⁸ This exemplifies how their invading patrons introduced new techniques in the built environment of India and consequently, how the indigenous Indian craftsmanship responded to the patrons’ demands. The epigraphic program of both tombs also indicates that the Quranic verses were selected with grave considerations in an effort to enhance the symbolic significance of architectural elements and features used in the tombs. The theme of epigraphy in Nasir al-Din’s tomb suggests that it was also intended to function as a center for pilgrimage.⁹ In both tombs, the Quranic verses inscribed around the *mihrāb* indicate the importance of worship and promise of paradise in return, directed specifically towards the Muslim believers. The verses on other surfaces address the larger non-Muslim population and warn them against their awaiting fate, if they did not embrace the true faith. This epigraphic program puts great emphasis on marking a new era in the history of Indian Sub-Continent, that is the emergence of Islam.¹⁰

Both of these early Islamic tombs thus suggest that earliest Muslim rulers of India felt responsible to warn and guide their subjects towards the right faith.

4 *Chahār-tāq* literally means four doors or four openings and refers to a square structure with openings on all four sides. *Chahār-tāqs* of Sassanian period were holy structures and incorporated religious symbolism. The early Islamic tombs fashioned after *chahār-tāq* form were also mentioned as sacred structures in primary literary sources. For more information see Daneshvari, A. (1986). *Medieval Tomb Towers of Iran: An Iconographical Study*. Lexington: Mazdā Publishers.

5 For information on Zoroastrian and Sassanian influences on early Iranian funerary architectural forms see Hillenbrand, R. (1994). *Islamic Architecture: Form, Function, and Meaning*. New York: Columbia University Press.

6 *Hazār-baf* is an elaborate Persian and Central Asian architectural decorative technique using bricks.

7 Welch, A. (1985). *Quran and Tomb: The Religious Epigraphs of Two Early Sultanate Tombs in Delhi*. *Indian Epigraphy: It’s Bearing on the History of Art*, 256-67.

8 Bunce, F. W. (2004). *Islamic Tombs in India: The Iconography and Genesis of their Design*. New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, pp. 38.

9 Welch, A. (1985). *Quran and Tomb: The Religious Epigraphs of Two Early Sultanate Tombs in Delhi*. *Indian Epigraphy: It’s Bearing on the History of Art*, 256-67.

10 Ibid.

Though some of their subjects were adherents of different forms of Islam, yet a large population in India was non-Muslim, and both were active parts of the society, being employed in the architectural projects together. As the tomb of Nasir al-Din was intended to become a pilgrimage center, therefore, the patrons wanted to use architecture as a media to guide their subjects on a larger scale. This means that the patrons expected the visitors to read the epigraphy, which was selected in accordance to the symbolic function of the architectural elements. This suggests that the craftsmen as well as the public might have some level of educated background. The presence of a mosque in Nasir al-Din's tomb parallels this monument to the mosque shrines; probably following the Persian and Central Asia Sufi traditions, implicating that constant prayer would exalt the status of the deceased and bring him additional merit. Thus, the orthodox religious doctrines, which attempt to prevent tombs from becoming houses of worship, were interdicted right from the beginning of the Islamic rule in India in favor of the 'popular' religious doctrines of Sufism. Hence, it can be inferred that although the Sultan of Delhi and their Muslim subjects were fairly religious and pious figures, not all were, however, strictly orthodox.

The Sultanate Period: Tombs of the Tughlaq Patrons

Ghiyas al-Din Balban (d. 1287), the ninth slave Sultan of Delhi, was a patron of this 'popular' dimension of Islam. Many Sufi saints and mystics settled in India during his reign and became an important part of the religious, social and political setup. This aspect of the religion was greatly promoted by the Tughlaq Sultans, who built monumental shrines for the Sufi saints, marking an era of great developments regarding Sufi traditions, as well as Islamic funerary architecture. The mausoleum of Suhrawardiyya Sufi Shaykh Rukn al-Din Abu al-Fateh (d. 1335) at Multan, built in 1320, certainly is an ideal case to examine in this respect. The mausoleum was constructed by Sultan Ghiyath al-Din Tughlaq (r. 1320-25), originally intended as his own tomb.¹¹ Later, Ghiyath al-Din

bestowed this tomb to his spiritual guide and advisor, Shaykh Rukn al-Din *alias* Rukn-i-Alam. The tomb, with its elaborate architectural features, for example, the octagonal plan form, circular battered bastions at each corner, and decorative detailing, fits squarely within the traditions of late Seljuq architecture and represents the Turco-Iranian background of its patron.¹² This finest pre-Mughal Islamic tomb also marks a major shift in the ideologies of state and religion during Tughlaq dynastic period (1320-1413). It suggests the transfer of religious power from *ulama*, the legal scholars and arbiters of *sharia* (Islamic law), to mystic saints and *awliyā*. Such Sufi saint often acted as prime intermediaries between the ruling elites/political establishment and the general population.¹³ The powerful shrine structure of Rukn-i Alam also evinces the considerable political power the saint must have gained by becoming an ambassador of Islamic faith for the whole empire. Thus, it is quite reasonable that he received such a monumental mausoleum as his final abode, which uses a tri-partite (three-tiered) domed arrangement - a form dedicated to venerated figures.

Later, Ghiyath al-Din Tughlaq made a somewhat humble structure for his internment, compared to the tomb of Rukn-i Alam; yet he did promote the idea of placing the tombs in formal garden settings. This idea became a trademark for the royal tombs of the Indian Sub-continent. Delhi Sultans took the gardens around their tombs as metaphors for *Jannah al-Firdaws* (Garden of Eden or the garden of paradise), as promised to the faithful by God in the *Quran*. These ideas became the basis for many royal tombs that were constructed in the succeeding dynastic periods, for instance, during the rule of Sultan Sher Shah Sur (r. 1538-1545).

The Monumental Tombs of the Sur and Mughal Emperors

A pious and just ruler, as well as a great military and

11 Page, J. B. (2007). *Indian Islamic Architecture: Forms and Typologies, Sites and Monuments*. Brill Academic Pub, pp.6.

12 Hillenbrand, R. (1992). Turco-Iranian Elements in the Medieval Architecture of Pakistan: The Case of the Tomb of Rukn-I Alam at Multan. *Muqarnas*, 9, 148-174.

13 Taylor, C. S. (1999). *In the Vicinity of the Righteous*. Boston: Brill Academic Pub. pp-14.

administrative strategist, Sher Shah is famous for being the only emperor of India who invested more in public and utilitarian architecture. However, that image slightly alters on viewing the tomb of Sher Shah, built in his lifetime at Sasaram (Bihar) in c. 1545. It is a monumental three-storied octagonal structure placed in the middle of a gigantic artificial lake, giving a paradisiac impression to the whole site. At the time of its construction, it was the largest tomb in India, placed in an extraordinary setting. Thus, the tomb glorifies Sher Shah as an ideal ruler worthy of great honor. Another theory proposed by scholars is that such unexpected adoration of his own funerary structure in fact highlights Sher Shah's insecurities of not being considered a legitimate ruler by his subjects and contemporary rulers.¹⁴ These insecurities possibly resulted from Sher Shah, belonging to a humble lineage of Afghan nobles, had snatched the Indian empire from Nasir al-Din Humayun (r. 1530-1540; 1555-1556), the second Mughal emperor. As the Mughals traced their lineage to the great Turco-Mongol Amir Timur (d. 1405), a great conqueror and builder, it is quite possible that Sher Shah felt the need to physically assert his worth and legitimacy, through a monumental and impressive tomb structure.

The Sur dynasty came to an abrupt end when Humayun recaptured the empire in 1555. Humayun, however, never got a chance to plan his burial as he died in an accident the following year. His successor, Jalal al-Din Muhammad Akbar - the great Mughal (r. 1556-1605), built his mausoleum at Delhi in 1571. This monument displays an ostentatious scale, high drum, double dome, lofty arched *iwāns* and radially symmetrical plan. The plan consists of an octagonal central chamber, flanked by four corner chambers, entirely based on Timurid models.¹⁵ The red sandstone and white marble for the domes, on the other hand, place this monument in the Sultanate period Indo-Islamic context. The gardens around the tomb,

14 Asher, C. B. (1988). *Legacy and Legitimacy: Sher Shah's Patronage of Imperial Mausolea. Shariat and Ambiguity in South Asian Islam, Berkeley and Los Angeles*, 79-97.

15 Brand, M. (1993). *Orthodoxy, Innovation, and Revival: Considerations of the Past in Imperial Mughal Tomb Architecture. Muqarnas*, 10, 323-334.

however, are planned on the model of Persian garden traditions called *chahār-bāgh*. The characteristics of *chahār-bāgh* are based on the ideals of the Garden of Eden, as described in the Quran. *Chahār-bāgh* literally means the four-fold garden, as its design indicates. In this design, the number 4 is considered a perfect number symbolizing completeness and representing paradise in the real world.¹⁶ From here onwards, *chahār-bāgh* gardens became an integral component of imperial Mughal tombs, representing the promised paradise for the faithful leaders of Islam. Through this ostentatious mausoleum for his father, Jalal al-Din Akbar thus emphasized the Timurid ancestry of the Mughals and adoration for Persian garden traditions. This mausoleum also stresses upon the unorthodoxy in religious beliefs for erecting grand scale commemorative structure and making peace with already established Indo-Islamic building legacies. These ideologies were again accentuated at Agra, when the most celebrated funerary monument in the world, the Taj Mahal, was completed in 1654 by the fifth Mughal emperor, Shahab al-Din Muhammad Shah Jahan (r. 1628-58). Here the plan form, based on the Persian *hasht-bihist* concept, also reached its zenith showing greater influences from the Persian lands.¹⁷

It is noteworthy that not all Mughal emperors felt the need to project their powerful and ostentatious image as a ruler. Zahir al-Din Babur (d. 1530), the first Mughal emperor of India, had desired a simple and open burial for himself. Babur's tomb in Bagh-e Babur near Kabul (Afghanistan), now destroyed, was raised on a plinth with a low height marble screen surrounding it, but without any cover to keep the grave open to the sky.¹⁸ This appears to have followed

16 Bunce, F. W. (2004). *Islamic Tombs in India: The Iconography and Genesis of their Design*. New Delhi: D.K. Print-world, p.241.

17 *Hasht-bihist* literally means "the eight heavens or the eight paradises." It is a cosmological concept used on several occasions as the title of literary works, or as the name of a particular architectural form in Persian, Turkish, and Indian contexts. For more information see Electricpulp.com. (2003). *Encyclopædia Iranica*. Retrieved November 06, 2019, from <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hast-behest-2>

18 For more information see Zajadacz-Hastenrath, S.

the Central Asian tradition that became exceptionally popular under the Timurid royal patronage, as exemplified in the shrine of Khwaja Abdullah Ansari (d. 1088) at Gazur Gah (outside Herat). The remarkable funerary enclosure of Abdullah Ansari, commissioned in 1425 CE by the Timurid Sultan Shah Rukh (r. 1405-1447), adopts what is known as the “*hazīra*” form, which scholars have argued to symbolize Ansari’s orthodox Hanbali viewpoint against the construction of roofed funerary monuments.¹⁹ The *hazīra* conforms to the concept of *taswīyah al-qubūr* (leveling of all tombs to the ground to alleviate the corpse’s suffering in death), which primarily indicates the notion of equality of all believers in death, as it should be practiced in life.²⁰ In the context of Indian subcontinent, a humble burial was desired by Aurangzeb Alamgir (r. 1658-1707), the sixth Mughal emperor. Aurangzeb, who is well-known for his orthodoxy in religious practices, ordered during his life for his final resting place to be an ordinary edifice destined to be forgotten. Hence, the mighty Mughal sovereign after his death was buried in an insignificant, open to sky *hazīra* type tomb in Khuldabad (Maharashtra, India), in notable contrast to the imposing and lavish tombs of his predecessors.²¹

However, Akbar’s tomb at Sikandra (near Agra) presents a different story altogether. A few features common between Akbar’s tomb and Humayun’s tomb include the *chahār-bāgh* and the choice in building materials. Completed in 1613, Akbar’s tomb is an

unusual Mughal period structure.²² This tomb has a five-tiered pyramidal form. The pyramidal form was earlier seen in the remarkable, yet odd, structure of *Minār-i Zarrīn* or the Golden Minar at Firuzabad, built by Firuz Shah Tughlaq (r. 1351-88). This building in its tiered form “recalls the cosmic mountain of Hindu temple architecture, which the Tughlaqs could have easily seen in structures like the fifth-century stepped temple at Harwan, near Srinagar.”²³ Akbar’s tomb uses architectural elements like *chattrīs* (a significantly Indian element) instead of domes (a symbol of Islamic architecture) and red sandstone along with white marble for these *chattrīs*. Ornamentation and form, therefore, place the monument in its local pre-Mughal and pre-Islamic context and depict the era of socio-cultural and socio-religious tolerance in India. This extraordinary monument befits the emperor who resides here. As far as the epigraphic program in the tomb is concerned, Persian text and poetry is uniformly used. The inscriptions over the gateway clearly read, “These are the gardens of Eden, enter them to live forever.”²⁴ Such texts equate the tomb to the Garden of Eden and declare immortality for Akbar, who was a complex man; a great builder; a brave conqueror and a mystic figure. Surrounded by conservative Islamic advisors, Akbar faced disapproving vibes when he initiated theological salons at his court. These salons had Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, Jesuit and Muslim representations, where all the religious ideologies were discussed and debated upon openly.²⁵ Finally, he introduced a new religious division in Islam namely “*Dīn e-Ilāhī*,” which he claimed was grounded in all religions of the world. Akbar’s tomb, drawing on his religious and political ideologies,

(1997). A Note on Babur’s Lost Funerary Enclosure at Kabul. *Muqarnas*, 14, 135-142

19 Maria Eva Subtelny, “The Cult of Abdullāh Ansārī Under the Timurids,” in *Gott Ist Schön Und Er Liebt Die Schönheit/God Is Beautiful and He Loves Beauty: Festschrift in Honour of Annemarie Schimmel* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1994), 377–406; Golombek and Wilber, *The Timurid Architecture of Iran and Turan*, 1:308–11.

20 Leisten, T. (1990). Between Orthodoxy and Exegesis: Some Aspects of Attitudes in the Sharia toward Funerary Architecture, *Muqarnas*, 7, 12-22.

21 Audrey Truschke (2017). *Aurangzeb: The Life and Legacy of India’s Most Controversial King*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press. Chapter 1.

22 Brand, M. (1993). Orthodoxy, Innovation, and Revival: Considerations of the Past in Imperial Mughal Tomb Architecture. *Muqarnas*, 10, 323-334.

23 Welch, A. (1993). Architectural Patronage and the Past: The Tughluq Sultans of India. *Muqarnas*, 10, 311-322.

24 Begley, W. E. (1979). The Myth of the Taj Mahal and a New Theory of its Symbolic Meaning. *Art Bulletin*, 61 (1), 5-60.

25 Bunce, F. W. (2004). *Islamic Tombs in India: The Iconography and Genesis of their Design*. New Delhi: D.K. Print world. p.130.

indicates his tolerance towards non-Muslim subjects – a fact also supported by contemporary textual sources. All these examinations allow us to assume that Akbar's India was a more openly practicing syncretic society, where non-Muslims enjoyed great privileges in comparison to the reigns of Akbar's ancestors as well as predecessors. The epigraphy on the tomb uses Persian text in favor of the Quranic verses and declares that the deceased emperor has already pleased God, and therefore, been granted eternal life. This demonstrates that Akbar, and possibly his craftsmen, were certainly unorthodox Muslims.²⁶ Furthermore, they had contradicting beliefs regarding death, resurrection and judgment, which according to Islamic doctrines will only be done on the *yaūm al-Qiyāmah* (Day of Judgment).²⁷

Tombs of the Tribal Chiefs from Baluchistan and Sindh

Unorthodox attitudes of Muslims on a macro level can be presented more clearly in another case, that of Nekodaris of Kharan in Baluchistan, the northwest region of the Indian Sub-Continent. In this dry flat land of sand and gravel, located near a settlement called Gawachig, are found a group of fifty-seven remarkable square domed funerary buildings called Nausherwani tombs of Nekodari tribal people.²⁸ This group of artifacts shows unconventional funerary rituals of collective burial, as practiced by the Muslim population of the region during the thirteenth and

fourteenth centuries. These tombs have as many as fifty-two people buried in one tomb with burial chambers on two floors. The upper floor has just one burial chamber, probably used for an important figure or tribal chief, while the chambers on the lower floor carry remains of several bodies placed together in each chamber. In addition, instead of burying the dead, their sarcophagi were placed above the floors of these chambers. Among all these tombs only one tomb can be identified through an inscription, and probably belongs to the *amīr* (chief) of Nekodari tribe.²⁹ The district gazetteer of 1906 records that the inscription reads: *Mazār-e-Nekōdār* (Tomb of Nekodar).³⁰

These tombs demonstrate that the Nekodaris practiced above-ground as well as collective burials, which are strictly prohibited in Islamic doctrines. Other cases of collective burial among Muslims of the Indian Sub-Continent of the Punyal Valley in Gilgit has also been recorded. These tombs from Gilgit buried the members of a single family together, which is not the case in the tombs of Nekodaris as they are representatives of their tribe rather than individual families.³¹ It can be inferred that the Nekodaris, being the newly converted Muslims, either deliberately practiced non-Islamic burial rituals or were unaware of the Muslim burial rites. It is quite possible that they were following the Iranian pre-Islamic Zoroastrian practices of exposing the corpses on raised platforms called *dakhmās*.³²

26 Akbar's invention of a new religion "Dīn e-Ilāhī" asserts to the fact that he was an unorthodox Muslim. Some Islamic scholars even believe that he did not remain a Muslim altogether when he invented a new religion and proclaimed himself a prophet, thus committing apostasy.

27 Here the idea of unconventional Islamic beliefs is taken as a deliberate point of ending the discussion over Mughal tombs and Islamic tombs of northern India in general. This is done to include some interesting examples from southern regions to analyze the basic ideas of this paper.

28 These funerary monuments are known as the Nausherwani tombs, after the leading family of the district. Salman Rashid has tried to investigate the historical roots of these people and monuments but the study has only been published as a non-academic article. See: <https://tribune.com.pk/story/250796/naushervani-tombs>

29 Nekodaris were nomadic tribal people of Turkish and Mongol ancestry. According to the list of tribal chiefs given in the Gazetteer of Kharan (1906), one name appears as Amir Nausherwan. He died in a battle in Yazd, around the mid-fourteenth century.

30 For detailed information on Nausherwani tombs and the origin of Nekodaris see: Hasan, S. K. (2001). Nausherwani Tombs in Kharan, Baluchistan in *The Islamic Architectural Heritage of Pakistan: Funerary Memorial Architecture*. Karachi: Royal Book Company, pp. 39-46.

31 For details on collective burials from Gilgit see Jettmar, K. (1967). *The Middle Asiatic Heritage of Dardistan (Islamic Collective Tombs in Punyal and their Background)*. East and West, 17 (1/2), ISIAO, Rome.

32 For more information on dakhmās and their influences on early Islamic funerary architecture see Hillenbrand, R. (1994). *Islamic Architecture: Form, Function, and Meaning*. New York: Columbia University Press. p. 274.

Gunbad-i-Qabus – the tomb of Shams al-Ma ali Qabus, built in early eleventh century in Gurgan, Iran was also modeled after Zoroastrian *dakbmās*. This early Islamic tomb is a flanged cylindrical and slightly tapering tower with a conical roof. Near contemporary literary sources report that instead of burying the body, Shams Qabus's glass coffin was suspended inside the tower from the ceiling.³³

In the Nausherwani tombs, however, collective and above the ground burial traditions are not the only remarkable features. The ornamentation is also notable in these tombs. The tombs are decorated with terracotta tablets fixed on the façades, which bore carved images of wheels, jagged hills, waves, hand and footprints and different geometric designs. Figural images such as horses, camels and peacocks are also found on some of these tombs. Figural representation in Islamic tombs, never enjoyed as much popularity as in the tombs along the southern belt of the Indian Sub-continent, especially in the province of Sindh from where the Islamic architecture of the whole

region began. It is important to note here that figural representation in venerated and religious buildings is another phenomenon that Islamic ideology discourages.³⁴

Despite the Islamic resistance to images, the Sindhi tombs belonging to almost all Muslim dynastic period, reigning between the fourteenth and the early nineteenth centuries, show figural images as the main theme in their ornamentation. This is true for the tombs found in Thatta, Hyderabad, Karachi, Taung, Oogar and Sonda in Sindh or even as far towards the south at Sonmiani in Baluchistan.³⁵ The most notable are the *chaūkhandī* type tombs of Sindh.³⁶ The *chaūkhandī* tombs use carved sandstone

33 Hillenbrand, R. (1994). *Islamic Architecture: Form, Function, and Meaning*. New York: Columbia University Press. p. 276. Hillenbrand, R. (1994). *Islamic Architecture: Form, Function, and Meaning*. New York: Columbia University Press. p. 276.

34 On the prohibition of figural art in Islam, see a short note on "Figural Representation in Islamic Art." In Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Retrieved August 18, 2019, from https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/figs/hd_figs.htm

35 Hasan, S. K. (1996). *Chaukhandi Tombs in Pakistan*. Karachi: Royal Book Company.

36 *Chaūkhandī* type of tombs are specific to the regions of Sind and Baluchistan in Pakistan. The word *Chaūkhandī* is

Fig. 2 *Chaūkhandī* tomb in Makli necropolis from the Samma dynastic period





Fig. 3 Elaborately ornamented *chaūkhandī* cenotaphs in Shah Hussayn Cemetery in Sindh (height represents higher status)



Fig. 4 Fifteenth-century cenotaph with fluted turban element inside a ruined tomb in Makli Hill, Thatta.



Fig. 5 Cenotaph in Makli necropolis with palm-tree like motifs

caskets placed over one another in stepped form (Fig. 2). They are unique in their decoration and construction.³⁷ The number of caskets used in the tomb depicts the socio-political and economic status of the dead (Fig. 3). The decorative program of these tombs also reveals a great amount of knowledge regarding the religious, socio-economic and cultural identities of the deceased, as well as their contemporary communities. For instance, as seen in the case of a fifteenth-century cenotaph inside a ruined tomb on Makli Hill, Thatta. This cenotaph has a fluted turban as part of its topmost slab (Fig. 4). Turbans on top of sarcophagi are common features found in *chaūkhandī* type tombs and represent, among other characteristics, the male gender of the deceased. The Makli cenotaph also has palm-tree like motifs carved all around it (Fig. 5). According to

Islamic theology, palm tree symbolizes a scholar, a noble or a wise man that imparts his knowledge and wisdom to others. These features, therefore, indicate



Fig. 6 Topmost slab of ruined *chaūkhandī* cenotaph from cemetery near Oongar (southern Sindh).

that this cenotaph from Makli belongs to a male member of the community who was of nobility, and probably educated background, and enjoyed an exalted position in the community.

Another example supporting our arguments is the visual representations on the tombs in the Necropolis

also used for a cemetery 29 km east of Karachi. This cemetery holds unraveling collection of the *Chaūkhandī* sarcophagi. For more information see Zajadacz-Hastenrath, S. (2001) *Chaukhandi Tombs: Funerary Art in Sind and Baluchistan*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.

³⁷ *Chaūkhandī* tombs are locally also called *Gharriyoon* (the chiselled ones), *Pathar-jun-qabroon* or *Rumis* (embellished tombs).

of Oongar, Sindh. *Chaukhandi* tombs of Oongar have carved images of equestrians and weaponry such as shields, axes and spears, on almost all the tombs (Fig. 6). The ornamentation on these aids in assuming that the tombs belong to people who were soldiers by profession. Also, they were probably martyrs, considered heroes and celebrated figures to receive such embellishment and commemoration after their death. Literary records also support these assumptions and show that these tombs belonged to warriors of the Jakhra and the Burfat tribes, who fought at the battle of Siri around the middle of the eighteenth century.³⁸

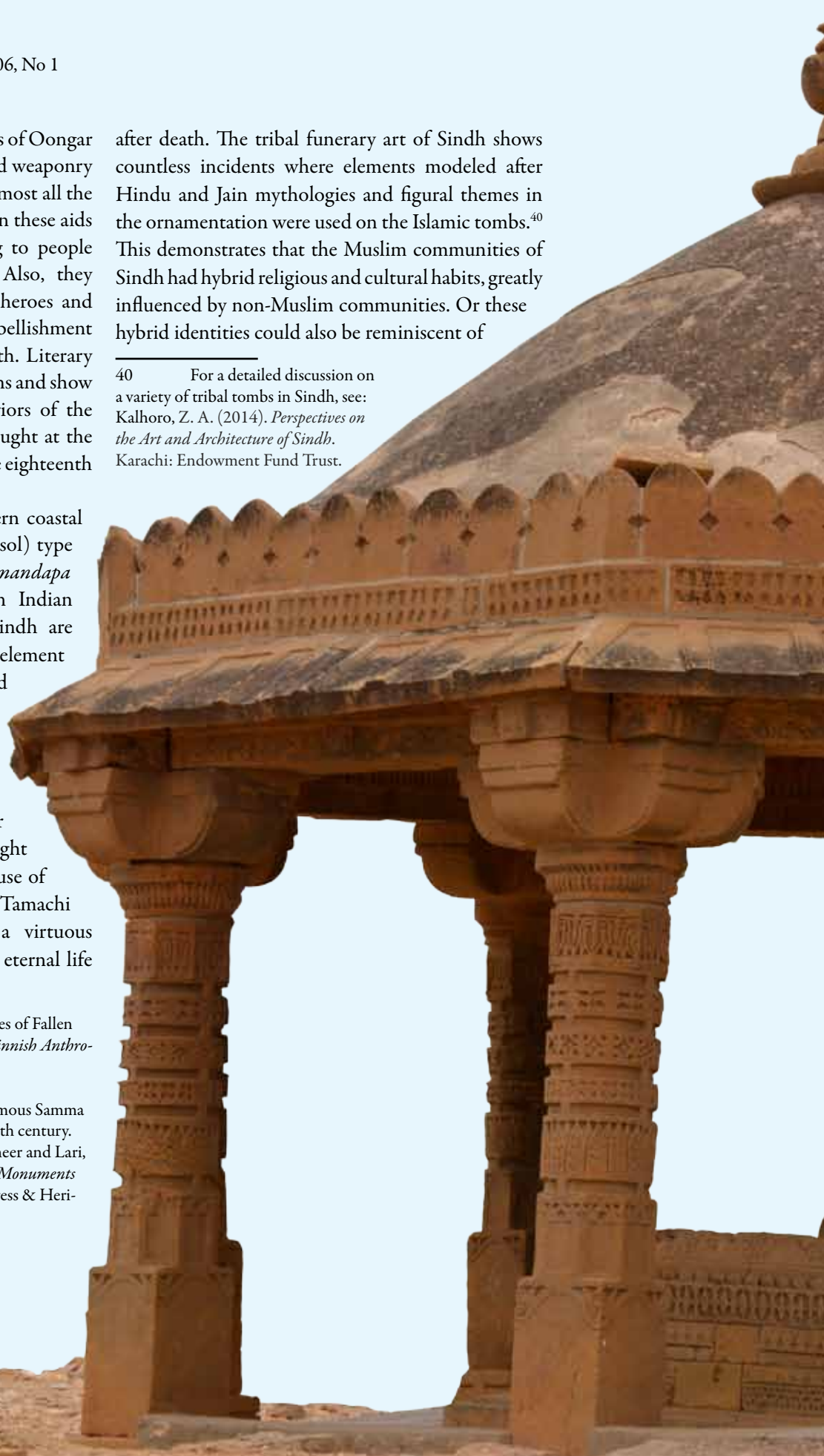
Many necropolises along the southern coastal belt of Sindh also have *chattri* (parasol) type tombs, which are derived from the *mandapa* forms, the sacred pillared halls in Indian temples. These *chattri* tombs in Sindh are always topped by a pre-Islamic Indic element called *kalāśa*, as seen in the so-called tomb of Jam Tamachi in Makli necropolis (Fig. 7).³⁹ *Kalāśa* in Hindu iconography is the personification of an item in the hands of deities containing the elixir of life. In Jainism, it represents the right faith and the right knowledge. The use of such element over the tomb of Jam Tamachi symbolizes the resting place of a virtuous sovereign who had been offered the eternal life

after death. The tribal funerary art of Sindh shows countless incidents where elements modeled after Hindu and Jain mythologies and figural themes in the ornamentation were used on the Islamic tombs.⁴⁰ This demonstrates that the Muslim communities of Sindh had hybrid religious and cultural habits, greatly influenced by non-Muslim communities. Or these hybrid identities could also be reminiscent of

40 For a detailed discussion on a variety of tribal tombs in Sindh, see: Kalhoro, Z. A. (2014). *Perspectives on the Art and Architecture of Sindh*. Karachi: Endowment Fund Trust.

38 Kalhoro, Z. A. (2009). Tombstones of Fallen Heroes. *Suomen Antropologi: Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society* 34 (3).

39 Jam Tamachi was the first autonomous Samma Sultan of Sindh who died in the late fourteenth century. For details on this tomb, see: Lari, Suhail Zaheer and Lari, Yasmeen (1997). *The Jewel of Sindh: Samma Monuments on Makli Hill*. Karachi: Oxford University Press & Heritage Foundation. p. 112-117.



their original Hindu culture, as most Sindhi tribes converted to Islam only in the late medieval period.

Conclusion

Hence, the funerary art, architecture and rituals can

help us gather a lot of information about societal values. The Sultanate period Islamic tombs in the Indian Sub-continent show that the Sultans of Delhi felt responsible to guide their Muslims as well as non-Muslims subjects towards the right faith as they were the progenitors of Islam. These tombs also suggest that 'popular' religious beliefs, such as *ziyāra* (popular pilgrimage), were part of the Islamic empire of India right from the beginning of the Islamic rule. Furthermore, the Sultans of Delhi and their Muslim subjects were fairly religious, however, they were not strictly orthodox. The 'popular' religion was greatly enhanced by the later Sultans, especially in the Tughlaq period when the finest pre-

Mughal shrines were built in India. This era also marked a major shift in the ideologies of

state and religion when Sufi saints gained considerable religious, political and social powers.

The Sultans of Delhi also initiated the important instances in architectural history by placing their tombs in formal garden settings. In doing so, they announced their belief in the Day of Judgment but also predicted and celebrated their fate beforehand. These ideas became the basis for many royal tombs that were constructed in the subsequent

Fig. 7 The so-called chattri tomb of Jam Tamachi in Makli necropolis



dynastic periods, the most notable among them being the four-fold *chahār-bāgh* gardens around the Mughal tombs, based on the ideals of the Garden of Eden as described in the Quran.

These monumental tomb traditions also signify that for the Delhi Sultans and Mughal emperors, funerary structures were very important for their identities. In the Islamic history of northern India, these structures kept on developing and becoming more ostentatious than the previous. The emperors displayed their power and legitimacy to rule using these tombs. In between, however, humble funerary structures are also observed, such as the tomb of Babur and Aurangzeb, who preferred the *hazīra* type tombs rather than the magnificent structures. This shows the orthodox religious values of both of these Mughal emperors in contrast to Akbar and Shah Jahan, who flamboyantly projected their image as powerful rulers and descendants from Timurid lineage. Akbar's tomb also evinces his connection to the Indian culture and that non-Muslims enjoyed considerable positions in his era.

Nonetheless, the funerary art of the southwestern and western regions of the Indian Sub-continent, show that some Muslim communities living in these areas had rare burial rituals and practices. Additionally, these communities greatly used figural representations in tombs as part of their decorative themes. This was due to the fact that almost all Muslim tribes of Sindh and Baluchistan were indigenous Hindu Rajputs who had converted to Islam in the medieval centuries. Also, due to the political policies of the rulers of this region, many Hindu, Jain and Zoroastrian communities lived freely among the Muslim communities. This shows that the medieval population of Sindh and Baluchistan was multi-faith and multi-cultural. This syncretic population kept on influencing the Islamic funerary art of the region and produced monuments, which may not compare to the Sultanate and Mughal tombs in scale and grandiosity, but certainly have unique characteristics of their own.

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