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Original Research Article

Reading, Revising and Reviewing the Kufic Inscriptions on the Caravanseries of Khorasan Razavi

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Abstract

Problem statement: Kufic inscriptions of Islamic architecture are considered the ancient era masterpieces of Iran and the Islamic world. Some of the Caravanseries in Razavi Khorasan province are counted among superb monuments in terms of decorations and architecture. However, the antiquity of some of them has not yet been well analyzed. Monumental inscriptions are often the most outstanding architectural elements that can direct the researchers through their endeavors from various viewpoints. Therefore, we deemed it critical to review the inscriptions under the study in terms of the scripts, objectives, various calligraphy types, etc., and determine their impacts on the identity of the monuments of interest.

Research objective: This study tries to comparatively review the inscriptions, scan the obscure ones, and correct the erroneous scanning of some others. In this spirit, the authors focused their efforts on presenting advice on the recreation of the inscriptions found at Robot (a small fortification built along a frontier) Mahi excavation site. They determined some of the monuments' ages through a critical approach toward inscriptions scanning by employing the surviving texts and shreds of evidence.

Research method: The present study was conducted through survey and archeological research methods. First, the inscriptions were recorded using the survey investigations. Then it was attempted to accurately identify the events of the past to further clarify the historical, political, and economic identities of the monuments under investigation through library research, verification of the firsthand resources, evidence gathered by the past photographers, and then through data analysis and classification, following the historical approach.

Conclusion: This study revealed that the writing structure of the Kufic inscriptions was based on the early Kufic scripts with diverse writing styles and that the artists have employed the decoration factor in conveying their message. The placement of the inscriptions in the predetermined spaces is in abundant congruity and harmony with their associated monuments. A reason for inscribing the scripts has been to serve religious purposes. Some advice was then made for age determination of Caravanseries of Ziarat, Mahi, and Sharaf sites after scanning and reading some of the inscriptions.

Keywords: *Kufic inscription, Caravanserai, Decorations, Islamic Architecture, Razavi Khorasan Province.*

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Introduction

In the past two thousand years or more, scripts have always been the most significant media for depicting Iranian ingenuity (Pope, 1977, vol. 4, 1707). In the meantime, the monumental inscription is an art of historical background, dating back to the Elamite Untash-Napirisha of 1250 BC in Chogha Zanbil (Steve, 1996, 12), Iran. Like many other types of art, inscriptions have also gradually flourished and perfected following the introduction of Islam to the plateau of Iran.

With the rise of the Seljuq dynasty (429-529 AH) in Iran, a new chapter of decorative arts was opened. There are abundant decorative potentials in Arabic calligraphy (Ali Shahroodi, 2009, 15). As a consequence, 42 types of cursive and decorative Kufic calligraphy were in use by the late fifth century of the Islamic calendar (ibid, 13). The Kufic calligraphy acted as an efficient visual element, somehow connecting the far and near nations (Mousavi Jazayeri, 2013, 32). The splendor, grandeur, emersion, and development of the Kufic calligraphy have been such that it can perhaps be perceived as a miracle (ibid, 36). According to Pope, the Eastern Islamic territories have created much more diverse decorative calligraphies than the Western end (1977, vol. 4, 1743). This calligraphy method had proportionate sizes required to be linked with the corners, geometric shapes, vertical heights, and horizontal stretches (Grohmann, 2004, 7). The elegant inscriptions carved in the caravanserais, especially those in the Kufic calligraphy were accompanied by arabesque decorative elements. These pieces of art reflected an improvement in social, cultural, and spiritual context in which it had flourished (Hamid Safadi, 1996, 38). Due to the harmonized incongruity of the inscriptional decorations with the building architecture, the Mahi and Sharaf Caravanseries are entitled as palace-caravanserais. These decorative elements later became exemplary for numerous religious and non-religious buildings in the Razavi Khorasan Province, Iran.

By reviewing the works of researchers, ancient documents, etc. the question arises as to how the correct reading of the inscriptions found in such buildings can help clarify the age and identity of these monuments, as well the inscribers' intentions.

Research background

To start investigating the history of studies carried out on Robat Sharaf, André Godard's examinations (1949) of this building must be mentioned in the first place. His work has maintained its special value and position, given the importance of Robat Sharaf and the scarce investigations carried out by the researchers. The author has also extrapolated the text and the images laid down in this study as a reference to their investigations on the inscriptions of Robat Sharaf. The local and international researchers, including Kiani, Fahrvari, Daneshdoost, etc. then started their excavation and examination activities that led to the publication of worthwhile articles in Athar magazine (1981, No. 5).

While esteeming the endeavors of the said researchers, it should be pointed out that the contents of their works are not much in association with the purposes set forth for the author of the present study. Furthermore, Regarding Robat Mahi and Ziarat, unpublished reports of archaeological activities in the Khorasan Razavi Province may be mentioned. The technical office of the national organization for the preservation of the historical monuments in Khorasan, 1974; 1988). Consequently, an examination of the Kufic inscriptions of the Khorasan Razavi Province Caravanseries was deemed as a necessity, especially on the said three monuments under the investigation. Accordingly, the author tried to correct the erroneous readings and interpretations of the scripts of Robat Sharaf inscriptions with a critical approach towards the other readings of the inscriptions and tried to recreate the inscriptions found in Robat Mahi site to suggest the antiquity estimations for this Robat as going back to the Samanid dynasty by exploiting the surviving script and evidence.

Research Method

This study was conducted and put down in two methods, namely survey and historical; initially, the works under question (inscriptions) were registered and recorded by a survey examination of the data. Then, through the historical approach, we used library research, firsthand resources verification, evidence gathered by the past photographers, citations from the historical texts, the papers and reports derived from the archaeological investigations, and the surviving parts of the inscriptions. These sources together with other helpful surviving written texts and photographs were used to better this project. On this ground, the data were collected and their accuracy on the inscription was evaluated. Therefore, it was attempted to accurately identify the events of the past to further clarify the historical, political, and economic identities of these monuments.

Robat Mahi

• The History of the Building

This Robat has been constructed in the four-iwan plan with a square-shaped yard and chambers around it. This Robat is presumably one of the works of “Abul-Hassan Mohammad Bin Hassan Mah, God bless”¹ (Ibn Hawqal, n.d., 378) and goes back to the late Samanid dynasty era. Among the most important properties of this building is the utilization of brick and plasterwork ornamentations. The remaining splendor of these decorations have survived at the entrance of the building, and in its North-wing iwans.

• The Kufic Inscriptions of the Building

The inscriptions of this building used to be at the entrance and the four iwans in brick and plaster. Today, only a small portion of the plasterwork inscriptions of the entrance iwan, and a defaced portion of the North-wing iwan inscriptions of the building have survived.

1. In a photograph taken by Abdollah Qajar, the private photographer of Nasir Al-Din Shah in 1311 AH (lunar calendar), 1273 AH (solar calendar) (1894 AD) of the entrance iwan of the Robat Mahi

(Semsar & Sara'iyan, 2003, 282) remaining today as a souvenir of the past, we encounter an entrance similar to the far end iwan of Robat Sharaf in terms of architecture and inscription-writings. Scripts of this brickwork inscription are in Kufic calligraphy on the right side of the iwan reading: “Izd al-Dowlah and taj al-millah and kamal al-ummah [...]” (the assistant of the rule, the crown of the nation, and the most perfect of the people [...]), and on the left side of the iwan it reads: “[...] al-sahib al-ajal sadr al-din [...]” ([...] the most honored lord, the chest of the faith [...]) (Fig. 1). Reporting the incidents of 367 AH, Zahabi has written that: Izd al-Dowlah asked the “Tayi” caliph to add the word “taj al-millah” (the crown of the nation) to his honorifics, and the caliph accepted (Ibn Khalkan, 1968, 51; Zahabi, 1989, 267).² As the Buyid dynasty took over the power in the Western parts of Iran, and due to the troubled relationships of the two splendid and cultured Iranian rules and the presence of war-leading tribes such as Chaghanian and Simjoorian, expensive military conflicts and struggles between the two rules was inevitable. Therefore, the Samanid government was forced to conclude a genteel peace agreement with the most powerful Buyid ruler who “sided the Samanid monarchs” at the beginning of its weakness (Faghihi, 1996, 201). This “compromise agreed upon between the Samanid (Mansoor Bin Noah) and the Buyid (Izd Al-Dowlah Fana Khosrow” in 361 AH (971-971 AD) was one of the most important political-military events occurred among the two great Iranian governments” (Herawi, 2003, 401). The author of this study believes that the Robat Mahi inscription chronicles this important event. Regarding Ibn Hawqal’s reference to Abu Al-Hassan Bin Hassan Mah’s many splendid Caravanseries in the great Khorasan, as prompted while authoring the book Surat Al-Arz (368 AH, lunar), where the story is told (Hawqal, n.d., 378), the date of granting the title Taj Al-Millah (the crown of the nation) to Izd Al-Dowlah and its reference on the transom of this Robat is apparent. Therefore, we may conclude that the Robat Mahi was built following the compromise

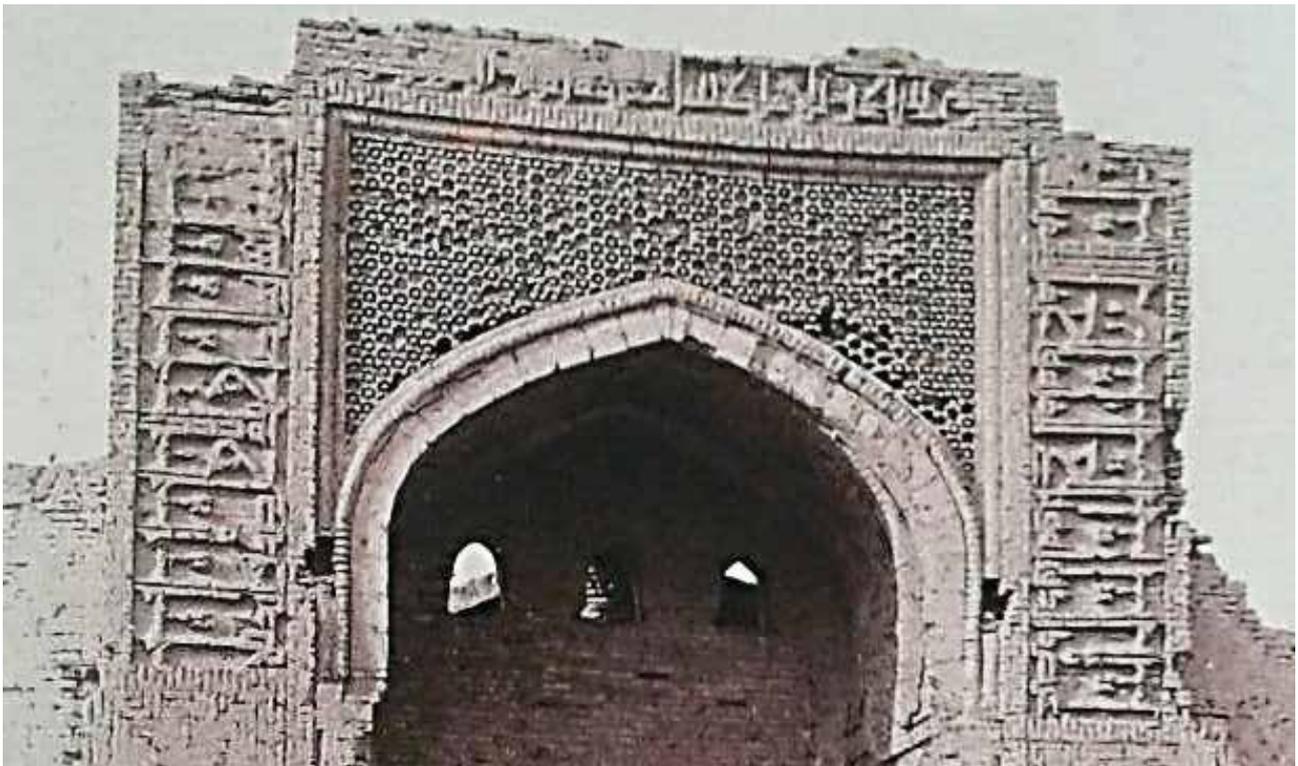


Fig. 1. The entrance iwan and the brickwork inscription band around it before the collapse of the iwan, in floral Kufic calligraphy, Robat Mahi. Source: Semsar & Sara'iyani, 2003, 282.

between the Samanid and the Buyid. This has been followed by copious payments made by the Buyid (Ibn Athir, 2004, vol.12, 5164) which also goes along with the inscription of the iwan interiors (Baqarah, 261) addressing the giving away of the personal properties for the sake of God. Hence, we consider the date in which the building was constructed as being 367 lunar AH, and due to the denomination of Mahi Banna to the builder of the building, we presume Abu Al-Hassan Muhammad Bin Hassan Mah (the charitable caravanserai-builder) as the builder.³

2. On the iwan's transom, the words "[...] Al-Mulk Li-llah [...] [...]" (The rule belongs to God) can be observed in the middle (see Fig. 1). It is very likely that similar to the inscription of the far end iwan of Robat Sharaf, a separate inscription has been carved in with thinner lines compared to the two inscriptions on the sides of the entrance iwan. The top half of the entrance iwan's transom and its inscriptions have collapsed after the Qajar dynasty era.

The inscription on the interiors of the entrance iwan;

Today, there is a plasterwork inscription in Kufic calligraphy on both sides of the entrance iwan's pillars, other than what is seen in Abdollah Qajar's photograph. The inscription once circled the three sides of the iwan interiors, the remains of which are seen now only under the arc of the entrance iwan's roofing. The script of the inscription on the right side of the iwan interiors starts with the beginning of the verse (261) of the Koranic chapter titled Baqarah as reading: "Qal Allah tabarka va ta'ala va taqaddas, mathalu llazina yunfiquna amva[...] [...]" (said the auspicious, high, holy Allah, the example of those who give their weal[...] [...]), and the verse goes on as: "...lahum fi Sabili llahi ka mathali habbatun anbatat sab'a sanabila fi kulli sumbulatin mi'atu habbatin vallahu yuda'af" (...th in the way of Allah is like a grain of corn that sprouts seven ears, in every ear a hundred grains, and Allah multiplies) above the transom of the entrance, but has collapsed together with the entrance's roofing. On the left side, the words of the same verse close as reading: "[...] li man yashaa'u wa llahu wasi'un alim, qoul

Allah ta'ala [...]” ([...] to whom he will, Allah is the embracer, the knower. The words of Allah the superior [...] is left of the whole inscription. The end of the inscription is defaced at this point, and possibly the script had continued with phrases or words addressing the veracity of God’s promise, and that there is no doubt about the fulfillment of what God promises (Fig. 2).

The defaced inscription on the right side of the Northern iwan’s interiors evokes the assumption that the four iwans of this Robat were decorated with plasterwork inscriptions like the iwans of the Robat Sharaf (Fig. 3).

The said decorations are undoubtedly the beginning of the next Caravanseries decoration under the Seljuqid and Ilkhanid dynasties, persisted, and perfected in other buildings such as Robat Sharaf and Sepanj (Kiani, 1995, 47).

Godard suspects that Robat Mahi was restored and repaired at some point in time as was done to Robat Sharaf by Torkan Khatoun, the Sultan’s wife (Godard, 1949, 60). This transom of the building looked safe and sound until Nasir Al-Din Shah’s

era, while the entire building is gradually destroyed as a result of disregard and intentional demolition (The technical office of the national organization for the preservation of the historical monuments in Khorasan, 1974) during the recent hundred years.

Robat Ziarat

• The History of the Building

Consequent to the investigations and speculations carried out on this place, the presence of a Robat, a mosque, and an abbey is approved. Ziarat is an example of open Caravanseries with a large area and chambers around the court, and an inscription decorated hall next to the mosque. These inscriptions are comparable with those of Arsalan Jazeb’s tomb, based on which their antiquity can be attributed to the fifth century after the hijrah (Labaf Khaniki, 1988, 44).

• The Building’s Kufic Inscriptions

The surviving inscriptions of this building are of brickwork type in edged Kufic calligraphy placed in the following positions:

Inside the nave of Robat’s mosque; brickwork



Fig . 2. The plasterwork inscription on the left side of the entrance iwan, Robat Mahi. Photo: Archive of authors.



Fig . 3. The plasterwork inscription on the right side of the Northern iwan, Robat Mahi. Photo: Archive of authors.

Kufic inscriptions of the width of a meter are put on the coverings impost. The nave is a rectangular hall of 15×4. 5 meters dimensions. The inscription is placed on a height of two meters following the brick working of the last two rows, inside a frame created by pulling back the bricks, and it circled the hall (ibid, 47). The Koranic verse known to Muslims as Ayyat Al-Kursi (Baqarah, 255) appears on the North-wing wall, and the remains of another inscription can also be seen on the South-wing walls. Of the North-wing inscriptions of the nave, the part that reads: “[...] man za llazi yashfa’u indahu illa bi iznihi ya’lamu maa baina aydihim wa ma [...]” ([...] who is he that shall intercede with Him except by his permission. He knows what will be before their

hands and what [...]) has remained and the rest of the inscription is destroyed (Fig. 4). The second inscription is put on the wall above the entrance of the Robat to the nave, on the left side of the altar. The scripts are composed of parts of the Koranic Surah Tawhid reading “Allahu ssamad, lam yalid wa lam yulad wa lam yakun lahu kufuwan ahad (“[...] Allah, the called upon, who has not given birth and has not been born, and there is none equal to him) (Fig. 5). Unlike the inscriptions of the nave, this one is put down in three lines, the first line of which read; Bismillahi rrahmani rrahim, qul huwa llahu ahad (In the name of Allah the most compassionate the most merciful, Say He is Allah, the one) is destroyed.



Fig . 4. The Kufic edged plasterwork inscription (Ayah Al-Kursi), Robat Ziarat. Source: Archive of The Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts And Tourism Department Of Khorasan Razavi Province.

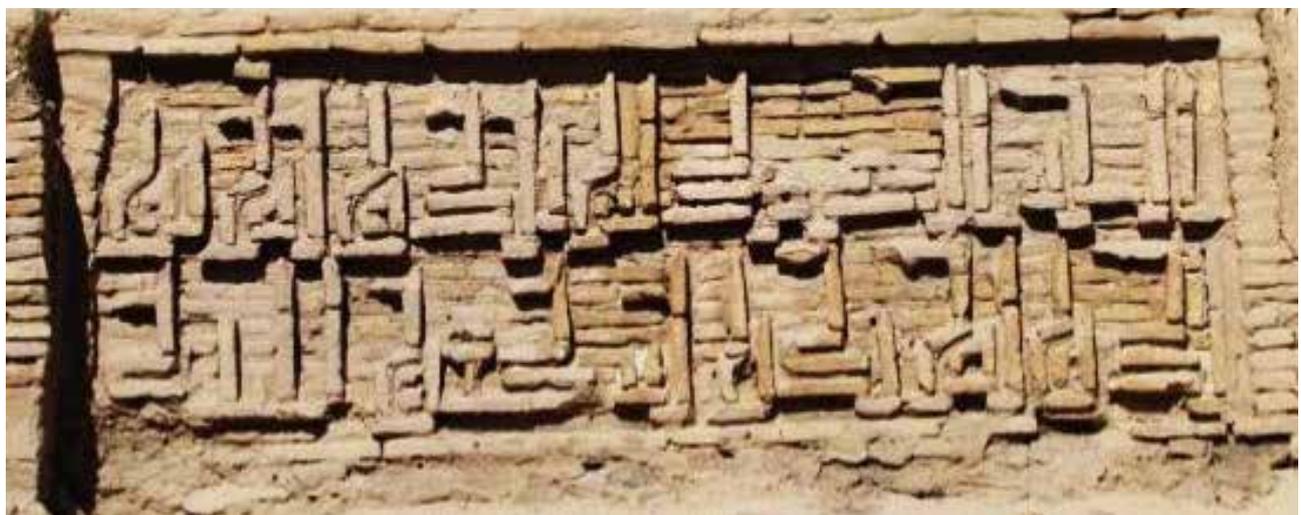


Fig . 5. The altar plasterwork edged Kufic inscription (the Surah of Tawhid), Robat Ziarat. Source: Archive of The Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts And Tourism Department Of Khorasan Razavi Province.

The Robot Sharaf

• The History of the Building

Regardless of its denomination⁴, Robot Sharaf is among one of the most superb and perfect Caravanseries of the Islamic world for its architecture and works of art. The building is not built at once in a time, that is, the second court was built first and the first court was added in a short time (Daneshdoost, 1981, 3). The remaining Kufic inscriptions of this building are made in two methods of brickwork and artwork in the main three iwans, the altars, and archways as introduced below:

A) The Brickwork Inscriptions

1. The large brickwork inscription at the entrance on the main transom of the Robot Sharaf; the inscription that once circled the frontlet of the entrance iwan, used to be put on a base of chiseled and relief bricks. Now, the lines above its transom are collapsed. The remaining scripts in floral Kufic calligraphy (known as Muzahhari (floral) or Moshajjari (mottled)) on the right side of the iwan reads: “[...] Ghias Al-Dowlah Aba Nasr...” (a given name). On the left side of the iwan it reads: “[...] Rahimahu llahu Abu Sa’d Muhammad [...]” ([...] Abu Sa’d Muhammad, peace be upon him [...]) (Godard, 1949, 27) (Fig. 6).
2. The large brickwork inscription on the transom of the far-end iwan of the Robot; this inscription originally span about the high end of the iwan and then went on towards its sides, made of chiseled and relief bricks (ibid.). The inscription is lettered in the floral (Muzahhari or Moshajjari) Kufic calligraphy (Fig. 7). On the right side of the iwan the name “[...] Abul Ghasim Sa’d [...]” and on the left side the phrase “[...] lahuma fi shuhur sinah thaman [...]” ([...] for them in the months of year eight [...]) remain. Godard believed that the inscription went with a construction date indication which is destroyed now, and only the ones digit that is the word “Thaman” (eight) occupying less writing space remains. Hence he concludes that the date of the Robot building should be estimated as going back to the year 508 lunar AH that could fit at the end of the inscription (ibid., 68). This conclusion is not

appropriate for the clarification of the defaced date part of the inscription’s end, because the scribes used to put some of the overreaching words on top of the previous words if they ran short of space. This is well demonstrably observed in this same Robot in how the last two words (minhoma and bi rahmatihi) (“of them” and “of His mercy”) are lettered on the plasterwork around the corridor of the main iwan (Fig. 8). The same also applies to the last two words (arba’een and khamsa mi’yah) (“forty” and “five hundred”) of the inscription of the trimester of the far-end iwan.

3. The (small) brickwork inscription is Harrarahu (he inscribed it – a signature) in simple Kufic calligraphy which is inscribed in khafi (concealed) style. This inscription is the only intact inscription in Robot. Godard believes that this inscription apparently points out the scripts of an inscription adorning the about the fronts of iwans and arches in the first and the second court (ibid., 54). The inscription text reads: “harrarahu hazihi al-kitabah ala yaday Ibn Mansoor As’ad Ibn Muhammad Al-Tara’iqi Al-Sarakhsi ghafara llahu lahu wa li walid” (Fig. 9). Here, Godard has assumed the word “Ala Yaday” as reading “Ali Abadi” (ibid., 59), while these two words mean “by the hands” in Arabic, and the whole text is translated as “this inscription was inscribed by the hands of Ibn Mansoor As’ad Ibn Muhammad Al-Tara’iqi Al-Sarakhsi, may God bless him and his parents”.

Also, unlike what Godard believes, the word “Hazihi Al-Kitabah” reveals that the calligrapher points out only the inscription above the transom of the far-end iwan, not including other iwans of Robot Sharaf. As we go on, we will see that the inscriptions of Robot Sharaf are independent in terms of their texts and calligraphies.

B) Plasterwork Inscriptions

1. The plasterwork inscription about the main entrance corridor; this inscription used to spin around from the leap of the curve of the iwan’s arch, and it is likely manufactured after the demolition of Kazan to substitute the brickwork inscription.

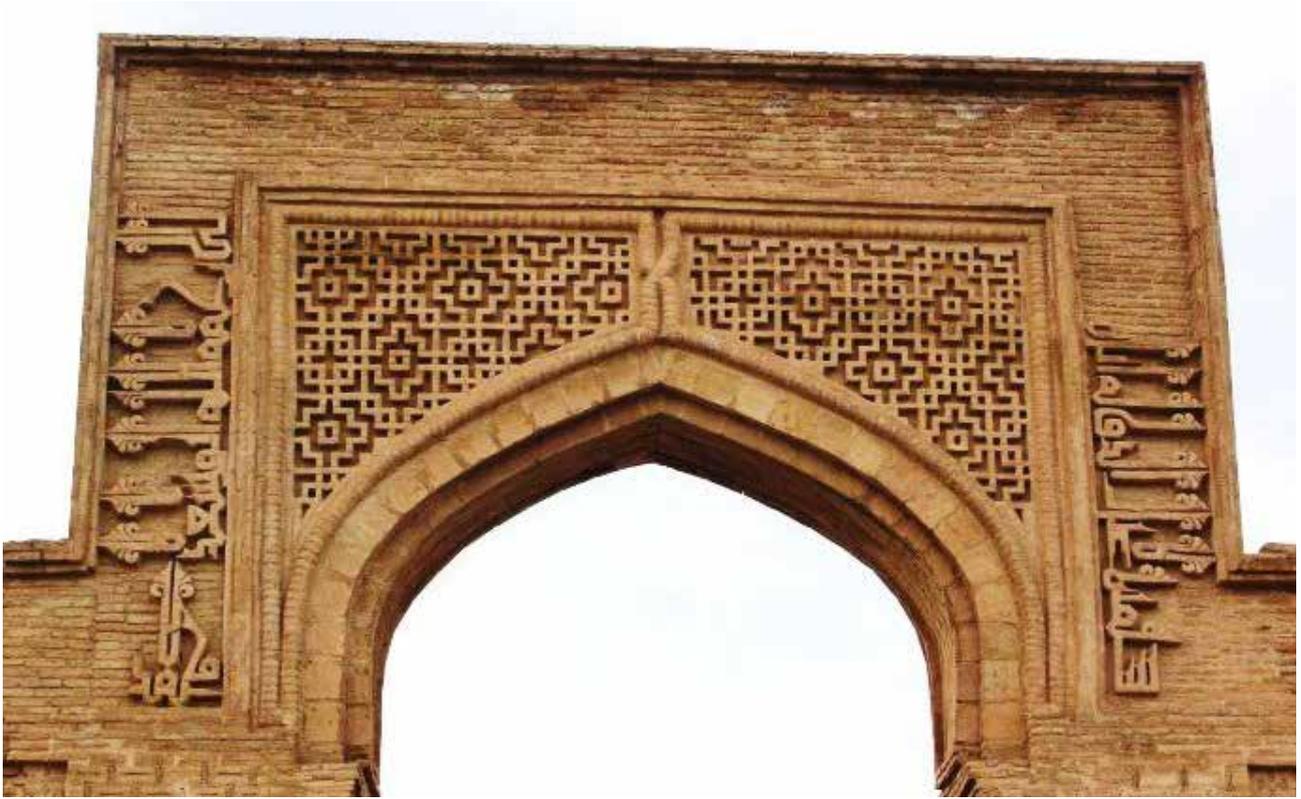


Fig . 6. The brickwork inscription of the two sides of the main (entrance) iwan, in floral Kufic calligraphy, Robat Sharaf. Source: Archive of authors.

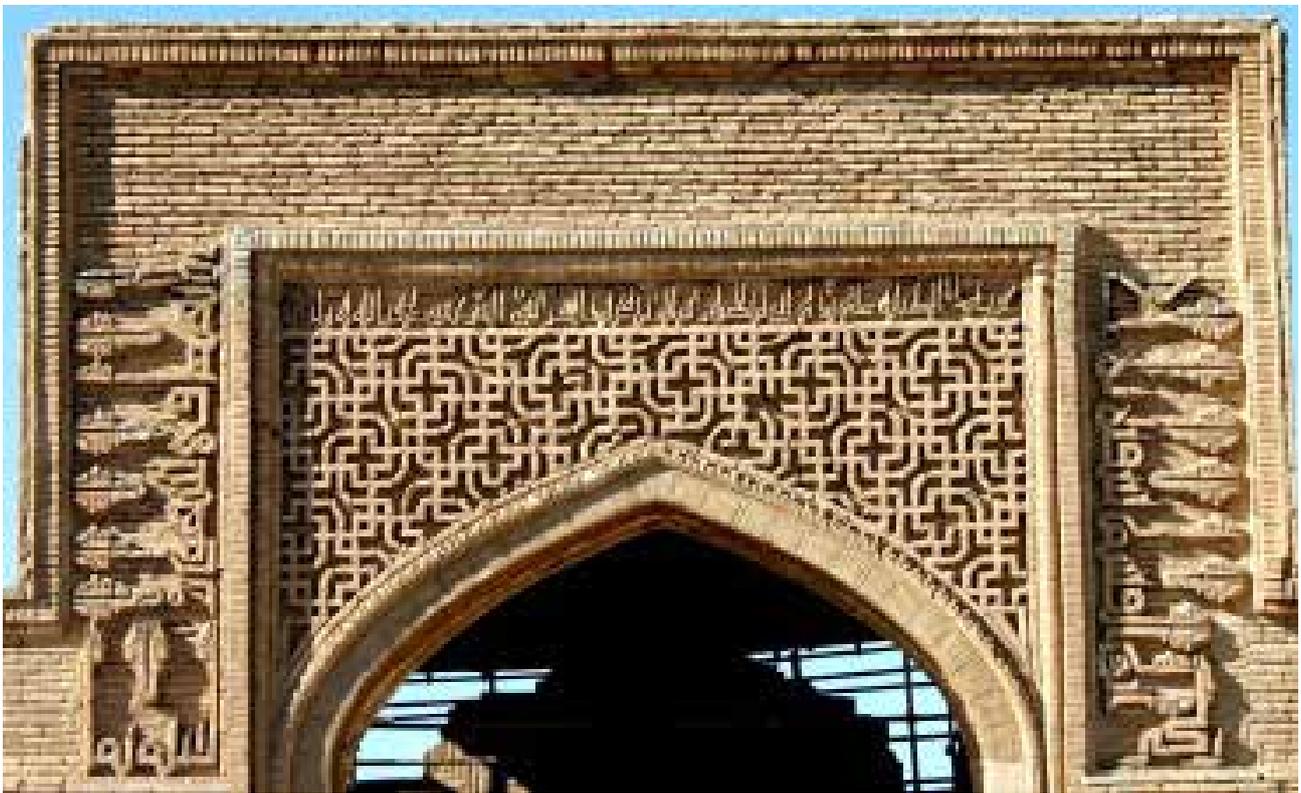


Fig . 7. The brickwork inscription on the two sides of the far-end iwan, in floral Kufic calligraphy, Robat Sharaf. Source: Archive of authors.

This inscription is manufactured and molded out of plaster in floral Kufic calligraphy (leafed). This piece was the finish of the historical phrase ending at the words reading “[...] Sahl Al-Tabirqani Taqabbala llahu minha bi rahmatih” ([...] Sahl Al-Tabirqani, may God accept it from them out of His mercy” (see Fig. 8) (*ibid.*, 31).

2. The plasterwork inscription used to spin about the transom of the second iwan, and like the above-mentioned inscription, it has been manufactured instead of the brickwork after the demolition of Qazan. This inscription is in the complex Kufic calligraphy manufactures and molded out of plaster on an arabesque substrate. At its right end, the inscription begins with “Bismi llahi al-rahmani al-rahim [...]” (in the Name of God, the most compassionate, the most merciful [...]) and it is distorted on the left end, and it seems as if has ended in some Arabic poetry. The sentences in the midway of the inscription are also destroyed (*ibid.*, 44) (Fig.10).

3. The plaster inscription inside the second iwan in simple Kufic calligraphy is verse 53 of Surah Al-Zumar, reading “Qul ya ibadi al-lazina usrifu ala anfusihim la taqnatu min rahmati llahi inna llaha yaghfiru zzunuba jami’an innahu huwal ghafuru rrahim” (Say: ‘O My worshipers, who have sinned excessively against themselves, do not despair of the Mercy of Allah, surely, Allah forgives all sins. He is the forgiver, the Most Merciful), the beginning and end of which is now destroyed (Fig. 11).

4. The text of the plasterwork inscription spinning about the two altars of Robot, is verse 255 (Ayat Al-Kursi) of Surah Baqarah in the leafed Kufic calligraphy on an arabesque substrate reading “Allahu la ilaha illa howal hayyul qayyumu la ta’khuzuhu sinatun wa la naumun lahu ma fi ssamawati wa ma fil ardi man za llazi yashfa’u indahu illa bi iznihi ya’lamu ma bayna aydihim wa ma khalfahum wa la yuhituna bi shay’in min ilmihi illa bi ma sha’a wasi’a kursiyyuhu ssamawati wal ard, wa la ya’uduhu hifzuhuma wa howal aliyul



Fig . 8. The plaster inscription spinning about the iwan, the main entrance, in floral Kufic calligraphy, Robot Sharaf. Source: Godard, 1949, 30.



Fig . 9. The small brickwork inscription on the transom of the far-end iwan, in simple Kufic calligraphy, Robot Sharaf. Source: Archive of authors.



Fig . 10. The plaster inscription on the right side of the second iwan ending in Arabic words, in complex Kufic, Robat Sharaf. Source: Archive of authors.



Fig . 11. The plaster inscription inside the second iwan, verse 53 of Surah Al-Zumar, in simple Kufic calligraphy, Robat Sharaf. Source: Archive of authors.

azim” (Allah, there is no good except He, the Living, the Everlasting. Neither dozing nor sleep overtakes Him. To Him belongs all that is in heavens and the earth. Who is he that shall intercede with Him except by His permission? He knows what will be before their hands and what was behind them, and they do not comprehend anything of His Knowledge except what He willed. His Seat embraces the heavens and the earth, and the preserving of them does not weary Him. He is the High, the Great). The beginning and the end of this inscription is also destroyed. In both altars, the words of credo reading “la ilaha illa llah wa muhammadun rasulu llah” (there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is the messenger of God) are molded in plaster in relief grid (intertwisted)

Kufic calligraphy horizontally, in the middle of the plasterwork (Fig. 12). In Godard’s old photograph, another small inscription is visible inside the hollow of the altar of which only the top part can be seen, which indicates that the altars of Robat Sharaf used to have three inscriptions (Fig. 13). The other less important inscriptions of Robat Sharaf are as follows:

1. A plaster inscription with patterns inside cuckoo-pint under the dome of the mosque which reads “al mulku li llah al azamatu lillah” (the kingdom belongs to God, the grandeur belongs to God) in simple Kufic calligraphy.
2. A plaster inscription in a bulkhead without patterns in Kufic calligraphy out of which only the words “[...] amal abi al-Hassan [...]” ([...] work of abi Al-

Hasan [...]” remain which might be the name of one of the builders of the building (*ibid*, 41).

3. Two distorted plaster inscriptions can be seen at the leap of the curve of the iwan’s arch, right above and the end of the Thulth calligraphy inscription of the third iwan. These two inscriptions were manufactured and molded out of plaster on an arabesque substrate in the complex Kufic calligraphy (Fig. 14) which were not mentioned by André Godard.

Conclusion

The visual structure and writing style of Kufic calligraphy, which are long stretching horizontal lines, round and compressed letters, and narrow words connection are used in the writing of the inscriptions. There are also common writing properties for Kufic and Thulth calligraphies in the inscriptions. For instance, the roundedness of the beginning of the letters “و”, “ع”, “ق”, “ف”, “م”, and “ض”, where lines are mostly hollow and the ending of the letters are not narrowed.

All Kufic and even Thulth inscriptions in Robats under study are dot-less. In terms of the writing style, there are two types of calligraphy on the transom of Robat Sharaf and Mahi; in Robat Sharaf and Mahi, thick (Jali) lines are created by big size bricks, and they spin around the transoms, going on at the sides of the transoms. The other type of lines is the thin and delicate (Khafi) lines inscribed horizontally on a geometric design substrate of the far-end iwan’s (Sharaf) and main iwan’s (Mahi) transoms. Interestingly, the thickness of the line that spins about the transoms is in a harmonious and artistic relationship with the delicate line above and behind the sides and their geometric design. In Robat Mahi, the delicate line is inscribed right above the entrance transom, and thick (Jali) lines were used on the two sides of the transoms. In Robat Ziarat inscription, only its Kufic thick lines remained for the moment. Robat Sharaf is also superior to other Caravanseries in terms of having lots of Kufic inscriptions (of four types namely simple, leafed, floral, and complex Kufic calligraphies).

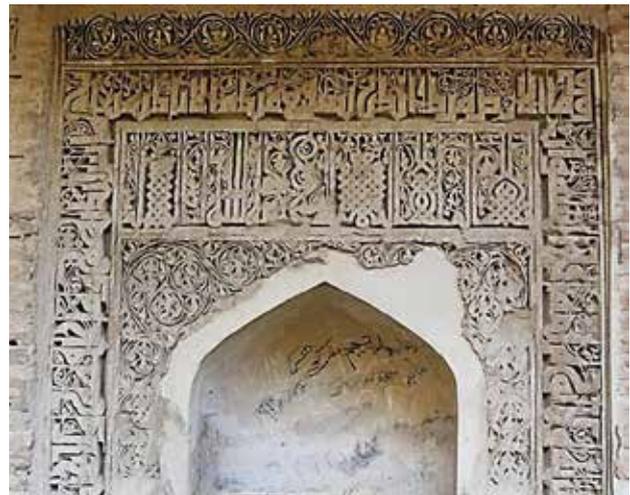


Fig. 12. The plaster inscriptions of the altars, verse 255 of Surah Baqarah, in leafed Kufic calligraphy, Robat Sharaf. Source: Archive of authors.

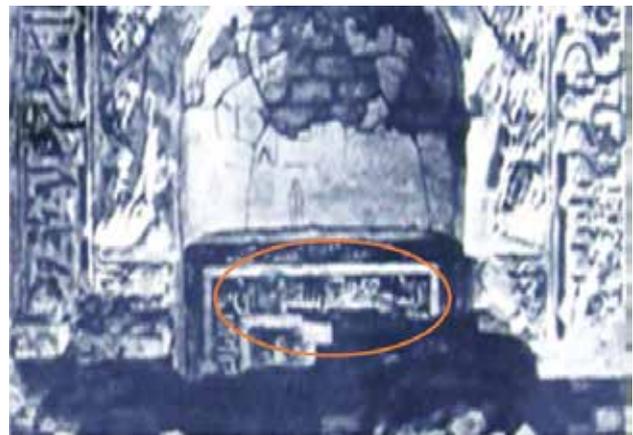


Fig. 13. The plaster inscription inside the hollow of the altar, in leafed Kufic calligraphy. Godard, 1949, 43.

The diversity of the Kufic calligraphy writing styles in Robats Sharaf and Mahi is such that, except for the Kufic calligraphies of the altars of Robat Sharaf, none of the Kufic inscriptions are written identically. For instance, the brickwork inscriptions of Robat Sharaf and, to some extent, Robat Mahi are written and decorated in a variety of calligraphic styles including leafed Kufic, leafed and floral Kufic, intertwined Kufic, complex Kufic, and even rounded relief Thulth.

In terms of materials, dates, and contents, the inscriptions have transformed from brick and plasterwork to stone varieties. The material used in the inscriptions under study here is brick and plaster. The contents of the plaster Kufic inscriptions of the

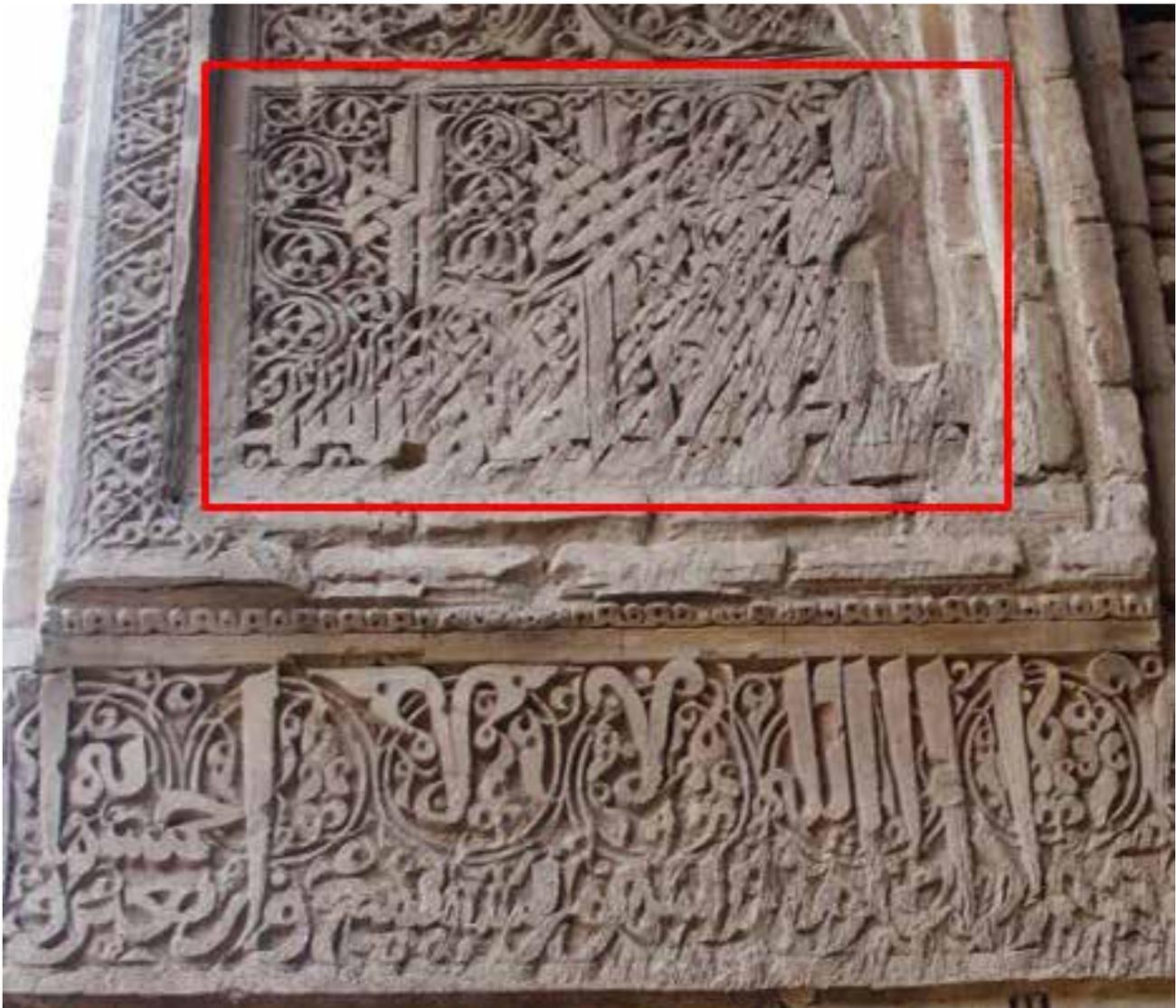


Fig . 14. The ending of the Thulth calligraphic inscription of the third iwan, and the plaster inscription above it, in complex Kufic calligraphy, Robot Sharaf. Source: Archive of authors.

two Robats are Quranic. But the brick inscriptions encompass historical content. Date insertion in Sharaf inscriptions is completely visible. But because the back and forth of some inscriptions are destroyed, we have no information about the exact date of some of the inscriptions manufacturing and, consequently, the exact date of the buildings' construction. In Robot Sharaf, the indicated dates have been inserted, beginning with the cardinal lunar months of the Islamic calendar in writing, followed by the names of the founders, architects, and calligraphers. The calligrapher's name is inserted following the word "harrara" (was written by) and

the names of the architects and stonecutters come following the words "rahimahu llah" (God bless him) and "amal" (work of) at the beginning or the middle of the text. But in Ziarat and Mahi Robats, the names of the calligraphers or architects are most probably destroyed.

Those names scanned in the Kufic inscriptions of Sharaf and Mahi Robats are historical. Robot Sharaf is not only more distinct from the two other Caravanseries due to the indication of more than ten names in the Kufic and Thulth inscriptions, but also this has made us better and more aware of the identity of a structure like Robot Sharaf. It

goes back to about 1000 years ago compared to the Caravanseries of 100 years ago belonging to the pre-Qajar dynasty era.

The indication of the name Izd Al-Dowlah and his titles in Robat Mahi helped us a lot in revealing the identity of the building, and we got informed of the purposes and manner of the construction of the monument. The inscription of Robat Mahi also reveals another one of Izd Al-Doelah's titles which is "Kamal Al-Ummah" (the most perfect of the people). But the titles and names such as Al-sahib al-ajal sadr al-din and their relationship with Izd al-Dowlah are still unknown to us. Except for the items mentioned here, the answer the investigation of the inscriptions found at the Caravanseries under the study gives us is that by scanning the inscription of Robat Mahi, we could determine the identity and time of the building (Samanid dynasty) for the first time. In scanning the inscriptions and using the references of historical texts, Robat Mahi and its beautiful inscriptions illustrate the spirit of Iranian cooperation and tolerance. This is how they lived in the concurrence of the cultural atmosphere created by the two culture-loving governments of old Iran, Buyids and Samanids. It is evident in Robat Mahi more than any other outcomes of that time. By analyzing and reading the inscriptions found in Robat Sharaf and Ziarat, it may be depicted that among the purposes of writing the inscriptions was to religiously exploit the inscriptions of the caravanserais. The religion factor has been enforced and preserved until now since the Safavid dynasty era. The inscriptions of Robat Sharaf can be regarded as a declaration of the Seljuqs' surrender to the official faith of Abbasid caliphate (Sunni), and perpetuating this declaration in one of the Eastern parts of the Islamic caliphate. This is well-illustrated in a splendid monument like Robat Sharaf, which has been the traffic hub of caravans from the East and the West of the Islamic world. Therefore, the ruling ideologies and cultural policies of the alien rulers (Qaznavids and Seljuqs) on the great Khorasan boasted with the Iranian culture is carved in by the inscribers as such.

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Endnote

1. Ibn Hoghel wrote in 368 lunar AH: Abu Al-Hassan Muhammad Bin Hassan Mah, may God bless him, was one of the most beneficent of the people and an initiator of charitable acts. This man built numerous Robats in the Transoxiana and Khorasan including Robats of Tarmaz, Robat Mileh, Robat Qawazian (Qobadian), Robat Shuman, Robat Sarmanji, Robat Choghaian, etc. (378 AH).
2. Izd Al-Dowlah first received the title Taj Al-Dowlah. But to avoid repetition of the word "Dowlah", this title was changed to Taj Al-Millah. To explain this title, Ibn Khalkan writes: "when Abu Ishaq Sabi wrote the book "Al-Taji" in association with the Buyid family, he used this title (1968, 51). Also, coins are available from Izd Al-Dowlah time with these titles minted (coined in Basra in 372 AH). Due to this title, Izd Al-Dowlah's coins were divided into two groups of Taji and Shuja'ee (the title of Abu Shuja' Fana Khosro) (Faghihi, 1996, 392; Sarfaraz & Avarzamani, 2000, 199).
3. From another view, if we look at Robat Mahi caravanserai, we would realize that this building is an example of Izd Al-Dowlah's interest in development and prosperity. This place was built following the pursuit of his daughter who had married Mansoor Bin Noah. It is close to certainty that Gatlagh Belka Torkan Khatoon's (the daughter of Arsalan Khan Muhammad Tagin and wife of Sultan Sanjar) model of constructing Robat Sharaf in terms of architecture, plan, decorations, and inscriptions was Robat Mahi. Maybe the Robat built by the daughter of Hakim Firdausi (Robat Chaheh?) was also in this style. Some of the archaeologists such as (Godard, 1949, 8) {he never visited Robat Mahi in person} and Kiani (1995, 46) believe that these two Robats namely Mahi and Chaheh are one same building. But some others including Labbaf Khaniki and Seyyedi believe that these two, are separated buildings. The author of this study hold the opinion of the latter group true. Because Robat Chaheh was located in today's Cahahk area midway to Robat Mahi and Sang Bast, of which nothing has remained. Robat Chaheh is the same Robat that according to Arouzi Samarghandi when the only "extremely noble" daughter of Hakim Abulqasem Firdausi rejected the unduly gift of Sultan Mahmoud, the Sultan ordered the building of Robat Chaheh with the cash equivalent of that gift (Nizami Aruzi, 1985, 83). However, before the targeted archaeological excavations, only this can be pointed out that Robat Mahi in a building that dates back to the late Samanid dynasty (Mansoor bin Noah, 350-365 AH, or Noah bin Mansour, 365-387 AH).
4. The name Sharaf was selected by Mahmoud Rad for this Robat, inferring that because Sharaf Al-Din Abu Tahir Sa'd Al-Din Bin Ali Al-Qomi was the governor of Marv and Sultan Sanjar's Minister, therefore he has built this building. André Godard takes this suggestion with a pinch of salt (Godard, 1949, 10), but other researchers agree decisively (Kiani, 1995, 64). Different names are called by the sources for this splendid monument. They include Okineh (Qudama B. Ja'Far, 1981, 97), Abkineh (Ibn Khordadbeh, 1889, 24), Oginah (Moghaddasi, 1982, 514), Abginah (the version available to Godard). "The Abginah Robat of the Mongols era, which is doubtlessly called Abginah (glass) or "Bolor" (Cristal) or "Gohar" (gem) due to its beauty, cannot be anywhere else but Robat Sharaf" (1949, 11). Some other words such as Sharkh, etc. are called for the Robat (Labbaf Khaniki, 2005, 89). The locals of this place used to call it Sharookh previously, which is close to the name of a village close by (Shoorlagh) .

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