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Ribat-i Mahi (Khurasan-i Razavi, Iran): Evidence of a Saljuq Building Inscription¹

Lorenz Korn

In the architectural history of Iran, the province of Khurasan has long fascinated scholars as a region which allowed them to look at the roots – not so much as a place of origin of many developments that influenced other parts of the country, but as a region in which development was slow and in which ancient artistic forms and cultural techniques persisted to a degree that it was possible for the historian to observe in Khurasan what had vanished in other, more westerly parts of Iran. However, from this impression of the seemingly undisturbed and archaic, some assumptions and interpretations have arisen that will not go unchallenged when critically [76] revised.

For the history of the caravanserai, it seems that Khurasan was an area in which the great investment of the Safavid monarchs remained comparatively low, while they otherwise dotted the roads of their empire with way stations between urban centers and port cities.² In the province of Khurasan, the main road from Central Iran to Mashhad, parallel to the

¹ It needs no emphasis to say that Chahryar Adle, in his unrelenting interest in the cultural heritage of his home country Iran, excelled in the exploration of new material, particularly of buildings that had been only little known before. Besides, he invested great energies in the fresh scrutiny of material that had been known for a longer time, but that always yielded new aspects under his mindful gaze. From my personal experience, I would like to underline that Chahryar Adle encouraged others to go ahead with their research and to deal critically with established views. – The present paper is based on work in a joint research project on the art and material culture of Islamic Khurasan with a focus on the pre-Mongol period, in which the University of Bamberg, the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin, and the Linden Museum Stuttgart participate, and which is funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), in the scope of the research programme “The Language of Objects”. My sincere thanks go to the relevant department of the ministry for the funding of the project. I am also gratefully indebted to the Iranian Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organisation (ICHHTO), who supported our research group during a field journey in Iran in autumn 2015, in particular to the administration of the Gulistan Palace Museum with its director, Mrs. Parvine Seqatoleslam, who granted access to material in the photographic archive. – Transliteration from the Persian follows the rules of the Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft. Names of dynasties and places that have become common in general usage, such as Saljuqs, Nishapur and Balkh, are given in simplified transliteration.

² Kleiss 1996-2001, vol. VI, pp. 11-12.

northern border of the great desert, attracted the most attention. It seems, however, that this investment stopped with the pilgrimage road, and less means were put into its north-eastern extension, to ease traffic along the formerly important route to Sarakhs and Marv – a route that continued to Balkh and Bukhara, into the realms of neighbouring dynasties, with whom the Safavids occasionally quarreled over control of some regions of Central Asia and Khurasan.

Archaeological evidence indicates that traffic through Khurasan into Central Asia had declined from the Mongol period onwards, and that the route from Marv to Bukhara was only sparsely used in the early modern period.³ However, there is another possible explanation for the scarcity of Safavid investment in the Khurasanian traffic network east of Mashhad: This was a region where patrons of earlier periods had already done their best to build caravanserais along the main routes, and there is evidence that at least some of these buildings were still used in the Safavid period.

During the Saljuq period, Khurasan had been a heartland of the empire. It was a flourishing region in which the large cities – Balkh, Herat, Marv and Nishapur – had not yet seen the destruction that the Mongols were to inflict on them. In the later period of Saljuq rule, Khurasan, unlike Western Iran, was not torn apart by feuds between the descendants of Malikšāh ibn Alp Arslān. Instead, Khurasan enjoyed relative stability under the long rule of sultan Sanğar ibn Malikšāh, until the Ġuzz invaded parts of the country after their victory over a Saljuq army in 548/1153.⁴

It is logical to assume that the caravan road between Nishapur and Marv [77] was a backbone of Khurasan under the Saljuqs, because it connected the most populated places that were also politically important. On this road, the famous complex of Ribāṭ-i Šaraf has been known as one of the principal monuments of secular architecture built under the Saljuqs (figs. 1-2). As a large and splendid building, with its uncommon layout comprising two courtyards and with its wealth of architectural decoration, it stands out among caravanserais of the Saljuq period. André Godard was the first to publish a description of the building, which occupies a large portion of his article on the architecture of Khurasan.⁵ Later, a complete issue of the Iranian architectural heritage journal *Ašar* was devoted to Ribāṭ-i Šaraf, with contributions by various scholars under the editorial hand of M. Yusuf Kiyani.⁶ Ribāṭ-i Šaraf was interpreted as a royal caravanserai, built not only for ordinary travelers, but probably for the needs of the Saljuq court, under the reign of Sultan Sanğar ibn Malikšāh. The date of its construction reconstructed from an inscription on the rear *aivān* in which only the digit xx8 is legible, is generally assumed to be 508/1114-15. Godard argued for this reading from his comparison of the brick ornament of the building with other buildings of

³ Wordsworth 2015, pp. 55-59.

⁴ For the history of Khurasan in the first Islamic centuries, cf. the brief overview by Durand-Guédy 2015.

⁵ Godard 1949, pp. 7-67.

⁶ Kiyani 1360/1981. Cf. also Hill/Grabar 1967, p. 67, fig. 542-550, colour pl. N; Gropp 1995, pp. 215-216; Khmel'nitskiy 1996-1997, vol. I, pp. 295-296; Kleiss 1996-2001, vol. VI, pp. 41-42.

the same period, particularly with the façade of the prayer hall in the sanctuary of Šaiḥ Bāyazīd at Bištām, dated 514/1120.⁷ Large parts of the stucco decoration of Ribāṭ-i Šaraf, however, must be attributed to a phase of renovation in 549/1154-55, as indicated by the inscription running along the walls of the rear *aivān*. This renovation was obviously initiated by Turkān (Terken) Ḥātūn, daughter of the Qarakhanid Arslān Ḥān and wife of Saṅḡar, as her name and titles are elaborately rendered in this (otherwise fragmentary) inscription, subsequent to the name and titulature of sultan Saṅḡar.⁸ Ribāṭ-i Šaraf was in use at least until the beginning of the 10th/16th century, as proved by the find of a *firmān* scroll in the name of Šāh Ismā‘īl I. that had somehow remained within the building.⁹

[78] The *Fihrist* of historical monuments in Iran, in a paragraph on the road from Mashhad to Sarakhs, mentions the importance of this route for the Saljuqs, but lists only Ribāṭ-i Šaraf as a caravanserai,¹⁰ although other remnants of buildings along the Mashhad-Marv-route were probably known at the time when the book was written. William Murrie Clevenger published the enigmatic building of Dū Barār, on a pass crossing the mountain ridge from the Kašaf Rūd valley to the Sarakhs plain, east of the present highway (figs. 3-4).¹¹ It consists of the remnants of two brick pillars which may have belonged to a gateway, for the symmetrical arrangement of the two structures with half-rounded lateral fronts on the outer sides appears like two towers flanking a gate. Spiral staircases allowed to climb each of them. In addition, there are remnants of engaged columns and epigraphic bands with a cavetto molding that must have framed the opening between the two pillars on both the northeastern and the southwestern front. The fabric of the masonry in double bond as well as the brick size of 25-26 cm square would support an attribution to the Saljuq period. It can be excluded that the building served a military function, because no traces of curtain walls adjoining the towers can be seen, and access to the spiral stairs in the half-round projections is from both sides of the gate. Therefore, it is understandable that Clevenger assumed that this building had a “ceremonial function on the principal highway”, perhaps not unlike the monuments that welcome the traveller when he passes the boundary from one province to another in the present political entities of the wider region. Of course, nothing of this can be proved unless further material is adduced. However, the formula ‘azza naṣruhū – “may his victory be glorious” – that remains of the end of the inscription on the eastern tower indicates that it must have contained the name of a ruler before. It would be interesting to know whether caravans and Saljuq officials stopped at such a place and took their rest before following the road down to the far side of the pass, and what the presence of a gate that was probably built by the sultan or by a provincial governor would have implied.

⁷ For Bištām, cf. Adle 2015, pp. 90-94.

⁸ Text of the inscription: Godard 1949, 13, 55; Dānišdūst, in: Kiyani 1360/1981, p. 2. – Terken Ḥātūn is also mentioned in the *K. Aḥbār ad-daula as-salġūqīya*, ed. Iqbal, 1933/ 1984, pp. 92, 94; transl. Bosworth, pp. 64-65.

⁹ Cf. Afšār 1360/1981.

¹⁰ Miškātī, 1345/1966, p. 75.

¹¹ Clevenger 1968, p. 58; cf. also the mention in Gropp 1995, p. 216.

Another caravanserai along the same route is Ribāṭ-i Māhī. It is situated south-west of Ribāṭ-i Šaraf, about two day journeys closer to Ṭūs, on the banks of the Kašaf Rūd. The ruins are preserved to a degree that allowed [79] Wolfram Kleiss to draw a schematic ground plan from his observations in 1995 (fig. 5). Walls with brick and stucco decoration were standing to the springing of the vaults in some parts of the building when I visited the place in 2000 and in 2015 (figs. 6-9). However, comparison with earlier photographic material makes it abundantly clear what damage has been done to the building in the course of the 20th century.¹²

Ribāṭ-i Māhī was already known to Godard, who, however, did not visit it himself and restricted his remarks to a footnote in his Khurasan article.¹³ Derek Hill published a brief description together with photographs in an article in *The Illustrated London News*,¹⁴ and a few images were published by him and Oleg Grabar in their book on Islamic architecture and its decoration.¹⁵ Anthony Hutt mentioned Ribāṭ-i Māhī in a brief survey report¹⁶ and highlighted one feature of its vaulting, namely, the split squinch in which a vertical groove separates two spherical lobes. According to his view, this form might be considered a precursor of the trilobed squinch-cell compositions of the pre-Saljuq and Saljuq period and thereby, ultimately, of the use of *muqarnas* in the transitional zone supporting a dome. Nearly at the same time, Oktay Aslanapa published a ground plan in his survey of Turkish art.¹⁷ He allotted Ribāṭ-i Māhī a rather prominent place in the development of ground plans because, in his view, this was the first moment in Iranian architectural history when the four-*aivān* courtyard could be seen in combination with a dome chamber in the main axis. Wolfram Kleiss, finally, lists Ribāṭ-i Māhī in his comprehensive work on Iranian caravanserais, with a ground plan and a reconstructed elevation of the south façade.¹⁸ In all of these publications, the date of the building is given as [80] 410/1019-20 or 411/1020-21.

This date rests on the identification of Ribāṭ-i Māhī with a caravanserai that is mentioned by the 15th-century historiographer Ḥāfiẓ-i Abrū. According to his report, sultan Maḥmūd of Ġazna had wanted to donate money to the daughter of Firdausī after the poet's death, in a belated move of recognition of his achievement. Firdausī's daughter, however, felt offended and rejected the royal gift. Maḥmūd instead decided to use the money for the welfare of the Muslims and to build the caravanserai on the road leading eastwards from Ṭūs. Obviously, Godard assumed that the name given by Ḥāfiẓ-i Abrū, Ribāṭ-i Čāha, was changed to the present form of Ribāṭ-i Māhī. He gave the year after Firdausī's death as the construction

¹² It is my pleasure to thank Barbara Finster for lending her photographs from her extensive travels during the 1970s.

¹³ Godard 1949, p. 10, note 2.

¹⁴ Hill 1966.

¹⁵ Hill/Grabar 1967, fig. 538-541.

¹⁶ Hutt 1970, p. 205.

¹⁷ Aslanapa 1971, pp. 62-63. – It remains unclear what the source of this drawing was.

¹⁸ Kleiss, 1996-2001, vol. VI, pp. 41-42; cf. also Gropp 1995, pp. 202, 216. – Another image from Ribāṭ-i Māhī was published by Kiyānī in his book on Ribāṭ-i Šaraf, probably mixed into the images from Ribāṭ-i Šaraf by mistake: cf. Kiyānī 360/1981, fig. 35, showing the south wall of the eastern *aivān*, with parts of the stucco inscription that are now missing.

date of the caravanserai. In his publication of 1966, Hill quoted the anecdote on sultan Maḥmūd from Godard, and compared the style of the stucco inscriptions to those in the mausoleum of Sangbast, considered to be built before 419/1028.¹⁹ All later authors apparently adopted the early 11th-century dating, and as mentioned above, drew their conclusions on the development of architectural forms, from which Ribāṭ-i Māhī would assume a rather crucial position in the history of Iranian architecture. Only in the caption of two photographs published by Antony Hutt and Leonard Harrow, slight doubts are expressed about the dating that was based on a legendary attribution, and it is suggested that the appearance of the caravanserai could go back to a thorough renovation contemporary with that of Ribāṭ-i Šāraf, in the mid-12th century.²⁰

Located on a strip of even ground between the river bed of the Kašaf Rūd and the slope of hills to the north, the caravanserai is visible from afar. Its ground plan is nearly square, with rooms arranged in four wings around a central courtyard of 41.20 x 36.40 m (fig. 5).²¹ The entrance is from the south, through a monumental gateway into which quarter-round towers are integrated at both sides (figs. 8-9), while the four corners and the centers of the three other outer façades are marked with three-quarter and half-round towers. The layout of rooms around the courtyard cannot be reconstructed with [81] absolute certainty, but it seems clear that there were chambers lined up behind the courtyard façades, interrupted by an *aivān* in the middle axis of each side. Behind each *aivān* was a dome chamber, while elongated halls occupied the space between the lateral chambers and the outer walls. Next to the gate, the arrangement of rooms was again different, with at least two domed chambers to the left (western) side of the entrance passage. Concluding from Ribāṭ-i Šāraf, one might assume that the room with the larger dome, which was probably accessible from the courtyard, might have served as a small mosque.

All parts of the caravanserai were built of brick. While the outer walls were mostly plain, the vaults of the gate and of the *aivāns*, and at least part of the domes, were ornamented with brick patterns in geometric compositions. In some places, bands of specially shaped brick were applied to frame certain fields of the walls and vaults. Thus, in the gateway as well as in the eastern *aivān*, transverse arches were used to divide the barrel vaults into fields, which were framed with a decorative frieze. This frieze repeats a characteristic motif that vaguely resembles a bone, composed of small c-shaped and larger 𐎀-shaped bricks (fig. 7).

For details of the decoration, stucco was used. In the outer flanking walls of the gateway, large parts of the walls are covered with rectilinear strapwork patterns (fig. 6). The intersecting bands are reminiscent of brick patterns (their width also fitting approximately the size of bricks), while the interstices are filled with vegetal elements. Above, the wall zone terminates with an epigraphic band in which densely written Kufic letters dominate the

¹⁹ For Sangbast, cf. Diez 1918, pp. 52-55; Mavlavī 1975, pp. 6-7; Sourdel/Sourdel-Thomine 1969; Gropp 1995, pp. 201-202, 216-217; Giyāhī 1393/2014, pp. 33-38.

²⁰ Hutt/Harrow 1977, pp. 118-119, pl. 62-63.

²¹ Measures after Kleiss 1996-2001, vol. VI, p. 40.

appearance with their upright *hastae*. The background is filled with a loosely undulating tendril consisting of two parallel lines from which scrolls and leaves branch off so as to fill the space between the letters. In the vault, the stucco decoration continued with imitated brickwork and with a field of strapwork pattern based on alternating octagons and squares. Of the decoration in the eastern *avān*, a section of an epigraphic band has been preserved that shows the same kind of double tendril in low undulations as in the gateway (fig. 7).

Parallels for both the brick and the stucco decoration can be found in the Saljuq architecture of Marv. Here, some of the mausolea of the Saljuq period are decorated with large-format brick patterns that resemble the spandrel decoration in the *avān* façades of Ribāṭ-i Šaraf. The mausolea of Imam [82] Bakr, Khuday Nazar and Muḥammad ibn Zaid – the latter dated 506/1112-13 – feature friezes with the bone-motif just like the one at Ribāṭ-i Māhī.²² The architecture and the stucco decoration of the mausoleum of sultan Sanğar display very close similarities with Ribāṭ-i Māhī, too: The barrel vaults of the gallery are divided into larger fields separated by narrow transverse arches, which are also differentiated by their stucco decoration.²³ While the arches are ornamented with detailed tendrils, partly enhanced with epigraphic fields at the springing of the arch, the larger fields in between are rather subdued in their stucco decoration, which is mostly restricted to the imitation of brick patterns, supplemented with some stylized vegetal elements in the vertical “joints”. Details that are strikingly similar to the stucco of Ribāṭ-i Māhī (and Ribāṭ-i Šaraf, particularly the second gate, fig. 2) can be seen in the vegetal elements between the *hastae* of inscriptions, and in the tripartite flower with a larger, diamond-shaped petal between two smaller lateral leaves that bend down sideways.

Thus, from the style of its architecture and decoration, Ribāṭ-i Māhī is closely related to Ribāṭ-i Šaraf, and in turn, both caravanserais show a very close similarity in their brick masonry, brick patterns and stucco decoration with buildings at Marv. The correspondence with the mausoleum of sultan Sanğar is so strikingly close that one might postulate the same workshop – perhaps led by a master builder from Sarakhs, as attested by a few inscriptions on Saljuq buildings in the wider region of Khurasan.²⁴

While the large east-western caravan route through Ṭūs and Sarakhs served as the main connection between the western and central Iranian provinces and Central Asia already under the Abbasids, Samanids and Ghaznavids (as Ḥāfiz-i Abrū’s report suggests), it became even more important under the Saljuqs, when Sanğar resided in Marv. The Saljuq

²² Cf. Khmelniĭskiy 1996-1997, I, pp. 108-111, 155-157; Sayan 1999, pp. 86-99, 111-113; Hillenbrand 2011, 278-281; Mamedov/Muradov 2013, pp. 146-148; Herrmann et al. 2002; the useful website through which the photographic archive of the international Marv project could be accessed in 2009 at <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/merv/Research/Activities/Information%20platform/index.htm> was unfortunately no longer available in 2016.

²³ Cf. Cohn-Wiener 1930, pp. 15-16, pl. 7-8; Khmelniĭskiy 1996-1997, vol. II, p. 47; Sayan 1999, pp. 98-99, fig. 35-36; Hillenbrand 2011, 295-303. – Khmelniĭskiy does not accept the general identification of the building as Sanğar’s mausoleum, but assumes that it was part of a sultanic palace; this opinion, however, has not been received widely.

²⁴ Cf. Mamedov/Muradov 2013, p. 142.

government had every reason to invest in this route. If Ribāṭ-i Māhī, on the [83] basis of its style, can be counted as a Saljuq construction, this does not preclude the existence of an earlier caravanserai; one might recognize it in the neighbouring structure to the east, as visible on Kleiss' sketch plan of the site. If there was a caravanserai founded by Mahmud, it could be identified with the older remnants lying east of the Saljuq ruin. However, the toponym "Čāha" mentioned by Ḥāfiṣ-i Abrū is by no means close enough to "Māhī" to justify an identity of the two. If one tends to believe the legend, it would appear much more promising to look for the Ghaznavid caravanserai in the nearby village of Čāhak, 20 kms further west from Ribāṭ-i Māhī on the highway to Mashhad, where a large ruin of rectangular plan can be found immediately north of the modern road.²⁵

Finally, an inscription finally provides clear evidence that Ribāṭ-i Māhī was a Saljuq construction. The inscription is no longer preserved, but a photograph taken in 1311/1893-94 and stored in the archive of Qajar period photographs in the Gulistan Palace Museum in Tehran shows the portal of Ribāṭ-i Māhī in a much better state of preservation, with parts of epigraphic bands in a legible state on the frame of the portal (fig. 10).²⁶

The caption below the image explains the photograph as work of the court photographer; it notes the place where the photo was taken, as Ribāṭ-i Māhī, and gives the dimensions of the building as well as the distance from the Arz-i Aqdas (Mašhad) as 11 *farsaḥ*. On the bottom left, the *ḥānazād* 'Abdullāh Qāḡār is mentioned, as well as the year 1311 (corresponding to 1893-94).

[84] The text of the inscription is fragmentary (figs. 10-11):

right:

عضد الدولة تاج الملة جمال الامة اد

'aḡud ad-daula tāğ al-milla ġamāl al-umma A-D

"... strong arm of the dynasty, crown of the nation, beauty of the community, ..."

above:

[ابو الحارث سنجر بن ملكشاه عدة(؟) امير المؤمنين]

[Abū l-Ḥārith Sanğar ibn Malikšāh 'uddat(?) amīr al-[mu'minīn]

"... Abū l-Ḥārith Sanğar, son of Malikšāh, instrument of the commander of the believers ..."

²⁵ Also mentioned by Kleiss 1996-2001, vol. VI, p. 40.

²⁶ Teheran, Gulistan Palace Museum, Album 240/1. – I would like to express my thanks to the staff of the Gulistan Palace Albumkhana for granting access to relevant parts of the photographic collection, and for providing a scan of the photograph. I am also indebted to Kourosh Rashidi, who established contact with the Gulistan Palace Museum for our research group.

left:

واشارة صاحب الاجل صدر الدين

wa-išārat aṣ-ṣāhib al-ağall Ṣadr ad-Dīn

“... and (upon) the order of the noblest lord Ṣadr ad-Dīn ...”

It can be assumed that this was a building inscription, which would have designated the object of the patron’s order at the beginning and the date at the end. Unfortunately, these passages were already destroyed when the photograph was taken.

As to the honorific of Sanğar that explains the sultan’s relation with the caliph, the inscription at Ribāṭ-i Šaraf mentions *burhān*,²⁷ and the same appears in the *Salğūqnāma*,²⁸ whereas the *Tārīḥ daulat āl Saljūq* has *yamīn*.²⁹ However, the shape of letters in the inscription appears more like *‘udda*.³⁰

The mentioning of a person called “the noblest lord Ṣadr ad-Dīn” in the [85] final section of the inscription poses a problem of its own. This title and *laqab* must refer to a high dignitary of the Saljuq empire under Sanğar, but they may not be specific enough to identify him. However, there was one of sultan Sanğar’s viziers who bore this name: Ṣadr ad-Dīn Muḥammad b. Faḥr al-Mulk b. Niẓām al-Mulk.³¹ He is also mentioned in the section on the Saljuqs in Bundārī’s history, with the year 500/1106-07 as the beginning of his vizierate and 511/1117-18 as the year of his death.³² Other than these dates, we learn nothing about the person from this source. I could find no other person in Sanğar’s surrounding bearing this *laqab*, so that the identification seems justified, unless contradicted by other sources.³³

For a vizier, the title *aṣ-ṣāhib al-ağall* seems suitable from the comparison with other inscriptions: In an inscription in Diyarbakır, the Saljuq vizier Šaraf ad-Dīn Abū Maṣūf Muḥammad received the title *as-sayyid al-ağall* in 484/1091-92.³⁴ The famous Niẓām al-

²⁷ Cf. above, note 8.

²⁸ *Salğūqnāma*, ed. Morton, p. 54.

²⁹ Bundārī: *Tārīḥ daulat āl Saljūq*, p. 120.

³⁰ According to Abdullah Ghouhani and to Sebastian Hanstein, the title *‘uddat amīr al-mu’minīn* is used with Sanğar’s name and other titles on coins (and in further written sources); cf. Hanstein 2018 – I am indebted to both Abdallah Ghouhani and to Sebastian Hanstein for this information through personal communication, which reached me only after publication of the present article in print.

³¹ *Salğūqnāma*, transl. Luther, p. 96; in Morton’s edition of the *Salğūqnāma*, the paragraph on Sanğar’s viziers is much shorter and several names are omitted, among them Ṣadr ad-Dīn Muḥammad; cf. *Salğūqnāma*, ed. Morton, pp. 68-69.

³² Bundārī: *Tārīḥ daulat āl Saljūq*, p. 244. – The passage on Sanğar’s viziers seems to be missing from the text of al-Ḥusainī’s *Kitāb Akhbār ad-daula as-saljūqiya*.

³³ The identification is also confirmed by Sebastian Hanstein’s findings on Ṣadr ad-Dīn, who, a rare exception among Saljuq viziers, is also mentioned on coins (Sebastian Hanstein, personal communication, 2019; cf. also his PhD dissertation, Hanstein 2018).

³⁴ Combe et al. 1931-1991, vol. VII, no. 2792.

Mulk is termed *al-wazīr al-ağall* in an inscription from the Great Mosque of Damascus.³⁵ Two generations later, the vizier Abū l-'Izz Muḥammad b. Ṭāhir b. Sa'īd was named with the title *aṣ-ṣadr al-ağall* in the building inscription in the Great Mosque of Burūğird.³⁶

If we accept the identity of the dignitary mentioned in the inscription with Sanğar's vizier, this would narrow down the possible dating for the construction of Ribāṭ-i Māhī to the period between 500/1106-07 and 511/1117-18. This way, the building is roughly contemporary with the first phase of Ribāṭ-i Šaraf, which [86] has been dated to 508/1114-15.

Consequently, the inscription confirms what stylistic comparison had suggested: Ribāṭ-i Māhī was either built or thoroughly renovated during the reign of Sultan Sanğar. Since the inscription was placed on the most prominent part of the building, occupying the whole frame of the portal, this would certainly mean that not only part of the decoration was renewed in a refurbishing of an extant building, but that it was meant to refer to the whole structure. In reverse, a conclusion can also be drawn for Ribāṭ-i Šaraf: Those parts of the decoration in this building that have an exact counterpart in Ribāṭ-i Māhī should perhaps not be attributed to the renovation of 549/1154-55, but to the earlier building phase. It will, however, be difficult to discern the two phases in the stucco decoration of Ribāṭ-i Šaraf. Alternatively, one might prefer to see a remarkable consistency in the stucco decoration of central Khurasan, in the region between Marv and Ṭūs, in which the motifs as well as the style in which they were executed hardly changed through the long reign of sultan Sanğar.

The inscription that is only preserved in the photographic document, together with stylistic analysis, has yielded another piece in the mosaic of Saljuq of building activities in Khurasan – a mosaic from which many parts are missing and in which datings and attributions are based on a patchy, but complex evidence, so that information from written sources has to be critically weighed against stylistic and archaeological criteria.

³⁵ Combe et al. 1931-1991, vol. VII, no. 2735. – The inscriptions in the southern dome and in the northern dome of the Friday mosque of Isfahan, constructed by the viziers Niẓām al-Mulk and Tāğ al-Mulk, mention only personal names and no titles (cf. *ibid.*, vol. VII, nos. 2774-2775; Blair 1992, pp. 160-167, nos. 61-62).

³⁶ Blair 1994, p. 4 with fig. 1.

[87-94] Illustrations



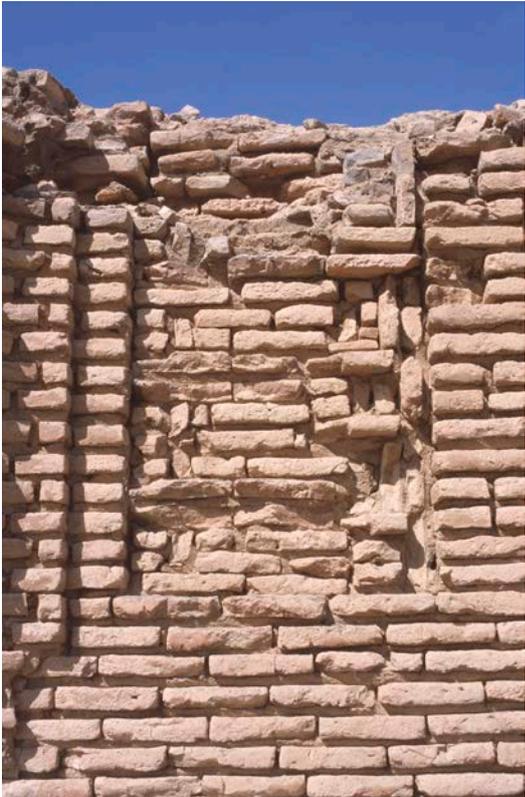
1) Ribāṭ-i Šaraf, second gate (2015)



2) Ribāṭ-i Šaraf, stucco decoration on the second gate (2015)



3) Dū Barār, view from S (2000)



4) Dū Barār, remnants of epigraphic band on the SW front, left pillar (2000)

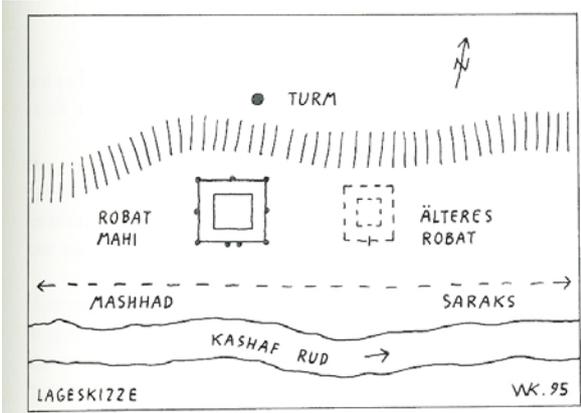


Abb. 49 Robat-e Mahi, Lageskizze

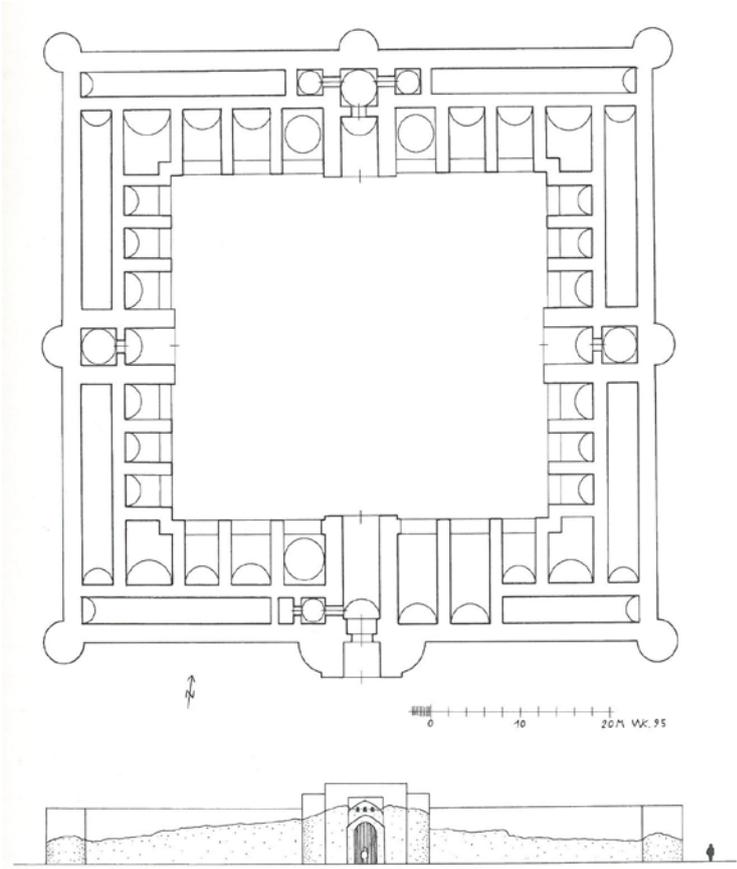


Abb. 50 Robat-e Mahi, Grundriß und Fassadenansicht

5) Ribāṭ-i Māhī, site plan, ground plan and reconstructed elevation (from Kleiss 1996-2001, vol. 6)



6) Ribāṭ-i Māhī, stucco decoration on the main gate (2015)



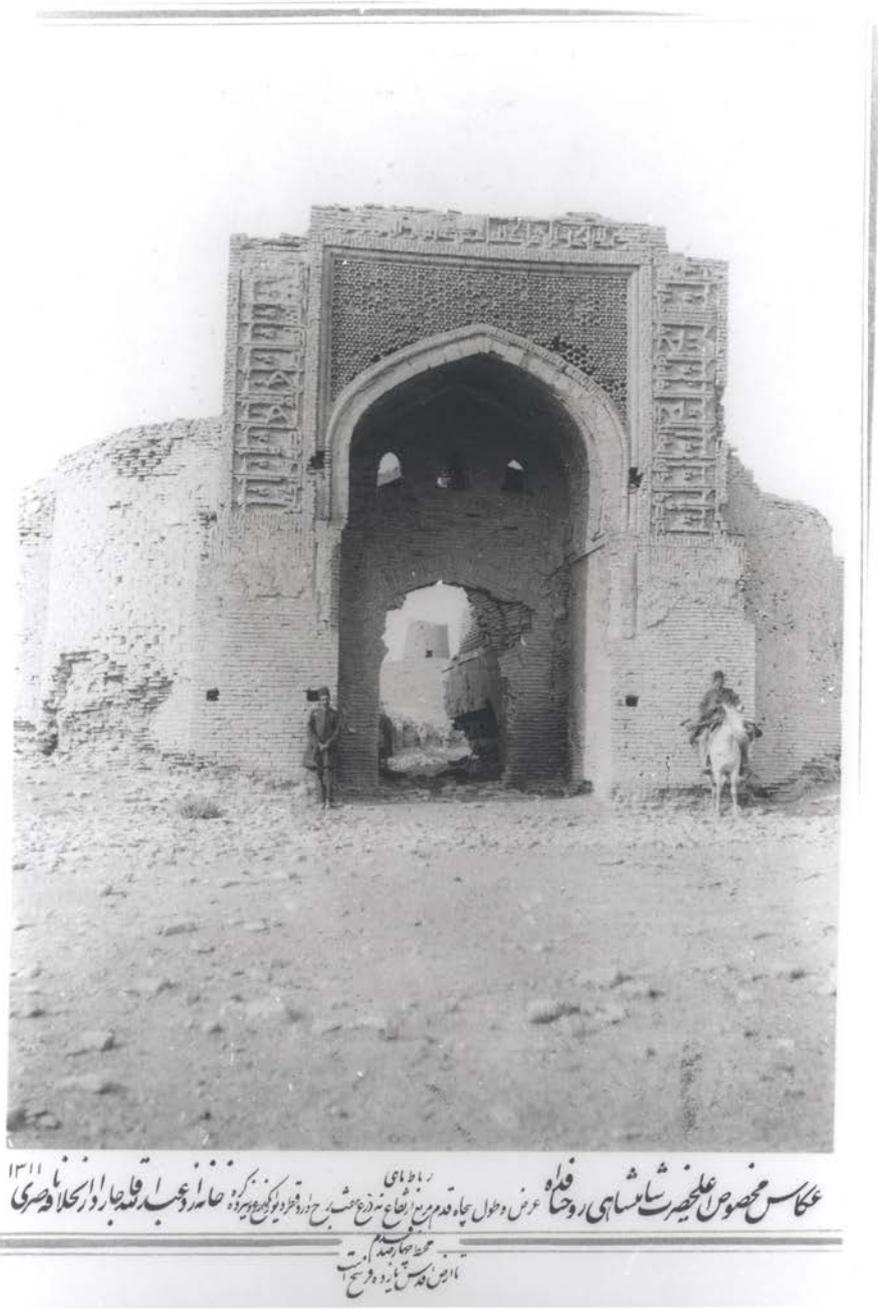
7) Ribāṭ-i Māhī, brick and stucco decoration in the eastern aivān (2000)



8) Ribāṭ-i Māhī, main gate, view from S (2015)

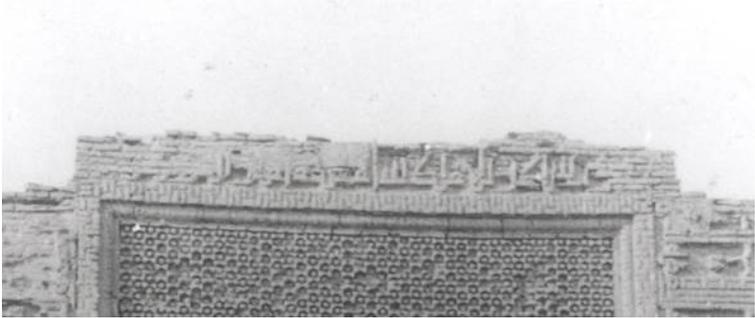


9) Ribāṭ-i Māhī, main gate, view from S (2000)



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10) Ribāṭ-i Māhī, main gate, view from S (1893; Gulistan Palace Museum photographic archive)



11) Ribāṭ-i Māhī, main gate, inscriptions (details from ill. 10)

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