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Between Architectural Design and Religious Politics: Aspects of Iranian Mosques of the Saljuq Period

Lorenz Korn

1. *A Major Turn in Architectural History*

It appears as a commonplace in textbooks on the history of Islamic Art that the Saljuq period saw a major change in the design of mosques. Most probably, this change began with the construction of the Southern dome hall in the Great Mosque of Isfahan, ordered by the vizier Niẓām al-Mulk around 481/1086-87 under the sultanate of Malikšāh, and continued with the building of other dome halls in mosques of central and western Iran, such as Ardistān and Zavāra, Qazvīn, etc., through the 6th/12th century.[1] As André Godard, one of the most influential authors on the history of Iranian art, had stressed ever again, the transformation of mosque buildings from hypostyle halls ("Arab mosque") to dome halls was an impressive achievement as far architectural space is concerned **(fig. 1)**. He maintained that the dome halls of the Saljuq period were erected on a *tabula rasa*, with the pre-existing hypostyle mosques being completely razed. Today, this latter view appears outdated in the light of the evidence from thorough examinations of several mosque buildings. One would also

[1] For a general overview on the topic of Saljuq dome halls, cf. Korn 2009, with further bibliography.

contradict Godard's interpretation that the domed mosque was a direct and one-dimensional revival of the *čahār ṭāq* as the building type of the Sasanian fire temple, used as an expression of revived Iranian national identity. The Iranian cultural revival had begun under the Buyids, but strangely enough, the construction of large dome halls in mosques started only under the Saljuqs. Apart from that, one would criticize Godard insofar as his view was unilaterally Iranian in a very modern sense: Hardly did he consider that the region where the hypostyle mosque had evolved to a monumental building type during the 7th century, namely Iraq, had been part of the Sasanian cultural sphere.[2]

Fig. 1 – Contrasting interior spaces of a hypostyle mosque and a dome hall: Damghan, Tari Khana, and Ardistan, Great Mosque (photos: author)

For a more balanced picture, one would add that during the Saljuq period, there was no strict bipolarity of dome hall versus hypostyle hall. There was a variety of forms and types in which mosques, small mosques in particular, were be built. For example, single domed mosques were an established type, apparently rather common in Central Asia (cf. the Diggaron mosque at Hazora near Kermine/Navoi in Uzbekistan) and in Khurasan (cf. the frequence of domed mosques of the 5th-6th/11th-12th century in Marv, from which one

[2] Cf. the well-known story related by Creswell in his Early Muslim Architecture: When the Umayyad governor of al-Kūfa, Ziyād ibn Abīhī wanted to rebuild the Great Mosque in his city, he asked a Persian builder to do so. When that man had done his work and erected a lofty construction with high stone columns and massive walls replacing the plain palm beams of the old mosque, Ziyad said "this is what I desired, but I could not express it". (Creswell 1969 I.1, 46, after aṭ-Ṭabarī). - Of course, Creswell's statement that "Arabia, at the rise of Islam, does not appear to have possessed anything worthy of the name of architecture" (Creswell 1958, 1) has been thoroughly revised. Here, the case of Kufa is used as evidence to demonstrate that the hypostyle mosque was probably not seen as something particularly "Arab" or alien at the time when the first dome halls were built in Iran.

might conclude to an earlier existence of the type).[3] It should also be remarked that in Khurasan, great mosques of the Saljuq period did not at all adopt the dome hall: Here, the standard type of great mosques is characterized by two axial *aivān*s on a courtyard, with no dome hall. In western and central Iran, however, dome halls, together with the slightly later introduction of the four-*aivān* courtyard, became typical of mosques of the Saljuq period. From the 6th/12th century onwards, these features were to determine the shape of mosques in Iran until the present day.

The present article deals with Saljuq Iranian mosques from a twofold point of view. Architectural design and religious politics can both count as valid categories under which the analysis of Saljuq dome halls can be subsumed. At least, it can be said that interpretations of Saljuq dome halls can be undertaken on from both angles. This may refer to the explanation of the very existence of the building type as well as to some characteristics in the architectural design and architectural decoration of individual buildings. In a first section, various interpretations of the building type of the Saljuq domed mosque will be discussed. In the subsequent passages, inscriptions in Saljuq period mosques will be adduced to deal with aspects of religious politics.[4] I am connecting this with suggestions for further studies which I hope would expand our knowledge of this group of buildings.

2. *Diverging Interpretations*

Various hypotheses have been adduced for the reasons why dome halls were introduced under the Saljuqs, and none of them is entirely satisfactory. National points of view have coloured some of these interpretations. Iranians tended to underline the Persian tradition of dome-building. This is based on the evidence of Sasanian dome constructions, and on materials from Central Asia, in particular the dome of the Mausoleum of the Samanids at Bukhara.[5] At Naṭanz, a dome of the Buyid period, dated 389/999, was later integrated into the Great Mosque. Originally, it can be assumed to have functioned as a mausoleum or memorial building.[6] Similarly, the building named Davāzdah Imam at Yazd, dated 429/1039,

[3] For the Diggaron Mosque, cf. Ettinghausen/Grabar/Jenkins-Madina 2001, 107-108, with further bibliography; for Marv, cf. Hermann et al. 2002.

[4] Both parts refer to earlier papers, and are representative of the larger context of my research in this field; cf. Korn 2008, 2009, 2010.

[5] For Sasanian architecture, cf. Erdmann 1943; for the Mausoleum of the Samanids, cf. Stock 1989-1991; for other domed constructions of pre-Islamic Central Asia, cf. Baimatowa 2008.

[6] Cf. Blair 1983.

might have served a commemorative purpose; however, a mosque function cannot be excluded.[7] Undoubtedly, the tradition of domed buildings, freestanding or as part of a larger complex, was deeply rooted in Iran. Why was it used for the mosque, or for part of the mosque?

Fig. 2 – Ceramic figurine inscribed *Tughril*, probably Kashan, 7th/13th cent.
The Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art, inv. no. POT1310
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Turkish art historians have tended to see the dome hall as an expression of Turko-nomadic influence – tent architecture turned into brick.[8] In brief, this would imply that the dome symbolized the power of the Saljuq sultan, by means of a cosmological metaphor. The image of the dome of heaven would have been used to celebrate the ruler on earth. Certainly, the relationship between the Saljuq sultans and prayer in the mosque must have played a part **(fig. 2)**, as will be explained below. But the association with the Turkish tent remains unproven, and within the general picture of building activities in Iran, the building of the mosque domes appears as a rather Persian matter – most of the patrons were Persians, and

[7] Cf. Finster 1994, 257-260.
[8] Cf. Arseven 1950, 71-72; Otto-Dorn 1964, 126-133.

the framework for cultural references used at the court of the Saljuqs seems to have been mostly Iranian.[9]

Some Western art historians have put forward the idea that the South dome of Isfahan, the first important dome chamber of the Saljuq period, was inspired from Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, since Malikšāh went to Syria on a campaign in 479/1086 and even ordered the restoration of the dome over the transept in the Umayyad Mosque.[10] This appears unconvincing, not only because there is no evidence that Malikšāh ever went as far as Damascus on his campaign – the written sources are unanimous in that he stopped near Antioch in Northern Syria. The Damascus theory is also not satisfying because no architect seeing the narrow transept at Damascus with its steep proportions, in which the dome has no effect on the appearance of the space of the mosque, would have taken this as an inspiration to build the dome hall in Isfahan.[11]

The case of Damascus, however, points to a more general parallel. The precedents in the architecture of mosques from pre-Saljuq periods and in regions west of Iran, in which the area in front of the mihrab is covered with a dome, should not be ignored. For example, in the Great Mosque of Qairawān, in its rebuilding of 221/836, the antemihrab bay was crowned by a richly decorated dome. In the Great Mosque of Córdoba, a more intricate arrangement of three domes was built when the mosque was enlarged from 350/961 onwards. Even if these earlier domes were much smaller and far removed from the spatial arrangement in Iran under the Saljuqs, the motif of the dome and its use for emphasizing the place in front of the mihrab had long been imprinted on the mosque.

The more specific interpretation with regard to the situation under the Saljuq involves terms of religious politics. It suggests that the dome hall was intended to serve as a monumental *maqṣūra* – a gigantic baldachin that marked the place of the ruler in the mosque and underlined his rank and importance as opposed to that of his subjects. The Arguments to support this interpretation come from two sides: In fact, a few inscriptions in Iranian mosques of the Saljuq period use the term *maqṣūra* **(fig. 3)** in such a way that it can only refer to the dome hall.[12]

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[9] Cf. Korn 2009, 250, 255.

[10] Cf. most recently Blair/Bloom 2009, I, 92 (s. v. Architecture – 2. Iran c. 1050-c.1250); earlier references quoted by Korn 2008, 105, 112.

[11] Cf. Korn 2008, 113-115, for the full argument.

[12] Cf. Hillenbrand 1972, 68; Sourdel-Thomine 1974, 23-34; Korn 2009, 251

Qerve, Great Mosque: Inscription under the dome dated [5]75/1179, naming the construction a *maqsura* (photo: author)

There is also evidence that the Saljuq sultans and their viziers gave new importance to Friday prayer as an expression of the Islamic character of the state. Al-Māwardī, in his *al-Aḥkām as-sulṭānīya* had described the theoretical framework for the practice by which power was delegated from the caliph to the sultan – a practice which, in fact, had been exerted already under the Buyids, but with the difference that they were considered as usurpers by Sunni authors. Besides, the Buyids had termed themselves only *amīr al-umarāʾ* whereas the title of sultan was deferred (after the Ghaznavids) to the head of the Saljuq dynasty.[13] It can be argued that it would have served the interest of the Saljuq sultans to assert their authority in Friday prayer, which they were entitled to lead. According to al-Māwardī and to Ḥanafite custom, every *amīr* who was installed by the caliph would have had the authority to lead the Friday prayer in his province – all the better, this would have suited the sultan. A difficulty with this hypothesis lies in the lack of positive evidence that sultan Malikšāh ever went to the Great Mosque of Isfahan to participate in the Friday prayer. David Durand-Guédy has

[13] Mawardī, Aḥkām, 33, quoted after Nagel 1981, I, 361.

argued that the Saljuq residence in Isfahan was probably not even located within the confines of the city, but that the sultan would have camped outside.[14] But even if the sultan was not present himself, there remains the similarity between the layout of Saljuq mosques from the first half of the 12th century onwards with their four *aivān*s **(fig. 4)**, and the combination of *qibla aivān* and dome hall, which resembles the scheme of palace architecture as it was used by the Ghaznavids. Janine Sourdel-Thomine and Barbara Finster have both suggested that the shape of the mosque could also be explained as a transfer from palace architecture.[15] To have the mosque look like a palace would also imply a transfer of meaning. Unfortunately, contemporary statements that would confirm this interpretation are lacking. Besides, it has to be remarked that the introduction of the four-*aivān* courtyard into mosque architecture was only the second step after the construction of dome halls. Nevertheless, it is important to consider the wider context of typological development and of possible meanings. At any rate, the re-shaping of the Friday mosque can be seen as a statement on the importance of Friday prayer.

Fig. 4 – Domed mosque with four-*eyvan* courtyard: The Great Mosque of Ardistan (photo: author)

[14] Durand-Guédy 2010, 92-101.
[15] Soudel-Thomine 1970, 112-114; Finster 1994, 168-169; Korn 2009, 256. – It is self-evident that the sultan could not possibly be present in Isfahan and all other places at which domed mosques were built, such as Barsiyān, Qazvīn, Burūğird and Ardistān.

3. *Aesthetics of Design*

From the point of view of architectural design, an additional reason why the dome halls were built can be seen in their aesthetic appearance. Put simply, the patrons and builders of the Saljuq domes erected these constructions because they looked good, and because they were able to do it. A comparison between the architecture of older domes, e. g. at Naṭanz and Yazd, and the dome halls in the Great Mosque Isfahan shows that a process was under way in which not only the dimensions of domes were expanded, but also the logical and pleasing relationship between different parts of the architecture was enhanced. This can be observed on the design of the walls and the zone of transition, in which a progressive integration becomes visible.

Fig. 5 – Isfahan, Great Mosque, interior of northern dome (photo: author)

While the wall niches at Yazd were apparently hardly related to the elements of the squinches above, there is a clear congruence between wall sections and squinches in the South dome in Isfahan. Within the Great Mosque of Isfahan, the differences between the two domes make a further development visible: The South dome is marked by a clear horizontal partition between the massive design of the wall zone with its strong pillars and the zone of transition with its elegant pointed arches. The North dome, however, has a unified design in which the verticality of profiles which rise from the bottom makes a dominating impression of sweeping elegance **(fig. 5)**. Only a few years separate the two from each other. It appears that a great mastery in handling the design of interior space evolved under the reign of Malikšāh. Even if the later dome halls of Barsiyān and Gulpāygān, just to quote two which are not far removed from Isfahan, did not repeat the scheme of the North dome but returned to a strict horizontal division between the different parts, they follow an internal logic and successfully cope with the masses of wall and vaulting.

Another aspect concerns the exterior. A dome gives a significant outer profile to a building. It would suit the Saljuq period that conscious use was made of the possibility to put an accent on the silhouette of the city. The round dome of a mosque towering above the lower, flat roofed houses could have been understood as a sign of Islamic identity, deliberately made visible from afar. Earlier in the 5th/11th century, it had become common in Iran to erect brick minarets in various shapes. At a later stage of the Saljuq period, twin towers were used to flank an entrance or *aivān*. This was particularly effective as a sign of Islamic urbanism, because it was now possible to tell the orientation of a building, and therefore the *qibla*, from afar.

In order to find out how the builders of the dome halls designed their works, one would have to look more closely at measures, proportions and modules. Unfortunately, the available plans are hardly sufficient. The Iranian organisation of historical monuments, presently: the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organisation, owns ground plans which have been measured with reasonable detail. However, elevations and sections are frequently not sufficiently exact to take them as a basis to conclude on principles of design. Therefore, important questions remain unanswered: Did the builders plan the exact height of different zones in the interior appearance of a dome hall, or did they follow the requirements of the day and the routines of their workmen, had arches put up, finish the wall and see how far they had gone? A book chapter by Kāmbīz Navāʾī and Kāmbīz Ḥāğğī Qāsimī suggests that

proportions of a pentagon have been used in the interior design of the North Dome in Tehran, but it remains unclear whether these findings can be taken as a general rule.[16]
In any case, exact documentation is essential before more hypotheses can be put up or conclusions can be drawn on the architectural design of the Saljuq domes. For this purpose, a research project has been started in cooperation between the University of Bamberg and the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization, with the aim of an exact documentation of a dozen dome halls of the Saljuq period mosques with 3D laser scanning. The first campaign took place in January 2013, on the mosques of Qirva (Qerve; Zanǧān province) and Burūǧird (Luristān).[17] The dome hall of the Great Mosque of Burūǧird can be dated to 533-39/1139-45, concluding from the name of the patron which is named in an inscription on the *qibla* wall.[18] The mosque of Qirva was apparently built in two phases, the first of which can possibly be connected with the date of 413/1022 that is mentioned in a painted inscription on the *qibla* wall, while the upper part of the dome hall was only constructed in (5)75/1179, according to an inscription encircling the foot of the dome interior.[19] During our campaign, the scans were successfully completed. It became immediately visible that the published section drawings of the two domes significantly deviate from the built substance, as can be seen in the profiles of the domes. The time during which laser scans are taken (3-5 days per dome hall are a minimum, even with the latest fast scanner) was used for the recording of certain features such as building materials, inscriptions, etc. An interesting detail that has come to light in the mosque of Qirva will contribute to the discussion below.

4. *Inscriptions*

The attention of architectural historians has normally been restricted to those inscriptions which give a date or name the founder or the builder. However, for the understanding of the building as a work of intentional design, in which elements are arranged meaningfully, it can be rewarding to look at the other inscribed texts. True, a great number of them contains standard formulae. Some inscriptions in the dome hall of the Great Mosque of Ardistān can

[16] Navāʾī/Ḥāǧǧī Qāsimī 2012, 128-131.
[17] Reasons why these two buildings were selected to be studied first were, among others, repeated earthquake damages on the mosque of Burūǧird, which make a laser scan particularly desirable for monitoring purposes, as well as the small size of the mosque of Qirva, which facilitated a close study of the building.
[18] Blair 1994.
[19] Hillenbrand 1972.

serve as an example: The large frieze along the four walls **(fig. 6)** quotes a well-known verse from Sūrat at-Tauba (9: 18): “Only those shall inhabit the mosques of God who believe in God and the day of judgment, who perform the prayer and give the alms, and who fear none but God – perhaps, they will be among the rightly guided”.[20] On the outer frame of the mihrab, another frequent quotation can be read, from Sūrat al-Isrāʾ (17: 78-79).[21] In the soffit of an arcade, a text from Sūrat al-Ǧumʿa can be seen which is less frequently quoted, but appears suitable for an inscription in a Friday mosque (62: 9).[22] These are, in a sense, default texts for mosques, and it will be difficult to derive any particular meaning from them but that ritual prayer was to be performed here. This seems rather banal.

Fig. 6 – Ardistan, Great Mosque. Inscription in the dome hall quoting Qur’an 9:18 (photo: author)

[20] *Innamā yaʿmuru masāǧida Llāhi man āmana bi-Llāhi wal-yaumi l-āḫiri wa-aqāma ṣ-ṣalāta wa-atā z-zakāta wa-lam yaḫša illā Llāha wa-laʿalla an yakūnū min al-muhtadīn*.
[21] *Aqimi ṣ-ṣalāta li-dulūki š-šamsi ilā ġasaqi l-laili wa-qirāni l-faǧri. Inna qurʾāna l-faǧri kāna mašhūdan / wa-min al-laili fa-tahaǧǧad bihi nāfilatan laka ʿasā an yabʿaṯaka rabbuka maqāman maḥmūdan*.
[22] *Yā ayyuhā llaḏīna āmanū iḏā nūdiya ilā ṣ-ṣalāti min yaumi l-ǧumʿati fa-sʿū ilā ḏikri Llāhi wa-ḏarū l-baiʿa ḏālikum ḫairun lakum in kuntum taʿlamūn / fa-iḏā quḍiyati ṣ-ṣalātu fa-ntaširū fī l-arḍi wa-btaġū min faḍli Llāh*.

There are, however, other examples. Sheila Blair has drawn the attention to an inscription in the Sar-i Kūča mosque at Muḥammadīya near Nāʾīn.[23] This rather small mosque was most probably built during the 5th-6th/11th-12th century. The inscription encircling the prayer hall quotes the personal names of some companions of the prophet – the so-called *ʿašara al-mubaššara*, the ten companions who were promised paradise by the Prophet himself. Since the *ʿašara al-mubaššara* were – and still are – not very popular with many Shiis, quoting these names in a large inscription in the prayer hall of a mosque building must have been a signal, strongly indicating a position in the religious quarrels between Sunnis and Shiis that divided Iran during the period in question. Blair's interpretation of the *ʿašara al-mubaššara* as a clear anti-Shiite statement connects this building with the thorny matter of Sunni-Shii relationship. Apparently, Saljuq mosque buildings may provide some evidence for the understanding how this relationship developed.

Fig. 7 – Golpaygan, Great Mosque: Inscription quoting the names of the *'ashara mubashshara* (photo: author)

[23] Blair 1986.

The enumeration of the *ʿašara al-mubaššara* also can be found in the Mosque of Golpāygān, dated 508/1114-15. Here, it appears in a field in the South corner of the dome hall **(fig. 7)**, above a panel that quotes the *šahāda*. Interlocking geometric star patterns are adorned with fragmented words included in the stars. Read in a sequence, these render the text *Ḫair al-bāqīn baʿd rasūl Allāh (ṣlm) Abū Bakr aṣ-ṣiddīq ṯumma ʿUmar al-fārūq ṯumma ʿUṯmān ḏī* [sic] *n-nūrain ṯumma ʿAlī al-murtaḍā wa-Ṭalḥa wa-Zubair wa-Saʿd wa-Saʿīd wa ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān ibn ʿAuf wa-Abū ʿUbaida ibn al-Ǧarrāḥ riḍwān Allāh ʿalaihim aǧmaʿīn* etc.[24] According to Blair's interpretation, one would have to understand this inscription, and with it the mosque, as a monument of Sunni faith. In the following, a modification of this interpretation is suggested, on the basis of the inscriptions found in some mosques, and against the background of the politico-religious situation of the Saljuq period.

5. *Religious Politics as mirrored by inscriptions in mosques*

For the 5th-6th/11th-12th century, the situation in the Eastern half of the Islamic world, i. e. the Abbasid caliphate or what had remained from it under the domination of the Buyids and, from 447/1055 onwards, the Saljuqs, has been characterized as the period of the "Sunni Revival". The struggle between the Abbasids and their Shii adversaries, most of all the Fatimid caliphs of Cairo, had led to an alliance of political powers with religious scholars. The Saljuq bid for power went along with the foundation of madrasas, in order to push back Shii doctrines and confirm the Sunni position. Of these newly founded institutions, the famous *Niẓāmīya*s were only the most spectacular. It seems logical to see in these works of art and architecture – and in this case, the inscriptions in a mosque – an expression of the ideological conflict of the time.[25]

However, it would be simplistic just to assume, in strict bipolarity, two parties opposed in fierce struggle with close fronts. We have to differenciate both on the Sunni and on the Shii

[24] Qūčānī 2004, 14.

[25] This interpretation has been taken to an extreme by Tabbaa 2001. In a less pointed form, it is widespread in other works on Islamic art, such as Blair/Bloom 2009, vol. I, 109, where the introduction of madrasa to Egypt under the Ayyubids is seen merely as a measure to suppress Fatimid-Shii tendencies and to re-integrate Egypt into the realm of Sunni orthodoxy; this view had already been revised by Gary Leiser 1976: "(...) the *madrasa* came to Egypt from the East fairly soon after Niẓām al-Mulk founded the al-Niẓāmīya and long before the arrival of Saladin. (...) Sunnism had reasserted itself and dominated the Muslim community in all but name well before Saladin put an end to the Fāṭimids (…) he set no precedents when he established colleges in Egypt." (Leiser 1976, liii).

side. Already George Makdisi stated that "The Revival […] was not merely a Sunnī Revival, but a Traditionalist Sunnī Revival".[26] Not all parts of the Sunni group favoured a strict traditionalist doctrine in the same way as the court of the caliph in Baghdad did. Some political actors were more flexible when planning for the expansion of their power. For the Saljuq sultans and their counsellors, this meant not to completely take sides with the traditionalists or with one of the schools of law (*maḏāhib*), even if they adhered to them personally. It was important to consider the interests of dominating groups in the cities of Baghdad, Rayy, Nishapur and Isfahan, without too much neglecting strong minorities. In her seminal study titled *Der mittlere Weg*, Erika Glassen has characterized the religious politics of Niẓām al-Mulk in this sense: As governors of an empire in which a broad range of religious doctrines was present, the ruler and his vizier had to care for a common perspective, not for the individual group.[27] Protecting the caliph did not mean that all other religious tendencies apart from Sunni traditionalism were suppressed. On the contrary, Niẓām al-Mulk asked for mutual respect between the different Sunni factions. On the occasion of the opening of the *Niẓāmīya* in Baghdad, he wrote: "It is our duty rather to strengthen established customs than to elicit unrest. We have only ordered to build this madrasa because we wanted to protect the scholars and the common good, not to cause quarrels and discord."[28] From Malikšāh onwards, the Saljuq sultans adopted an attitude of reconciliation, from which Shiis were not excluded. True, Muḥammad ibn Malikšāh led an exacerbated war against the Ismāʿīlīs in the Alburz region. But he did not undertake much to suppress Twelver Shiism, widespread in many parts of Iran. It appears that the "middle path" was a guiding principle of the Saljuq sultans, also beyond the death of Niẓām al-Mulk.

The Shii author Autor ʿAbd al-Ǧalīl al-Qazvīnī ar-Rāzī, writing between 1160 and 1170, in his *Kitāb an-Naqḍ* stressed the necessity and the reality of coexistence, even cooperation between the pro-Sunni government and Shii groups in Iran. Jean Calmard has taken this work as a basis for a description of the religious situation in Iran under the Saljuqs.[29] ʿAbd al-Ǧalīl had composed his book as a response to a writer before him, a newly converted, belligerent Sunni. He underlines how well-integrated Shiis were in the elite of the empire, citing the fact that they served as high-level functionaries in the administration, up to the

[26] Makdisi 1973, 157.
[27] Glassen 1981.
[28] Quoted after Nagel 1988, 172.
[29] Calmard 1971.

position of vizier. He mentions important libraries in Isfahan and in Sāva which contained Shii writings. He enumerates pious foundations and Shii memorial places, which had a reputation as centres of learning and pilgrimage, and were also visited by Sunni rulers. As Calmard puts it, "the exclusion of extremist Shiis from Islam, vehemently put forward throughout the Kitāb an-Naqḍ, demonstrates how much the Imamites, moderate Shiis, tried to be accepted as orthodox."[30]

It can be questioned to which degree the self-image of ʿAbd al-Ǧalīl can be taken as a picture of reality. However, some of the facts that he adduces in support of his argument can be proved. Thus, an assessment of the religious politics of the Saljuqs has to consider the fact that they also employed Shiis as viziers. On the other hand, looking at the *Kitāb an-Naqḍ* and its character as a salvatory treatise meant to justify the Shiis, one may ask what concessions the Shiis could actually expect from the Sunni side, apart from the religious diplomacy of the sultan.

The inscriptions enumerating the *ʿašara al-mubaššara*, too, can be counted among the evidence that confirms the Kitāb an-Naqḍ, in which ʿAbd al-Ǧalīl refers to the fact that some mosques were inscribed with pro-Sunni slogans.[31]

Golpaygan, Great Mosque. Medallion naming Allah, Muhammad and the *Rashidun* (photo: author)

[30] Calmard 1971, 46.
[31] ʿAbd al-Ǧalīl, K. an-Naqḍ, 110.

In Golpāygān, the same tendency is represented by the medallions in the spandrels next to the Muqarnas squinches in the zone of transition **(fig. 8)**. Made of form bricks in high relief, the pentagram inscribed into a circle consists of the names of the prophet Muḥammad and the four rightly guided caliphs, with Allāh in the centre.[32] ʿThis, again, can be understood as a pro-Sunni statement. ʿAbd al-Ǧalīl tries to defend the Shii attitude with examples of Shiites who bore the names Abū Bakr and ʿUmar (according to him, even Yazīd and Muʿāwiya were used as personal names by Shiis). However, from this very passage and its apologetic tone it is obvious that the contemporary Shiites despised these names. The *sabb aṣ-ṣaḥāba*, the public denouncing of the names of prominent companions of the Prophet, who were held in high esteem by the Sunnis, was current practice among the Shiis in the caliphate.[33] In Baghdad, Shiis regularly performed the *sabb aṣ-ṣaḥāba* as a ritual in public demonstrations, and frequently, this resulted in severe clashes with Sunni groups and public riots. Aš-Šahrastānī, in his haeresiography *al-Milal wan-niḥal*, written in 521/1127-28, denotes the *sabb aṣ-ṣaḥāba* as one of the characteristics of Shii practice.[34]

Golpaygan, Great Mosque. Inscription against the cursing of the *Siddiq* (photo: author)

[32] Qūčānī 2004,
[33] Kohlberg 1984.
[34] Šahrastānī, Milal, tansl. Gimaret, I, 480-482.

A climax of this explicit religious position can be seen in the inscriptions which are placed high up in the transition zone, almost at the foot of the dome **(fig. 9)**. Of the eight fields of the main arches bearing the dome, seven bear epigraphic bands, in which the following sentences can be read:[35]

1. *Man abġaḍa Ṣiddīqan kāna wa-Llāhi zindīqan*
2. *wa-man abġaḍa ʿUmar fa-maʾwīyuhū saqar*
3. *wa-man abġaḍa ʿUṯmān fa-ḫaṣamahū r-Raḥmān*
4. *wa-man abġaḍa ʿAlī fa-ḫaṣamahū n-nabī*
5. […]
6. *riḍwān Allāh ʿalaihim ağmaʿīn*
7. *ʿamal Abī ʿUmar b. Muḥammad al-Qazvīnī al-maʿrūf bi-VASAKNRAR*

"He who curses (or: denounces) the Ṣiddīq is a heretic
He who curses ʿUmar will dwell in the abyss
He who curses ʿUṯmān shall be fought by the compassionate
He who curses ʿAlī shall be fought by the Prophet
(erased)
God's pleasing be on all of them
Work of Abū ʿUmar b. Muḥammad al-Qazvīnī known as …"[36]

Again, this can be taken as an invective against the *sabb aṣ-ṣaḥāba*. It should be remembered that at times, the Shii practice was outrightly criminalized, and even today, the denouncing of companions of the prophet is probably the worst accusation against Shiis.[37] A look into internet forums of inter-confessional dialogue (or rather, hate propaganda), reveals that some anti-Shii sites quote exactly the sentences inscribed on the mosque of

[35] Qūčānī 2004, 16. – The inscriptions start on the southeastern side and run in reading direction, ending above the mihrab on the southwestern side. The field above the southern squinch contains no inscription.
[36] The signature of the builder, which terminates the inscription, the last word has not been sufficiently read. In the sequence deciphered as VASAKNRAR, some letters could be read differently: *bāʾ tāʾ*, *yāʾ* instead of *nūn*, *nūn* instead of the final *rāʾ*. An Armenian identity of the builder seems possible, similar names are attested for Armenians in Persia, such as "Vanakan", "Varmanišān" or "Vasakes" – the latter nearly without interruption from the pre-Islamic period until c. 500/1100, cf. Justi 1895, 357–358, 522–523.
[37] Kohlberg 1984, 171; cf. also Wiederhold 1997.

Golpayegan.[38] From the versions current in the internet, the erased line in the north-western field might be reconstructed as

Man abġaḍa Muʿāwiya tasḥabahu z-zabāniya

"He who curses Muʿāwiya shall be dragged away by the henchmen of hell"

As far as can be seen, the remnants of the inscription do not stand against this reconstruction. Besides, it appears plausible that the name of the Umayyad caliph (father of Yazīd) was perceived as a particular provocation by later users of the Mosque of Golpayegan – say, after the introduction of Shiism as the only publicly admitted confession in the Iranian heartlands under Shah Ismāʿīl, and the religious consolidation under Shah Ṭahmāsp. The name of this loathed enemy of the Shii saints might have instigated an extra effort to apply the chisel and erase this piece of epigraphy, even at considerable height.

Looking at these inscriptions in Golpaygan, it seems as if the politics of the "middle path" had ended twenty years after the death of Niẓām al-Mulk, and had given way to a more rigid line of anti-Shiism.

However, two things must be considered: The building of the mosque in Golpaygan was not ordered by the sultan. The patron is a no-name in Iranian history; he is not mentioned in the current chronicles. Therefore, the inscriptions of the mosque cannot be taken as a statement representing official state politics. Second, there is also a hidden reference to ʿAlī in one of the large wall panels bearing square Kufic inscriptions – one repeating the name Muḥammad in high relief, and the other, opposite, repeating ʿAlī, in flat ornamental Kufi, only visible when one follows the decorative stucco lines of the brick joints.[39] If the differences in technical execution and visual presence in these inscriptions are taken as indicators of rank, they highlight the position of Muḥammad versus that of ʿAlī. Nevertheless, ʿAlī is given prominence against the other *rāšidūn*, because his name is rendered on the same scale as the name of the Prophet, dominating the interior wall surface of the dome hall.

Therefore, it could be said that the epigraphic program of the dome hall of Golpaygan shows ambiguous tendencies. It is obvious that Sunni identity was reinforced, while Shii practices were branded as heretic. However, there is the prominence of ʿAlī – certainly not in itself a pro-Shii statement, but possibly a gesture of respect. Shiis who had wanted to pray in this

[38] For example, cf. "Multaqā ahl al-ḥadīṯ", http://www.ahlalhdeeth.com/vb/showthread.php?t=163661; "ʿĀlam al-maʿrifa", http://www.alm3refh.com/vb/t6970.html (date of calling 20.12.2010).
[39] Cf. Qūčānī 2004, 15.

mosque would have had to ignore the invectives expressed in some of the inscriptions. They would have had to align themselves with the author of the *Kitāb an-Naqḍ*, thereby presenting themselves as "orthodox mainstream" Muslims.

To drive this argument further, it would be a mistake to interpret the dome hall of Golpaygan as a one-dimensional statement of radical Sunnism. The patron may well have had in mind to put up signs against Shii tendencies which had taken root in places like Qum and Āva, not far away, and to propagate an orthodox, or rather, orthopractic, position. But it would go too far to conclude that generally all kinds of Shiism were condemned, even using this text.

Instead, we can underline that one of the major points of Saljuq religious politics consisted in the attempt to reconcile those parts of the Muslim community of the Empire which were fit to participate in communal action; that actions were suppressed which were apt to disturb the coexistence of the different religious groups – the public denouncing of companions of the prophet certainly belonged to this kind of actions –, so that a particular stress was laid on public order, rather than Sunni doctrine. Even the quotation of the *ʿašara al-mubaššara* might not have been meant as a general condemnation of the Shiis, but as a reproach of their practicing the *sabb aṣ-ṣaḥāba*.

In support of this view, one might turn to a later period of Islamic history – Turkey under the Ottomans. Here, it seems that the inclusion of moderate Shiis was programmatic for the religious politics of the empire. At least, the inclusion of Shii *imām*-patriarchs in one group with the *rāšidūn* can be observed in Ottoman mosques: Inscribed shields with the names of God, Muhammad, the *rāšidūn*, and, notably, Ḥasan and Ḥusain, form a standard element of decoration. The inscribed shields were considered important enough to be designed by prestigious calligraphers. Particularly famous are the wooden roundels placed on the main pillars of Hagia Sophia which, in their present style, belong to the restoration of the building conducted by the Fossati brothers in 1847-49; they were preceded by other panels, written by the seventeenth-century calligrapher Teknecizade Ibrahim Efendi.[40]

[40] Crane 1999, 14.

Kilis (Turkey), Canbulat Camii, interior (photo: author)

In the Canbulat Cami in Kilis in Southern Turkey **(fig. 10)**, built during the second half of the 10th/16th century, the usual eight medaillons are combined with the names of the *ʿašara al-mubaššara*. Apparently, the decoration was meant to include a great number of venerable names from the early days of Islam. This could be interpreted as a representation of a broad range of religious tendencies in the mosque where Friday prayer was held. The mosque communicated its offer – space for prayer for the whole Muslim community – in the form of names which invited identification. Differences between Sunni and Shii orientation were not negated but were played over by the enumeration on one level.

The same grouping of names occurs in some of the Ottoman religious calligraphies known as *ḥilye*s. In their typological fixation of text and graphics, perhaps also in their function, they form a counterpart to European late medieval devotional images. The *ḥilye*s presented contents of Islamic creed as well as personal veneration in a generally accepted form. A relatively early example, presently in the Sakip Sabancı Collection and dated 1110/1698-99, the main text in the central field is framed by a crescent. On the outside, it is accompanied by the names of the *rāšidūn* and the other *ʿašara al-mubaššara*; the names of Ḥasan and Ḥusain are placed in the lower corners. A similar composition can be seen in a *ḥilye* dated 1223/1808-09, in the same collection.

From these examples, it seems clear that the reconciliation of Sunnis and Shiis was a challenge felt not only by the Saljuqs, and that similar texts were used in the different historical contexts.

6. *Some Further Inscriptions*

During the recent campaign in the mosque of Qirva, a few inscriptions were deciphered that had hitherto not been noticed. In the zone of transition, the hexadecagonal part features little stucco corbels in the spandrels between the larger arches. Each corbel is inscribed with a single word, repeated in the cross-shaped sunken panel in the centre of the field above. Flanking the main axis on the *qibla* side, there are the names of Allāh and Muḥammad **(fig. 11)**. To the left, the inscription is damaged. But the upper part of *Kāf* can be identified in the inscription of the upper field, so that the name of Abū Bakr can still be guessed. Further left and on the entrance side, the two following inscriptions clearly start with an *ʿAin*, which would fit ʿUmar and ʿUṯmān. ʿAlī can be clearly deciphered in the western inscriptions of the northern (entrance) side **(fig. 11)**. On the corbels and panels on the western side, the letters can easily be overlooked between some elements of vegetal decoration; but closer observation reveals that Ḥasan and Ḥusain are inscribed here **(fig. 12)**. There is, then, clear evidence for an epigraphic program that already in the 6th/12th century propagated the inclusion of Ḥasan and Ḥusain in one group with the *rāšidūn* and thus pre-empted the Ottoman practice.

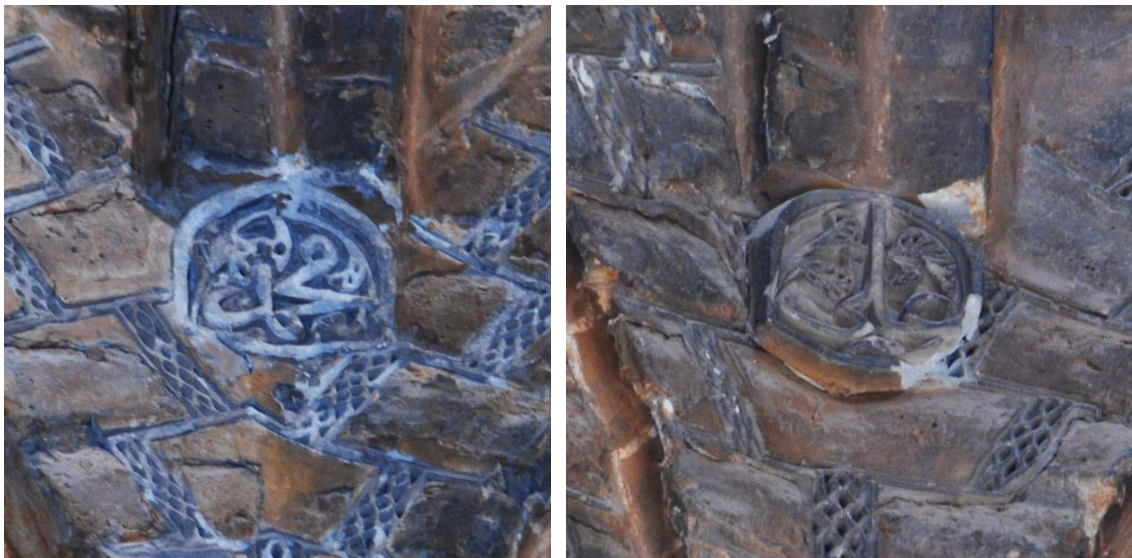

Fig. 11 – Qerve, Great Mosque. Stucco medaillons mentioning Muhammad and Ali (photo: author)

Fig. 12 – Qerve, Great Mosque. Stucco medaillons mentioning Hasan and Husain (photo: author)

Could this be the general meaning of Saljuq dome halls: To unite the community in Friday prayer? Communal prayer was the one act in which the Islamic state manifested itself; it must have been a central issue of a government that wanted to preserve public order and control over the empire. This would also suit the postulates of theoreticians like al-Māwardī who put considerable weight on the duty of the state (or: the ruler) to care for the religious needs of his subjects. One could not do away with the different groups and confessions within Islam, after they had established themselves, some of them for more than four centuries. But it seems reasonable that after the experiences of civil wars, competing caliphates, and insecurity created by quarrels among religious factions, even terror spread by sects like the Qarmatians and the Ismāʿīlī Assassins, the need to unite the community at least in Friday prayer was felt stronger than before. The dome halls of mosques may have appeared suitable to symbolize just this goal.

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