



Received: 4 May 2020
Accepted: 1 January 2021
Published: 1 January 2022

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How to cite this article:
Moradi, Amin (2021). The
Reason Why the So-called Dash
Kasan in Viyar is Not a Buddhist
Temple, *The International
Journal of Humanities* (2022)
Vol. 29 (1): (115-140).

<http://ejih.modares.ac.ir/article-27-42635-en.html>

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Reason Why the So-called Dash Kasan in Viyar is Not a Buddhist Temple

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Abstract: The village of Viyar is known for its impressive rock-cut architecture called "Dash Kasan Temple." This monument is special in its architectural layout; two large scale dragon snakes carved out of cliffs, also the creation of a vast open area by excavating solid rock are the only examples in Iranian art and architecture. Although most of the debates generated hitherto on the identity of the so-called Dash Kasan are centered on a temple construction with a Mongol background in the Ilkhanid capital of Sultaniyya, there has been less architectural evidence to support this idea. Hence, the nature and the extent of the earlier studies are not sufficient to substantiate the architectural discourse in this monument. Consequently, most of the works done so far are mainly limited to general information from past decades attesting its monastic function. Thus, there remain several controversies about the inception of the architectural layout of the so-called Dash Kasan which needs to be further explored. The most recent field studies headed by the author in the spring of 2020 had developed one major question to be answered regarding this site: Why the so-called Dash Kasan cannot be a Buddhist temple. This research rejects the function of this complex as a temple based on its architectural composition. While the results clearly suggest an outright contradiction to the traditional views of scholars as a Buddhist temple, it is possible to trace a similar construction scheme between this site and Chinese style ceremonial halls in Central Asia. This paper is intended to review the monastic function of the so-called Dash Kasan, and to further stimulate others to explore this extraordinary site.

Keywords: Ilkhanid Architecture; Dash Kasan Temple; Buddhist Architecture; Mongolian Ritual; Chinese-style Ceremonial Halls.

Introduction

Dash Kasan is located in Zanzan province near the later Ilkhanid capital of Sultaniyya, Iran (Azad, 2010) (Fig. 1). It is not surprising that the surrounding area was an ancient inhabited region long before the Mongol invasion and the foundation of the city of Sultaniyya, as it was a fertile pasture surrounded by lush forests and easy access to many water sources (Brambilla, 2015). There is no consensus as to what exactly the so-called Dash Kasan¹ is? So far, all practical purposes and all discussions about this monument are simply a hypothesis based on a few known facts. A challenging problem which arises in studying this monument is that unlike adjacent Ilkhanid sites, Dash Kasan lacks a vast corpus of textual sources. Although, the evidence of Mongol activity identified most easily from the occurrence of Ilkhanid ceramics from fragmentary archaeological investigations in Dash Kasan, the lack of direct stratigraphic relationship with other elements of this monument cannot ascertain the exact nature of this presence. The later findings of Dash Kasan including sporadic blue and white porcelains from Timurid (1370-1507 CE) and Safavid eras

(c. 1501-1735 CE) attested post-Ilkhanid activities in this site (Mirfattah, 1997). Then, one might argue that the monument was undoubtedly visited by Ilkhanid successors, but there is little evidence that it played an important role in the mentioned time span and never recovered its early glory contemporaneous with Mongols. According to many in the field, two colossal dragons flanking the main axis at this site, also three cave-shape niches command attention to the presence of a Buddhist monastery² (Scarcia, 1975; Kleiss, 1997, Azad, 2010; Brambilla, 2015). This exposition is unsatisfactory because it fails to resolve the contradiction between the architectural form of Buddhist monasteries and the so-called Dash Kasan.

Literature Review

Regarding the so-called Dash Kasan, no comprehensive archeological documentation or record exists.³ In 1974, Ganjavi introduced the site in a short essay comprising few generalities. The main weakness with his survey is that he proposed pre-Achaemenid activities in the site which led to a monastery in

the Ilkhanid period. His understanding of a pre-Islamic function in Dash Kasan is questionable since archaeological evidence

fails to resolve the contradiction between the Achaemenid period and architectural remains.



Fig. 1. The location of Zanjan, Sultaniyya, and Dash-Kasan (Google Earth, 2020).

Scarcia (1975) visited the site when a significant portion was still under rubble. In a brief article, he suggested that the figural representations on it were Buddhist.

Mirfattah (1997) holds the view that the construction process in Dash Kasan had never come to an end. According to his report, the carved signs on the stone blocks are definitely referred to a pre-Islamic construction methodology, thus this is quite possible that the whole site dates back to the pre-Islamic ages, specifically the Sassanid period. A possible explanation for these results may be the lack of adequate comparative studies on Ilkhanid buildings. Interestingly, the evidence

of these mason's mark (mentioned signs) can be clearly seen in the case of Sultaniyya citadel and Alaki caravanserai (Moradi and Omrani, 2014) in the same fashion, both from the Ilkhanid era.

It is a widely held view that Arghun (1258-1291 CE) was the first Mongol who directed the foundation of Sultaniyya (Rashid al-Din, 1994: 996). Hence, some scholars believe that the so-called Dash Kasan was founded during this period due to his non-Islamic religious tendencies (Azad, 2010). This hypothesis lacks its authenticity if we consider the benevolent attitude of all Mongol rulers towards foreign religions, or at least a policy of benign neglect.

Their belief in Shamanism notwithstanding the Mongol determined early on that aggressive imposition of their native religion on their subjects would be counter-productive. Instead, they sought to ingratiate themselves with the leading foreign clerics to facilitate governance of the newly subjugated territories. They even offered tax reliefs to the clerics of Buddhism, Islam, Daoism, and Nestorian Christianity to win their support (Bausani, 1968). From this point of view, the so-called Dash Kasan could be appeared contemporaneous with any Ilkhanid rulers in Iran, then it would not be possible to give an exact chronology for the construction date.

Azad (2010) points out that the name of the nearby village (Viyar) might itself be an indication that a Buddhist building (Vihara)⁴ once stood here. Recent research by He (2013) has emphasized that Vihara refers to one function of a Buddhist monastery that provides residence for religious practitioners while architectural remnants do not attest such facilities in Dash Kasan.

Although Norallahy (2011) introduced the site as a temple dedicated to the Zoroastrian god Mithra which was shaped in the Oljeito's

reign (1304–1316 CE), more recent arguments against this idea have been summarized by the author (2018) concluded that there has been no Mithraism survived into the Islamic period in Iran. Eventually, none of the previous studies were able to portray a complete narrative of this monument from its conception to completion because of certain limitations in architectural analysis and comparative studies.

Methodology

This paper is based on architectural materials to justify the so-called Dash Kasan's layout and its unique architectural features as the main argument of this research. In this way, the limited amount of archaeological resources, literary evidences and epigraphic records at the disposal of the architectural historians are the main sources. Filling up this lacuna based on these scantily documented and apparently inconspicuous resources is the main research problem. Here, the research method is structured to cater two levels. First, it started from much broader aspects of architectural details and decorations by putting emphasis on the architectural approach to study the minute characteristics of this monument in detail.

Second is that of typological comparison which basically focused on the taxonomic classification of physical characteristics commonly found in contemporary Buddhist temples. In conclusion, it combined these two at the end to make a proposition regarding the formal attitude towards the so-called Dash Kasan as a Buddhist temple.

Description

The so-called Dash Kasan is an irregularly shaped entity, measuring at its maximum some 300 meters north-south and approximately 30 to 50 meters east-west. The whole site lies on an elevation rising on three shallow levels along the slope of the hill. (Fig. 2) Approaching the complex from the north, one first sees a tall 11-meter niche centering the main axis of the site in the south. This hyperbolic vault is the spine organizing the interior of the surviving sections of the complex. It is hard to deny that there has been no ideology behind this representation; one probable interpretation could be the deep involvement of Turkic tribes in their mythological attitude (Esin, 2004: 16). On the importance of directions in both pre-Mongol and Mongol dominion, it would be

enough to mention that the main axis of imperial structures, at least in Northwest Iran, have typically followed a north-south orientation³ (Moradi, 2020: 152).

There are two niches located on either side of the main niche in the east and west directions. While the eastern niche has a pointed arch, the western one presents the similar geometry of the main niche albeit on a smaller scale. The different geometry of niches, varying levels, and irregularly shaped spaces and explicit quarrying process shows that the complex was not planned as a single unified campaign, but rather was adapted to pre-existing structures on the site. Various intact polished stone surfaces suggest that the complex was meant to extend further north but was never finished. The homogeneous fabric of the site was never bordered by a wall. Although according to Azad (2010) the open space, at the lowest level, gives the impression of having been a grand entrance, there has been no sign of any entrance in this section. To date, several meters of deposit is removed, and the detail of the stone floor is clearly visible. When we look at the abundance of stone blocks scattered around the site with similar dimensions to the

Sultaniyya citadel's ashlar masonry, we cannot refuse the conviction that the site was also a quarry to provide materials for this impressive project. Still there is a road leading from Dash Kasan to Sultaniyya that seems more likely the road that was initially prepared for transporting stones. Quarry-cut stones that are abandoned in some points of this road are visible today (Norallahy, 2011). Apparently, the usual procedure for extracting blocks was to cut a narrow channel around the right and left sides and the back. The basement of the upper, previous series doubled as the fourth side and the working face as the fifth. Flat wedges were thrust into slots, carefully placed at joint lines. Iron wedges had to be hammered, while wooden wedges, as were probably used at Dash Kasan, required less effort. Pounded into place and soaked, they would split the block from the main outcrop. While the length of the stones varies, the height is always the same, as a consequence facilitating its prefabrication off-site and a speedy assembly on-site. (Fig. 3) A similar operation can be seen between the villagers who extract ashlar in its traditional way in the nearby mine. Irregular method of removal of stones from their natural bed in

Dash Kasan indicates the possibility of multiple usages over time, even in later periods, and does not necessarily stand for a Mongol phase. Also, some of the present villages in Northwest Iran bear the exact name "Dash Kasan." It may be noticed that Dash Kasan is a term peculiar to no locality, but it is used to denote a stone quarry. Then we have no clue to its ancient and original appellation.

Although the implemented quarrying techniques presents no remarkable features or sufficiently to induce a particular time span, three hypotheses might be extracted towards these mining process in Dash Kasan. Firstly, if it is contemporaneous with the Ilkhanid ruler of the region, Arghun Khan (1258-1291 CE) who started the construction of Sultaniyya, then we can evaluate this hypothesis that construction process in Dash Kasan had never ended due to an outright contradiction between the highly decorated frames of upper elevations and a messy stone floor. Hence, on the question of construction method in Dash Kasan, the existence of unfinished frames beneath the dragon frames as well as muqarnas cadres, one might propose the idea that carvers

started at the top of the original rock and excavated downward (Fig. 4). Otherwise, carving was including architectural baselines and decorations simultaneously. It is also

possible that this discernible phase of quarrying activity at Dash Kasan was activated with the intention of a further modification to enlarge the monument as well.

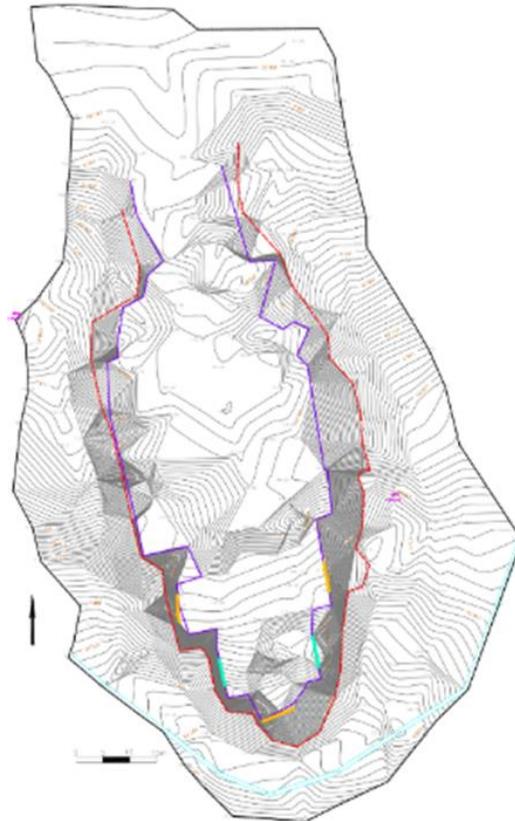


Fig. 2. Topographic plan of the so-called Dash Kasan in which yellow lines are the location of three niches and turquoise represent the dragon frames.



Fig. 3. Current remains of the so-called Dash Kasan in Viyar, Sultaniyya.



Fig. 4. Right: Western dragon frame from the so-called Dash Kasan before 2011. Details are indistinct due to deterioration. (Digital collection of Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization; Iran); Left: The muqarnas cadre from the southern wall in which the continuity of vertical lines is interrupted at the bottom.

A citation on behalf of Ghazn Khan (r. 1295-1304 CE) in *Jami' al-Tawarikh* (Compendium of Chronicles) affirms his interest in destroying all non-Muslim constructions of his predecessors all around the Ilkhanid realm after his epic conversion to Islam in 1295 (Rashid al-Din, 1994:657). From this point of view, Dash Kasan could exemplify a rigorous destruction undertaken by Islamic society over a monument that was never conceptualizing the theme of Islamic architecture. But this hypothesis is not devoid of important misconceptions since there is no need to cut a

block of stone free from the bedrock in partly regular geometric shapes inline with a hostile behavior to cause deliberate destruction or damage. As mentioned above, it is very probable that the quarrying process in Dash Kasan belong to a post-Ilkhanid period in which the stone bed of the earlier construction extracted to be reused in other projects, the repeating history of architectural heritage. As seductive as this hypothesis might be, several problems occur with this interpretation when facing hundreds of stone blocks scattered in the surrounding field. Otherwise, if the

purpose were to support a post-Ilkhanid project, stone blocks should have transferred after the extraction. A soft slope made of quarrying process conducts to the upper levels from which the central niche can be accessed. In all the niches there is a very noticeable absence of ornament while the scratches of pickaxes are visible. In this respect they offer a striking contrast to the lavishly decorated dragon frames. It may be a question whether the marked absence of ornament is or is not intentional, and good reasons might be adduced in support of the opinion that at some point, it was forbidden to lavishly decorate them. On a more technical level, the main niche is part of the monolithic mass. It seems that the stone vault fell and broke into fragments because of erosion and

deterioration. It is highly possible that this detachment occurred through the rapid wetting or by the force exhibited by raindrops and runoff. Apparently, the pressure of the entrapped frozen water or the shear forces resulting from anisotropic swelling produce (micro-) fissures weakening the aggregates. The upper part of the eastern and southern niches is detached where this mechanism prevailed (Fig. 5). Severe rainstorms, which are common in the region, with a steep slope of the southern hill towards the site might cause this geologic erosion. Then, it is difficult to decide whether the fissure in the middle of the central niche is a natural fountain-head in relation to the square ponds or just incalculable damage that accelerated the demolishing process.

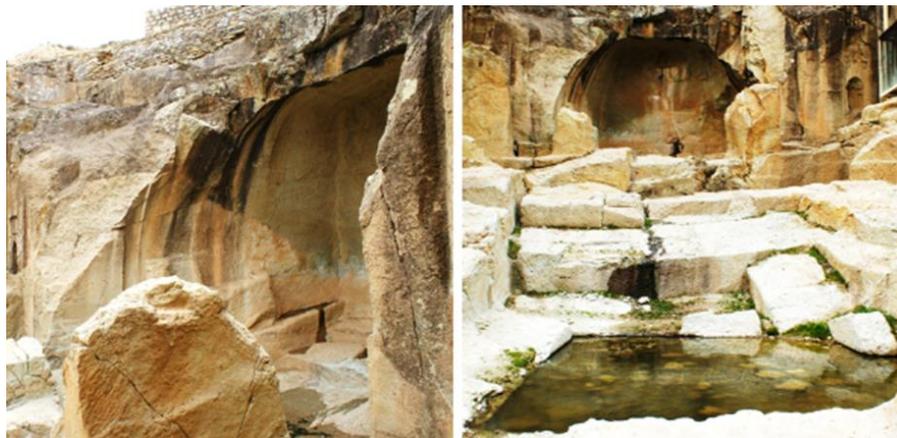


Fig. 5. Left: Missing parts of the central niche caused by geologic erosions; Right: Square pond in the central axis of the complex filled by the runoff from the central niche.

Little can be said of the general appearance of the main niche, but without further evidence a great deal of its top had fallen off. Since the central niche is presupposed to be the common center of this monument, it naturally received the finest decoration available: an elaborately carved decoration bands cross the two sides of

it and reach the top of the walls that does not exist today. Two sets of rectangular frames including muqarnas hood flank the central niche locating at the outer edge of the south wall and on either side of the eastern and western walls (Fig. 6).

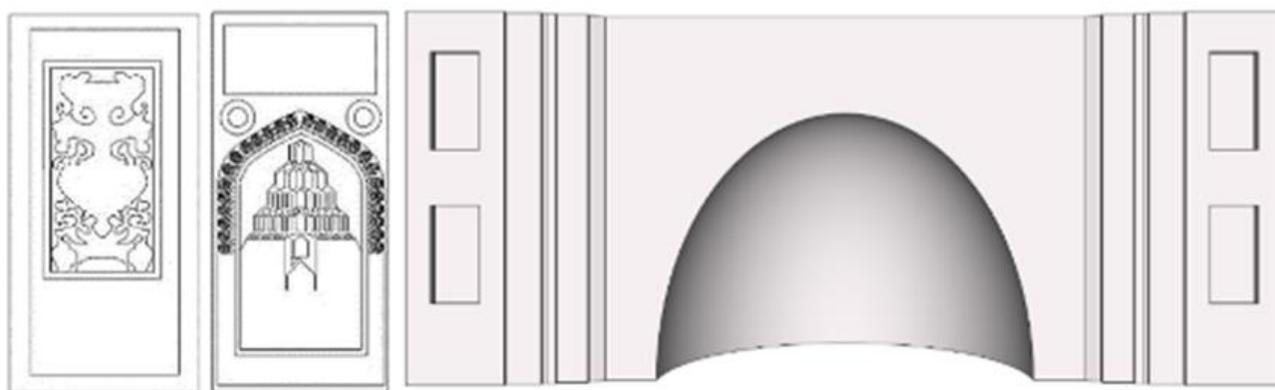


Fig. 6. Central niche (southern) in the so-called Dash Kasan and details of decorative frames before the walls got spilled.

Remains of a horizontal band encircles the upper level of the western niche. This would suggest that an inscription or even decorative elements were supposed to be set on the well-polished cliff face (Fig. 7). While this preparation is absent in the eastern niche, the current condition of the southern niche does not let us to judge about this possibility.

Almost contemporary with the so-called Dash Kasan, another interesting ruined rock-cut monument is located some 500 meters behind the existing hill on the main axis of the site. These remains have never been the subject of archaeological studies. Despite its ruined condition, evidence of cubic stone blocks carved with the same technique as well as several sherds attest its probable conjunction

with the so-called Dash Kasan. Thermoluminescence results from three sherds collected during a short period of archaeological investigation by the author in 2020 demonstrated that this site's historical identity does not differ significantly from the so-called Dash Kasan. (Fig. 8) The results suggest (691 ± 22 , 733 ± 25 , 740 ± 20)⁴, that this site is built during the Ilkhanid period (1256-1353 CE) which overlapped with the construction date in Dash Kasan. Hence, it would be logical to conclude that at one point in time it was integrated within the existing site, thus the entire architectural layout in Dash Kasan comprised of a central niche flanked by two peripheral niches in a way that the whole complex was linked to the southern undiscovered site.

Decoration

The appearance of two colossal dragons created on a polished rock cliff in Dash Kasan, however would induce the belief that this monument was raised over the relics of a king or a high-ranking politician since the dragon (Ryu) is the symbol of the highest rank of the military hierarchy in Far East which this

position was held by the emperor himself (Hai, 2014). The dragon motif in Dash Kasan is distinctive in that it dominates the entire eastern and western surfaces. Although Azad (2010) introduced Dash Kasan's dragons as a resemblance to Chinese dragons, however, her conclusion appears to be over-ambitious because the dragon has been found as the auspicious at almost all parts of Asia Pacific including China, Korea, Japan, Southeast Asia, Bhutan, Nepal, India, and etc. Considering the largest contiguous land empire in history under the Mongol dominion, unlike Azad (2010) we are permitted to conclude that the prototype for the Ilkhanid dragon was not merely Chinese since the Mongols provide the craftsmen with a higher status than was the case in many societies (Serruys, 1959), and artisans from four corners of the Mongol territory were free to inject their attitudes in Mongol art. From this point of view, dragons in Dash Kasan are not exclusively Chinese. Also, the comparative study of dragons in Dash Kasan can be enlarged as a study of East Asian dragons and the Southeast Asian legendary "naga" (snake/dragon) in a broader perspective. On a general level, the overall

picture of dragon in Dash Kasan has been fully depicted as the absorption of Southeast Asian civilization and the imported East Asian philosophies (Them and Tho, 2011). Although the existence of dragon in Dash Kasan seem to distinguish this monument as a sacred place, this representation does not necessarily depict a Buddhist temple because in East, dragon in mythology is a conceptual animal that

symbolizes supernatural power, wisdom, strength, and hidden knowledge as well (Ranjan and Chang, 2010). In any case, - the accurate identification of these dragons only strengthened the argument for interactions between Iran and the Far East which was so probable during the Mongol domain, the only logical interpretation towards this symbol in the so-called Dash Kasan.

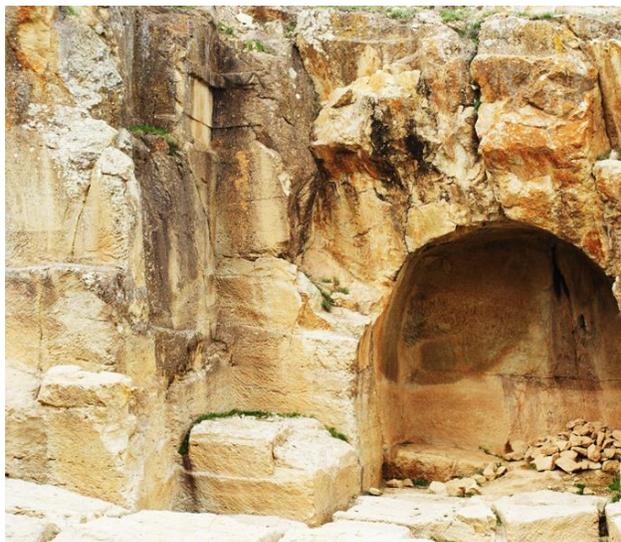


Fig. 7. Western niche in the so-called Dash Kasan including a horizontal band on top



Fig. 8. A bird view from the so-called Dash Kasan (left), and the southern Ilkhanid site (right) (Google Earth, 2020)

In 2014, Tho tried to categorize the dragon motif in Far East based on its physical expressions. He recorded three distinguish forms of the dragon; the first configuration which mainly belongs to 11th-13th centuries is the long snake figure with a zic-zac curly body continuing from top to down. According to Tho, during the next period (13th-14th century), the dragon's body became bigger, the head and the neck were irregularly changed while the dragon's tail stretched in a horizontal axis (Tho, 2014: 23). Finally, from 15th century

onward, the dragon was greatly influenced by the local features and naturally faded (Ibid). Interacting all possible forms of the dragon in Takht-e Suleyman, the Ilkhanid summer palace, casts doubt on this assumption by suggesting the fact that artistic expression of the dragon in Ilkhanid Iran was much depended on personal tastes rather than a specific rule (Fig. 9). Hence, dragon frames in Dash Kasan do not necessarily refer to a historic chronicle nor a specific region.



Fig. 9. An Ilkhanid molded cobalt-blue, turquoise and luster decorated pottery tile from Takht-e Soleyman, (c. 1270-1280) (Pinterest. Com).

On two sides of dragon frames in both eastern and western faces are a series of motifs common to Ilkhanid tombstones, including the stalactite vault which stylistically suggest an

affinity to Mongol funeral art in Northwest Iran (Moradi and Omrani, 2018: 89). (Fig. 10) Regarding their religious background which usually adorn Ilkhanid tombstones, it will

suffice to point out the fact that Mongol religious art collides the imperial symbols (dragon) in Dash Kasan. This coincidence deserves special attention because this could recalibrate our knowledge about the possible function of this site. Azad (2010) suffices to attribute the two circles on these frames to the turning wheel (cakra) which hold convincing clues for a Buddhist purpose.

The main weakness of this hypothesis is the failure to address thousands of Mongol tombstones in northwest Iran including the exact icon (Moradi and Omrani, 2018: 89). Otherwise, if this rosette indicates a Buddhist identity, all of tombstones in northwest Iran

are representing Buddhism. This conclusion cannot be true due to the following deductions; First, Mongol tombstones usually have a higher degree of Koranic embellishment and Islamic pious phrases. This is a serious concern when some consider the Buddhism-Muslim conflict in Asia that still exists (Yusuf, 2013: 360). Second, Buddhism society was only a non-Muslim minority in northwest Iran (Ball, 1968). Taken altogether, it won't be rational to say that rosette on Ilkhanid tombstones were necessarily the confirmation of a Buddhist identity. They may have existed anytime, even on the post-Ilkhanid tombstones (Moradi and Omrani, 2018: 90).



Fig. 10. Left: An unfinished decoration frames from the southern wall in the so-called Dash Kasan in which the circle shapes apparently were supposed to be rosette; Right: A tombstone from the Alanjag graveyard (8th century) including Kuranic inscriptions.

It is surely worth asking what message is being transmitted through these icons. As I discussed elsewhere (2018), these rosettes demonstrated the gender of the deceased in a way that double-rosettes tombstones represent a male

grave while a single rosette indicates a female burial (Fig. 11). This tradition is followed in most remote region villages of northwest Iran even today.



Fig. 11. Ilkhanid tombstones from Rab-e-Rashidi (left), Shad Abad-e-Mashayekh, and Alanjag, Northwest Iran.

Of particular interests in the so-called Dash Kasan are fragments of carved manuscripts dumped in field issuing Koranic epigraphs in Naskh calligraphy which is reminiscent of Islamic decoration (Fig. 12). The size and legibility of this script depict a sparked attempt to be seen and read from a distance. Unfortunately, the content is not understandable but the font contributed to those of Ilkhanid scripts found in Alanjag's burial sculptures (Moradi, 2013) that are partly

plundered and broken into pieces now, then, this establish an eighth-century date for this leftover in Dash Kasan. There may be a question whether this inscription was arranged to be set on the main niche (southern) that is vanished now, so characteristic of Ilkhanid structures (Moradi, 2020). Anyway, it will be open to doubt that an Islamic inscription would not in line with the architectural goals of a Buddhist monastery.



Fig. 12. Stone-carved inscription from the so-called Dash Kasan.

Why does the so-called Dash Kasan cannot be categorized as a Buddhist temple?

We do not have detailed information on the overall architectural layout of the Buddhist monasteries in Iran. Azad (2010) and Brambilla (2015) speculated that the architectural arrangement in Dash Kasan provide us with precious information about a Buddhist monastery. Strictly speaking, the architectural layout in Dash Kasan does not necessarily warrant a Buddhist monastery. Otherwise, not all Buddhist architecture can be called the monastery, since a complete Buddhist monastery should fulfill at least the following three conditions: it should contain a fixed space dedicated to worship; a place

capable of hosting a substantial number of resident monks or nuns; and also, a place where rituals are regularly performed (He, 2013) which the latter one stands for enough covered space.

If we accept the idea of a Buddhist temple for the so-called Dash Kasan, one might suggest a probable link with the monasteries of China, Korea, and Japan due to the cultural contacts provided by the Mongol invasion of Iran (1219-1221 CE). When we study the spatial composition of a Buddhist monastery in Far East, under normal circumstances, the following discrepancies would appear in comparison with the so-called Dash Kasan:

The main entrance of Buddhist monasteries mainly located on the south side of the monastic complex (He, 2013) while in Dash Kasan there is no specific remains marked as an entrance. Even if there was, it must have been located on the north, the only possible location.

all Buddhist monasteries are surrounded by a perimeter wall that served as the outer boundary. Also, a portico set at the edge of the monastery marked its limit that can be used to separate different Compounds within a monastery (Seiichi, 1969; Shoshin, 1974) while Dash Kasan never surrounded by a wall.

Another structure that is absent in Dash Kasan is the roofed corridor which normally used to connect different structures in a Buddhist monastery (Xiao, 2003: 56).

The pagoda in Buddhist monasteries marked the place where Sakyamuni's śarīra was conserved. As the most important building of the monastery, the pagoda was placed at its center (Nakamura and Okazaki, 2016). The shortage of such a unit could be vigorously challenged in Dash Kasan.

The so-called Dash Kasan doesn't represents a Buddha Hall which is a building to

present offering and carry out religious rituals in front of the Buddha or Budhisattva images (He, 2013).

Architectural remains in Dash Kasan do not confirm any covered area befitting a Lecture Hall that is a gathering place for the studying of sutras and the performing of daily rituals (Behrendt, 2006).

In addition to above-mentioned units, which have special religious function and are essential for the running of a monastery, other auxiliary buildings, such as monk's quarters, meditation rooms, sutra halls, and bell tower (Miller, 1979) did not exist on this site.

Considering the essential requisites of a Buddhist monastery, more complicated is the question: where were the monks' and pilgrims' residences. By taking into account the tribal nature of Mongol lifestyle (Tesouf, 2009: 102, Moradi and Omrani, 2015), one might propose the possibility of portable residences like yurts, which are used as a dwelling by several distinct nomadic groups in the steppes of Central Asia, as an alternative for lodging places. This is certainly possible but unlikely or at least not common for a permanent building like a temple. Even if true, we have no remains to

suspect the eulogium referred. If the caves in Dash Kasan are to be deemed vihara archetype (Azad, 2010), were constructed to the lodgment of status or idols, there were be no cells for the occupants. We should allude to the viharas of Darunta and Hadda in Afghanistan that are rock-cut viharas we can more positively affirm (Masson, 2017: 16) where a succession of cells formed in the rock overhanging the river to provide residence facilities.

More importantly, the evidence from archaeological investigations indicated no remains of heating units or even a thin layer of ash in Daks Kasan (Mirfatah, 1997). This is a serious concern if one refers to Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo's (died 2 April 1412) detailed report of Sultaniyya's extremely harsh winters (Clavijo, 2002: 137). Hence, the critical question remains: How is it possible to perform rituals in open air without any heating facilities where the climate is wet and raining for nine months of the year. The idea of a seasonal monastery is far beyond imagination since this would devalue the holiness of such a place.

Although according to Azad (2010), Rashid al-Din and Qashani provide some evidence that there was a place of worship (bandaqi)⁵ in Gongor Olong (Sultaniyya Plateau) attended by the Ilkhans, we should be much tempted to question the accuracy of the current opinion that Dash Kasan itself stood in the site to which is ascribed, bandaqi. But if it still did, notwithstanding the fact that bandaqi was not necessarily a rock-cut architecture, we are permitted to believe it otherwise, because of probabilities referring it to any brick-based construction in the historic fabric of Sultaniyya. Moreover, Rashid al-Din's description could only point to a focus of population in the Ilkhanid Capital, Sultaniyya, where the Buddhist community was large (Prazniak, 2014). In short, as aforementioned factors attest, the attribution of the so-called Dash Kasan to a Buddhist monastery would not exceed more than a preliminary hypothesis.

Why the so-called Dash Kasan cannot be an imperial tomb of an Ilkhanid Khan?

Historical sources indicated that a bias in favor of a hidden location on top of lofty mountains is given preface over the normal

burial customs, a policy hitherto known before Ghazan's conversion to Islam (1295 CE). The cultural significance of tomb monuments, before and after the Mongol conquest, is suggested in *Jami al-Tavarikh* (Compendium of Chronicles) as follow: "...Until now it has been the custom of the Mongol emperors of Genghis Khan's urugh [lineal descent] to be buried in unmarked places far from habitation in such a way that no one would know where they were ... When he [Ghazan] converted to Islam ... he said, 'Although such was the custom of our fathers ... there is no benefit in it. Now there we have become Muslim and we should conform to Islamic rites (Hamadani, 1994: 997). Parallel to this attitude, not with the same coherence and quality of Ghazans' tomb (Moradi and Omrani, 2015), an unprecedented number of religious projects underwent during the Ilkhanid dynasty in Northwest Iran like Sultaniyya, Ali Shah complex, next to which he was buried, as well as two mausoleums in Tepe Nour (Brambilla, 2015) and Salmas (Moradi, 2020). Then we must conclude that Mongol royal tombs after Ghazan are zenith towering mausoleums, while his predecessors like Hulago and Arghun are buried in secret

locations somewhere near a sacred mountain (Wilber, 1969: 198). Briefly, Dash Kasan is just a small hill, not a mountain, far from everywhere, and certainly not a likely hidden location for a pre-Ghazan royal resting place. Considering the burial background of pre-Ghazan ages, as historical texts confirm, in 1265, Hulago Khan was buried in a mountain in the island known as Shahi Island which literally translated to Royal Island (Sanders, 1996: 90). This landscape has enough potential of being a sacred place due to the inaccessible mountain inside the vast lake which provided adequate reasons to select it as a royal tomb. Abaga died at Hamadan on 1 April 1282 (Jackson, 1983: 63). Although the exact location of his tomb is not detectable in sources, there is no reason to attribute Abaqa Khan's royal tomb somewhere in the Sultaniyya plateau since it was never mentioned in Marco Polo's pre-Arghun reports (1271-1295 CE) of Iranian important cities (Polo, 1985). As the location of the burial place of Arghun, Brambilla (2015) believed in sufficient descriptions indicating that he was buried in an anonymous location in the mountains of Sujas, but Mustufi-e-Gazvini in

his Nuzhat al-Qulub reported that: "He (Arghun) was buried in an unknown place until his daughter Uljai Khatun revealed the location and established a monastery there" (Mustufi-e-Gazvini, 1913: 64). Fasai's accounts in *Farsname-e-Naseri* shares how Arghun's tomb was plundered by tomb raiders in 1847 (Fasai, 2003: 707). It is widely recognized that Ghazan and Oljeito built their own magnificent domes in Ghazaniyya (Tabriz) and Sultaniyya (Zanjan), respectively,⁵ hence, there is no reason to further elaborate this train of thought for Dash Kasan (Brambilla, 2015). Also, Brambilla (2015) suggested that Tepe Nur is the monumental mausoleum built by the last Ilkhanid emperor, Abu Said (1305-1335 CE). Dash Kasan is certainly not the mausoleum of any of the major viziers of Ghazan, Oljeito, or Abu Said. These viziers were all centered in Tabriz, where Rashid al-Din built a famous mausoleum and Taj al-Din Alishah a huge mosque (Brambilla, 2015). Otherwise, when it comes to intended the so-called Dash Kasan as a royal tomb (Sobuti, 1998: 77), there would be no unknown Ilkhanid elite burial candidate for this monument.

Suggestions for Further Studies

In the East Asian cultural sphere, ancestral rites are religious practices that originated as acts of worshipping the dead but were gradually integrated with political ideology for the protection and control of state power, thereby becoming rituals led by the state. Because of this close relationship between ancestral rites and the state, an altar where the rite was performed came to be regarded as an essential national facility (Park, 2018). Undoubtedly, the existence of altars was an important installment that not only symbolize the power of the king in Far East, but also represent the status of the capital city (Hyeryun, 2015). It was during the Song Dynasty (960-1279) that the first altar was built in China according to Confucian ideology (Ikchul, 2001: 529). The state of sacrifice is the focus of a great deal of attention in several of Liji chapters (Lagerwey and Kalinowski, 2009: 203). In Jitong, for example, the architectural layout of an altar described as follow: "The emperor shall help to prepare food for the rite by performing the ceremony of farming in a southern suburb while the queen shall help preparing ritual costumes in a northern suburb" (Park, 2018).

While the significant constraints ban the way to consider the so-called Dash Kasan as a temple, one might argue that the Chinese standard of altars was followed here. Interestingly, the recently discovered complex in the southern axis in Dash Kasan is surrounded by great farmlands, a suitable location where the emperor could conduct the farming ceremony. If we study the current remains of the so-called Dash Kasan as the northern suburb of the abovementioned site, architectural comparisons will shed new light on the possible function of this monument. In this sense, a close link existed between the Song's Dynasty altars and the so-called Dash Kasan. The overall arrangement of an altar during the

Song period included of a central hall in south flanked by peripheral halls (Ibid) which represents the utmost similarities with Dash Kasan. In "The secret history of the Mongols", sacrifice to the ancestors was the core of religious belief (Rachewiltz, 2015: 41). Then, it is not an exaggeration if one considered that Dash Kasan basically inherited the pattern of Chinese altars in troglodytic architecture language. This architectural layout also reminds the pattern of the ceremonial halls in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 CE) was, the main axial hall connected to the left and right halls. (Fig. 13) This composition was the center where the daily sacrificial activities were held (UNESCO, 2000).

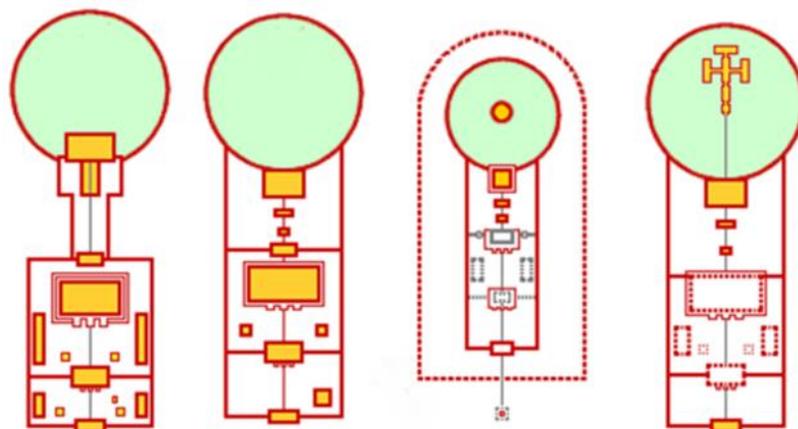


Fig. 13. Ming Dynasty tomb layout in which the second courtyard consists of a central hall and two side halls.

(from left) Xiaoling, Changling, Yougling and Dingling (mingtmb. eu).

This architectural language continued in the Eastern Qing Tombs (1644-1911 CE) as well. The layout of Tailing (1730) of the Qing Dynasty is almost the same in terms of a ceremonial courtyard including the same system of the central hall and the side halls. This showed that the Ming Tombs have a great impact over the later dynasties in royal buildings (UNESCO, 2000: 255).

Other western Qing Tombs like the Changling tomb (1769-1803), the Muling tomb (1831-1836), Chongling tomb (1909-

1915), Western Changling tomb (1851-1853), and Eastern Muling tomb (1831-1836) are basically identical to that of the Tailing tomb. (Fig. 14) The presence of a burial attachment in the rear of the central hall which basically belong to the royal family or king's concubines (not the king himself) would attract attention to the exact identity of the recently found site in the main axis of the so-called Dash Kasan. Otherwise, this site gives promises for filling the gap between the Chinese style ceremonial halls and the probable function of Dash Kasan.

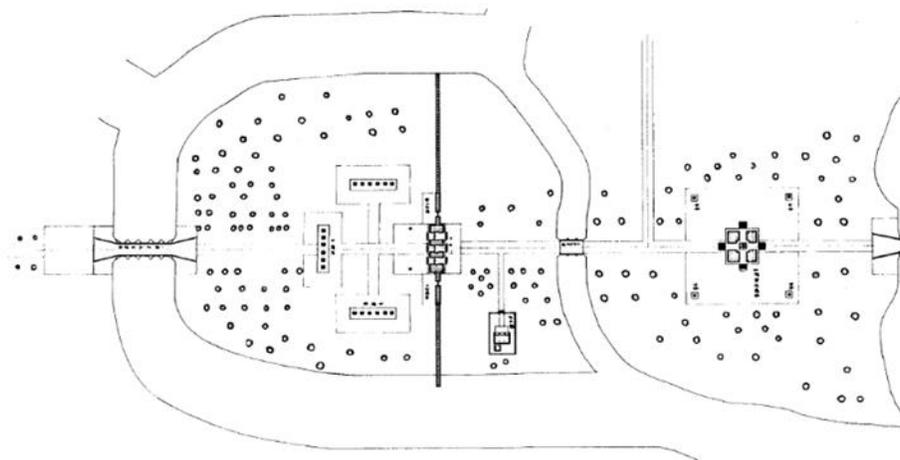


Fig. 14. Architectural layout of Tailing ceremonial hall; just like the Ming Tombs, the second courtyard represents a set of one axial hall flanked by two peripheral halls in west and east (UNESCO, 2000: 280).

There are several possible explanations for this architectural transmission from China to Iran.

As historical evidence attests, by 1279, the Mongol leader Kublai Khan (r. 1260-1294 CE)

had established the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368 CE) in China and crushed the last Song (960-1279 CE) resistance, which marked the onset of all of China under the Mongol Yuan rule. This was the first time in the history that the entire China was conquered and subsequently ruled by a foreign ruler. Chinese historians described the Mongol-ruled Yuan Dynasty as having ravaged Chinese territory and decimated the Chinese population, having undermined the proper operation of government by suspending the civil service examinations, having fostered the development of more despotic rule in Ming China, and has caused many talented men to avoid government service (Rossabi, 2015: 223). As a result of this strategy, Chinese craftsmen spread out all around the Mongol territories (Serruys, 1959) which subsequently disseminated the Chinese ideas into foreign lands. Although considerable time span between the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties is questionable, but the long-lasting cultural intervention between Mongol and Chinese culture is a fact that should not be underestimated.

Conclusion

Estimation of the function of the so-called Dash Kasan is an interpretive problem of widespread interest to archeologists. This study criticized the earlier theoretical ideas about the so-called Dash Kasan. Hence, it could be considered as an addition in the existing body of knowledge, with respect to the earlier studies of scholars. We could see that these scholars were more concerned about the dragon frames than the whole complex and assumed the dragon motifs to be part of a Buddhist monastery. As discussed earlier, considering architectural layout as well as decorations, the so-called Dash Kasan does not represent the essential requisites of a typical Buddhist monastery. Although the function of this site is itself an object of curiosity, as this type of architecture is abundant in other parts of Ilkhanid Iran, in the absence of any convincing evidence for a covered area, it could be concluded that the so-called Dash Kasan was used for a temporary activity. Also, the lack of sacred mountain and a hidden place does not let the possibility of an Ilkhanid royal tomb. Meanwhile, Dash Kasan was the outcome of a major event of cultural exchange

between Iran and China which occurred in the Ilkhanid dynasty (1256-1335 CE). Since the Mongols had ruled territories including modern-day North China for decades, compared with the Chinese style ceremonial halls, the rear rock-cut remains in the central axis of the main niche in Dash Kasan could belong to a Khan's concubines or even other family members of him. Consequently, a

discerning review of architectural configuration in which crowds both near and far architectural horizons demonstrates a gradual encroachment of ritual activity in this monument.

Funding Acknowledgment

This work was supported by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, Germany.

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تاریخ دریافت: ۱۳۹۹/۲/۱۵

تاریخ پذیرش: ۱۳۹۹/۱۰/۱۲

تاریخ انتشار: ۱۴۰۰/۱۰/۱۱

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دلایلی مبنی بر عدم ارتباط معبد موسوم به داش کسن با معماری بودایی

چکیده: بقایای معماری معروف به معبد «داش کسن» در نزدیکی سلطانیه در استان زنجان معرف یکی از مهم ترین نمونه های برجای مانده از معماری دست کند در شمال غرب ایران است. معماری و تزئینات به کار رفته در ساختار این بنا بسیار حائز اهمیت است چراکه وجود دو عدد اژدهای کنده کاری شده در مقیاس بسیار بزرگ، همچنین ایجاد فضای باز با هدف تولید فضای گسترده معماری به روش معدن کاری سنگ تنها نمونه برجای مانده از هنر و معماری اسلامی در ایران است. هر چند بسیاری از تحقیقات صورت گرفته درباره ماهیت معماری بنای مزبور متمرکز بر کارکرد آیینی آن به عنوان معبدی در پایتخت ایلخانی سلطانیه است، با این حال شواهد معماری برجای مانده در محوطه منسوب به داش کسن در تناقض با چنین فرضیه ای است. در همین راستا، اطلاعات معماری به دست آمده از بررسی های باستان شناسی و مطالعات میدانی مستلزم بازنگری های علمی در خصوص ماهیت بنای مزبور است. از طرفی، بخش اعظمی از پژوهش های صورت گرفته در رابطه با بنای منسوب به داش کسن محدود بر اطلاعات کلی به دست آمده از دهه های گذشته است که در تمامی آنها بر کاربری بنا به عنوان معبد تأکید شده است. بدین ترتیب الگوی معماری این بنا در ایران ناشناخته و نیازمند مطالعات علمی در زمینه تاریخ معماری است. بررسی های میدانی صورت گرفته توسط نگارنده در سال ۱۳۹۹ فصل گشای افق های جدیدی در خصوص ماهیت معماری بنای منسوب به داش کسن شده و با طرح چنین سوالی که چرا بقایای معماری داش کسن ارتباطی با معماری بودایی ندارد؟ پی گیری شد. تحقیق پیش رو بر آن است تا ضمن بررسی ساختار فضایی بنای مزبور، نظریه انتساب کاربری آن به معبد بودایی را مورد تردید قرار دهد. مطابق با نتایج به دست آمده، نه تنها هیچ ارتباطی بین ساختار معماری معابد بودایی و بنای منسوب به داش کسن در ویر وجود ندارد، بلکه فرم مشابهی از محراب مرکزی و دو محراب مجاور آن در تالارهای تشریفاتی چینی در آسیای مرکزی قابل مشاهده است.

واژه های کلیدی: معماری ایلخانی، معبد داش کسن، معماری بودایی، تشریفات مذهبی مغولی، تالارهای تشریفاتی چینی.