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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Sacred Precincts of Buddhist Architecture in Northwest Iran

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**Abstract:** It is well documented that the Mongol rule in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries fostered the direct exchange of ideas and practices between diverse cultures and religions. From this point of view, while the Mongols believed in shamanism, they embraced other religions for several reasons, ranging from a personal desire for the spiritual gains to issues of control and political and social cohesion. Hence, century of Mongol domination in Great Iran (1256-1353 CE) witnessed the practice of Buddhism, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. While the importance of the Ilkhanid period for the architectural history of the Islamic World has generally been acknowledged, explanations for the appearance of rock-cut buildings in Iran under the Mongol dominion, in contrast with Islamic architecture, are not very satisfying. By focusing on field studies, the aim is to catalogue rock-cut architecture of Ilkhanid Iran with certain parallels with Buddhist architecture, isolate construction phases of monuments of this type in northwest Iran. According to the results, while an investigation of Buddhist architecture in northwest Iran would reveal a vibrant portrait of life in Ilkhanid Iran by illustrating how Ilkhanid architecture responds to various faiths and traditions, it would be possible to have a fresh look at the sociopolitical history of Islamic Iran in collision with the Mongol culture.

**Keywords:** Ilkhanid Era; Buddhist Monasteries; Cave Temples; Northwest Iran.

## Introduction

Lack of sources hinders us from fully understanding the nature and impact of Buddhism in thirteenth-century Iran. Yet, we can assume that the religion was fully tolerated and encouraged from the reign of Arghun (1284-92) to Ghazan Khan's conversion to Islam in 1295.

From Marco Polo, among others, we know that Tabriz in the thirteenth century was highly cosmopolitan (Polo, 1958: 45). As a major trading center on east-west and north-south trade routes it ruled merchants, scientists, artisans and men of talent from all over the civilized world, much of which was then controlled by the Mongols. Boyle has noted that Chinese physicians were in the court of Ghazan Khan along with Chinese artists, who he assumes worked mostly in Buddhist temples (Boyle, 1958: 380).

The lack of Buddhist monuments from Mongol Iran is directly connected with Ghazan Khan's conversion to Islam in 1295. Despite his Buddhist upbringing and Buddhist temples he had erected in Khurasan, Ghazan's first royal decree was for the

destruction of all churches, synagogues, and Buddhist temples in Tabriz, Baghdad and throughout the realm (Canby, 1993: 299). It is estimated that over the first three decades of Mongol rule in Iran, the Ilkhans collectively advanced half of their treasury for elaborate gold and silver Buddhist images at multiple sites across Azerbaijan and Khurasan (Boyle, 1968: 380). Dominican Friar Ricoldo da Montecroce noticed Buddhist priests known by the Turco-Mongolian term Bakhshi while Victor Mair demonstrate that the term Bakhshi entered Persian in the fourteenth century from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition (Mair, 1992: 119). Bakhshi did eventually morph in Mongol usage into a general term for men of learning with or without ties to Buddhism. At the court in Tabriz, however, Kashmiri monks in Arghun's retinue were clearly identified as Bakhshi; Rashid al-Din recorded that it was Bakhshi who tested him with their riddles about the chicken and egg and other philosophical puzzles (Soudavar, 1996). By fitting the highly tolerant of most religions during Ilkhanid Iran and

architectural materials, this is the first attempt to examine a full range of Buddhist architecture in Iran during the Ilkhanid period and to isolate it from the Islamic architecture. To fulfill this desire, a comparative approach has been engaged to find similar theme between the rock-cut architecture of northwest Iran and wide range of Buddhist architecture in the Central Asia.

### Research Method

This research rests on architectural materials, and all typical building layouts taken into consideration are based on available material evidence. To highlight the role of "Buddhist Architecture" in northwest Iran, the research program will be conducted through two main approaches. While we basically propose a building archeological approach to study the minute characteristics of the employed archetypes, and their detailed evolution in the time, a second methodological tool used through the research is that of typological comparison which basically focuses on the taxonomic classification of characteristics

(usually physical) commonly found in contemporaneous sites exists in East Asia.

### Research Literature

Islamic aspect of Ilkhanid architecture in Iran has long been considered the single glory of the history of early Mongol Empire in general and its Middle Eastern branch, the Ilkhanate, in particular. Theories of this phase of research, formulated by Donald Wilber, Sheila Blair, Lisa Golombek, Marco Brambilla, Jaafar Giyasi and Parviz Vardjāvand, have been widely received and continue to be transmitted in the literature. Early on, authors noted the complete domination of the Iranian culture in changing Mongols attitude towards architectural projects (Brambilla 1980, Giyasi 1997, Golombek 1974, Varjavanf 1972). While these attempts explored many facades of Ilkhanid buildings, our understanding of Ilkhanid architecture, however, does not match rock-cut leftovers in Iran and reflects a huge gap that still exists between the Ilkhanid Islamic architecture and practice of non-Islamic buildings at the same time in the Central Asia. In his book, the review of the

Ilkhanid architecture, Moradi (2018) has suggested a diverse exchanged of ideas between northwest Iran and trans-continental influences. Before compelling this paper, Buddhist architecture has never been treated as an integrated whole in northwest Iran.

### **Buddhism in Mongolia**

According to the Origins of Dharma in the "Hor" Regions by the great Mongolian Scholar "Lozeng Tamdrin", Buddhism came to the "Hor" region in different waves. The first Mongolian Buddhist wave began in the third century B.C., during the time of the Indian Emperor "Ashoka", three centuries before Buddhism took root in China, and some eight centuries before it became firmly established in Tibet (Polo, 1958: 45). Traditionally Mongolians recognize their second highest incarnate lama, "Zaya Pandita", as being an emanation of Emperor "Ashoka", perhaps in honor of this early connection. According to "Lobsang Tamdrin", "Ashoka" extended his empire northward all the way to the Silk Road, and eventually captured the city of "Khotan". "Khotan" was the westernmost region of

"Hor", and thus in "Lobsang Tamdrin's" eyes was part of Mongolia. Emperor "Ashoka" was a strong Buddhist, and actively promoted Buddhism as the national religion of all lands under his rule. From "Khotan" Buddhism gradually spread eastward to the Mongolian Gobi kingdoms along the Silk Road. "Lobsang Tamdrin" comments that even in these ancient days "Hor" supported a population of over 100,000 Buddhist monks (Charles, 1987:374).

Cave paintings along the "Hor" section of the Silk Road certainly bear witness to an early Mongol enthusiasm for Buddhism.

The second great wave of Mongolian Buddhism began with "Chinggis Khan" and his sons, and the special relationship that "Chinggis" established with the "Sakya" School of Tibetan Buddhism. Indeed, Chinggis' grandson "Kublai" went so far as to have his Tibetan guru "Chogyal Pakpa" (known to Mongols today as Pakpa Lama) create a special form of the Tibetan Buddhist script for use in all territories under his rule. This script, known as the "Pakyig", continued as the formal script of choice by the Mongol

emperors who came thereafter, and was in common use for Mongol Buddhist literature until the next Wave took hold some three centuries later. In fact, one theory holds that "Kublai" intended to use this script for all purposes throughout his empire, and replace the Chinese and Uighar scripts with it. Only the bubonic plague brought this vision to a close (Fojiao et.al, 1993).

Kublai Khan's strong dedication to Lama "Chogyal Pakpa" and his brand of Tibetan Buddhism is strongly documented in The Journals of Marco Polo. Marco Polo had been charged by the Vatican Pope with the task of converting "Kublai" to Christianity. However, although Kublai was happy to sponsor Christians in his court and to retain them as advisors, he personally remained strongly Buddhist. Marco Polo laments this fact in his Journals, attributing his failure to convert the Khan to the superior skills in paranormal activities such as telekinesis demonstrated by "Chogyal Pakpa" (Polo, 1958: 45).

"Chogyal Pakpa's" biography (still not available in English translation) records the many Buddhist Tantric lineages and teachings

that this great lama gave to Kublai Khan and his inner circle, a testament to the dedication that this great khan held for the enlightenment tradition. The fall of Mongolian rule in China, and the according rise of the Ming from Nanking, saw the retreat of the Mongols to their original territories north of the White Wall. Eventually a lack of strong Mongol leadership, and the division of the remaining regions of the empire among the princely khans, also saw a decline of the Buddhist movement, and accordingly of Buddhist art and architecture (Mullin, 2012).

### **Mongol Rulers in Iran and the evidence of Buddhism Architecture**

Following a Tantric revival in and around Tibet, Buddhism, supported by the Mongol rulers, remained the second major religion in Inner Asia beside Islam (Papas, 2011). A pivotal period of cultural exchange between Tibet and Islamic world occurred during the Mongol period. During the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, the Ilkhan Mongol rulers in Iran maintained close relations with Tibetan Buddhism. With the help of Arabic,

Persian, Tibetan, Syriac and Armenian sources we can trace the extensive Tibetan presence in the Ilkhanid court in Tabriz, where most of the rulers were Buddhist and their spiritual advisers were lamas, "Bakhshi" (Azad, 2010: 216).

The first Ilkhan, Hülegü (Tib. Hu la hu or: Hu la; reg. 1256-65), was, like his brother Qubilai in China, a follower of Buddhism. We also know that Hülegü, while already ruling in Iran, had a representative in Tibet, who is named in several Tibetan sources as Go go chu (Kokochu), and that through this representative, Hülegü maintained his jurisdiction over a number of areas in Tibet (Papas, 2011). Hülegü's contacts with Kashmiri Buddhist communities began early in his career and would continue to feed currents of Ilkhanid Buddhism (Davidson, 2002: 161).

A Buddhist temple at Raziq-Abad near Merv, built by Arghun in 1250 and one in Tabriz that purportedly included a mural with Arghun's portrait (Esin, 1972: 53).

An interesting testimony of the link between Geikhatu (reg. 1291-95), the fifth

Ilkhan, and Tibetan Buddhism, is found on a coin minted in his time, which includes his Tibeto-Mongol religious name: Rinchen Dorje (rin chen rdo rje, meaning 'precious diamond') in its Mongolian form in Arabic transliteration, in addition to the Muslim profession of faith (De Saulcy et.al, 1842 and Poole, 1875: 32).

Ghāzān (reg. 1295-1304), the seventh Ilkhan, grew up as a Buddhist. Rashīd al-Dīn tells us that Ghāzān's grandfather, Abāqā, surrounded him with Buddhist lamas, and hence he maintained a great affection for their religion. According to Rashīd al-Dīn, Ghāzān spoke Tibetan. He also patronized and constantly consorted with lamas who came from Tibet and Kashmir, and who were very influential among the Mongol upper classes up to his generation (Martinez, 1994: 99).

#### **4Construction Principles of Buddhism Temples**

Shelter for the Monks and Stupa as monuments to memorialize the Buddha and his teaching defined the physical requirement of Buddhist architecture for many centuries,

symbolic and ritual requirements gradually transformed such elements into what probably can be called Buddhist temple compounds. A Stupa originally was used to mark the relics of the Buddha or of one of his principal disciples, significant objects (such as his begging bowl), or places related to his life or sanctified by his presence. At the same time, however, the structure of such a memorial Stupa incorporated cosmogonic and cosmological references as to a point or place of cosmic orientation to a vertical axis making cosmic parturition, and to the cardinal orientation of the created universe. Rituals related to such cosmogonic and cosmological beliefs must have been carried out around large Stupas such as those constructed at Sanci, Taxila, or Amaravati. Small Stupas were often used as votive markers of a follower's devotion, set up by laity as well as by members of the Buddha's order (samagha). Initially, the Buddha himself, as a great teacher who had transcended the cycle of birth and rebirth through his teaching, was not the focus of devotional practice. The Stupa, however, standing both for his presence and for a

Buddhist conception of universal order, took on its own devotional aspects; shelters were constructed for the stupa and its worshipers, as in the structural stupa-shrine at Bairat or the excavated (rock-carved) stupa-houses (Chaityagrha) at Guntupalli and Junnar. From these early enclosed stupas evolved a major type of Buddhist structure, the Chaitya hall, housing an object used as a factor for worship (Chaitya). The earliest of these, at Bhaja and Bedsa, date from the second or first centuries B.C.; the largest, at Karli from the first century C.E.; the latest, at Ellora, from perhaps the early seventh century C.E. Located on trade routes and patronized by merchants and others from nearby urban centers, these large establishments also provided monastic cells for wandering monks and abbots and sheltered pilgrims and travelers (Charles, 1987:374).

The transition of Buddhism and its monastic architecture from India via Central Asia was the first and only significant time in China's history that a monumental architectural tradition, fully established but in sharp contrast to the native one. Buddhism

introduced another new concept for worship to Chinese architecture; the cave-temple. In pre-Buddhist China, a few imperial tombs had been carved into rock, but non-funerary religious and imperial architecture was exclusively freestanding. Yet by the fourth century, following the model of famous Indian and Central Asian sites, Buddhist rock-cut cave-temples were excavated at Dun-Huang in northwestern China; they are found a century later at Yun-kang near modern-day Ta-t'ung, and subsequently, at scores of other sites throughout the country (ibid).

### **A Same Language of Architecture between Iranian Specimens and Buddhism monasteries**

In 439 A.D., Emperor "Taiwu" of Northern "Wei" conquered the Northern "Liang" (397 - 439 AD), an important Buddhist region since the Eastern Han and Sixteen Kingdom periods, and reunified North China. On this occasion many Buddhist devotees, craftsmen as well as most riches, were transferred from the Gansu area to "Pingcheng", creating a large concentration of manpower and material

resources, which, once added to the support of the emperor and the aristocracy, allowed Buddhism to quickly flourish in "Pingcheng" and in the whole North China in the second half of the 5th century (Su Bai, et.al, 1996).

To date, the earliest Buddhist monastery ever excavated in North China is the "Yungang" Monastery, located about 15 km west of "Pingcheng", the first capital of Northern "Wei". In coordination with the protection project of the "Yungang Grottoes", in 2010 the Shanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology, along with the Yungang Institute and the Datong Municipal Institute of Archaeology, carried out a joint excavation at the top of the cliff where the Yungang Grottoes were carved (Fojiao et.al, 1993).

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Fig. 1. The Location of Pingcheng in Northern China (Fojiao et.al, 1993).

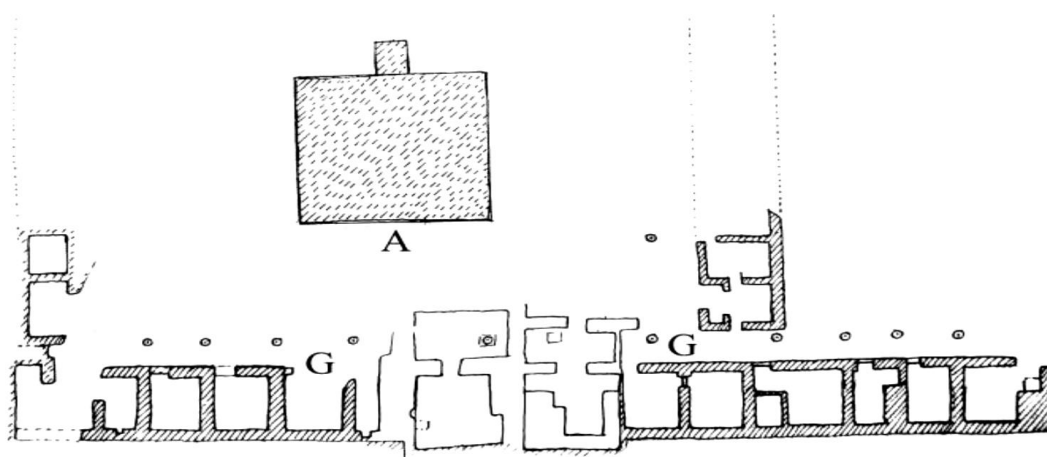


Fig. 2. Sketch plan of the Yungang Monastery (Modified from: Li Chongfeng 2013).

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Kizil were cut in the vertical cliff before the 4th century, and reached its peak in the 5 - 6th century. Central pillar caves were the most common and distinctive cave type of Kucha (Su Bai, et.al, 1996).

According to their location in the site, and that each group, which normally focused on one or several central pillar caves, might be a Buddhist monastery (Zhengzhong, 2004: 75). Such arrangement can be regarded as the transmutation of surface monastery focusing on the pagoda into rock monasteries (Fig.3)

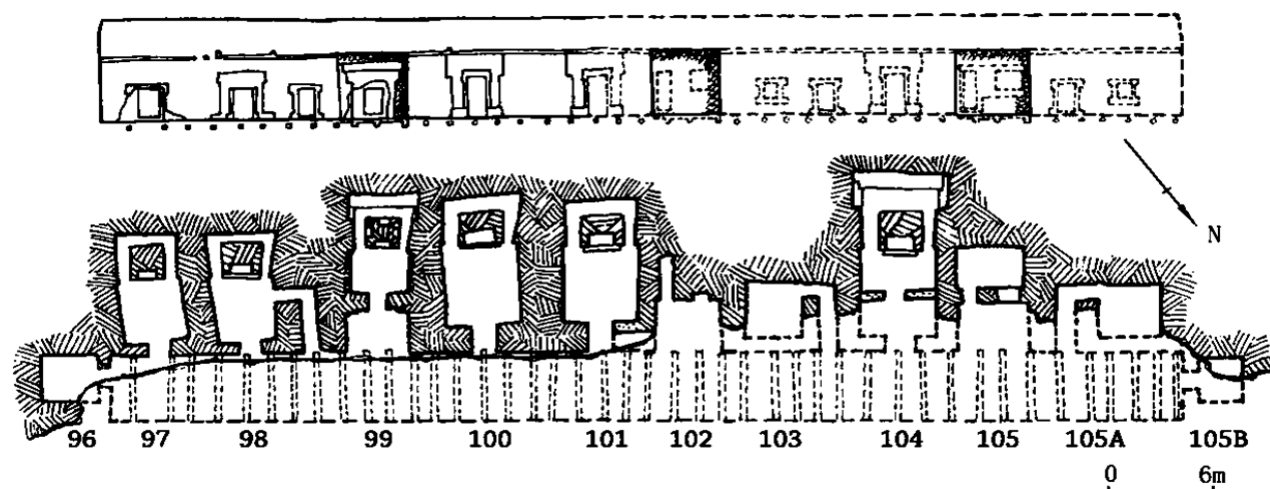


Fig. 3. Sketch plan of caves 96 - 105B in Kizil Grottoes (Modified from: Wei Zhengzhong 2004).

The central pillar caves still prevailed in the cave-temples of Dun-Huang and Hexi Corridor Region during the Sixteen Kingdom Period (317 - 439 A.D.). The Grottoes of "Tiantishan" in "Wuwei" were initially built by

"Juqu Mengxun", the King of Northern Liang (397 or 410 - 439 AD), they are supposed to be the famous "Liangzhou Grottoes" recorded in ancient texts. Under the influence of the grottoes of "Xingjiang" the central pillar cave

was the most representative grotto type in "Tiantishan", and the sculptural theme represented around the central pillar had close

relation with the Buddha of the Three Ages, that is past, present and future, as narrated in sutras (Ligun He et.al, 2013).

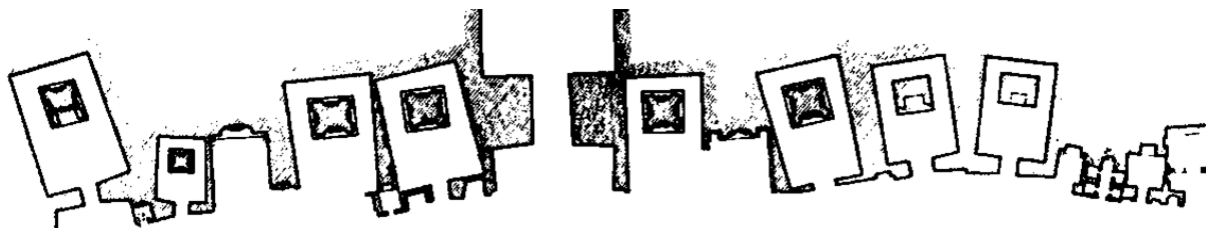


Fig. 4. Sketch plan of early caves in Dun Huang Grottoes (Ligun He et.al, 2013).

The Rasadkhaneh's cave in Maraghe\_ the early capital of Mongol's in Iran\_ have a ground level and an underground area. At the ground level, a forecourt leads to what Ball calls an antechamber, which has been cut into the western oriented limestone hill face. Chiseled on the ceiling is a football-sized rock-cut relief of concentric circle, and dotting the walls niches that once held a small, rectangular wooden door. The antechamber leads through very distinctive upwards pointed pentagonal opening to two slightly elevated adjacent chambers in the east and south respectively. Each encloses a rectangular block of limestone some 1.2 meters high, standing on a plinth (the block is cut out of the mountain rock and fixed in), and with a chiseled concave roof.

The southern chamber also has a stepped niche with a rounded back, looking much like an eroded Mihrab. Two sets of corridors lead around and to lower chambers (no. 2) a corridor winds around the back of chamber 3, and leads through a small round opening only about 1m high. Beyond this is an underground passage ends in a room with blackened walls (marked "a") situated just underneath chamber3. A similar trajectory winds from the southeast corner of the antechamber to a room underneath chamber 4 above it. The walls of the underground corridors are dotted with lamp niches, as well as larger concave niches that must have held items. North of the forecourt (No.1) and along the face of the mountain, are numerous small chambers,

with little semi-circular windows, large concave shapes niches and small lamps niches. Much of the exterior of these caves has crumbled and no original decorations or inscriptions remain. South of the forecourt along the face of the mountain is a shallow cave with three rock-cut tomb chambers (No. 5) that are now exposed and empty. Over a

distance of some 50m further south are five semi-circular cave openings, but these are filled with earth and are inaccessible without excavation. It seems that these are openings to more chambers or burial sites, as was already suggested by Bowman and Thompson (Azad, 2010: 216).

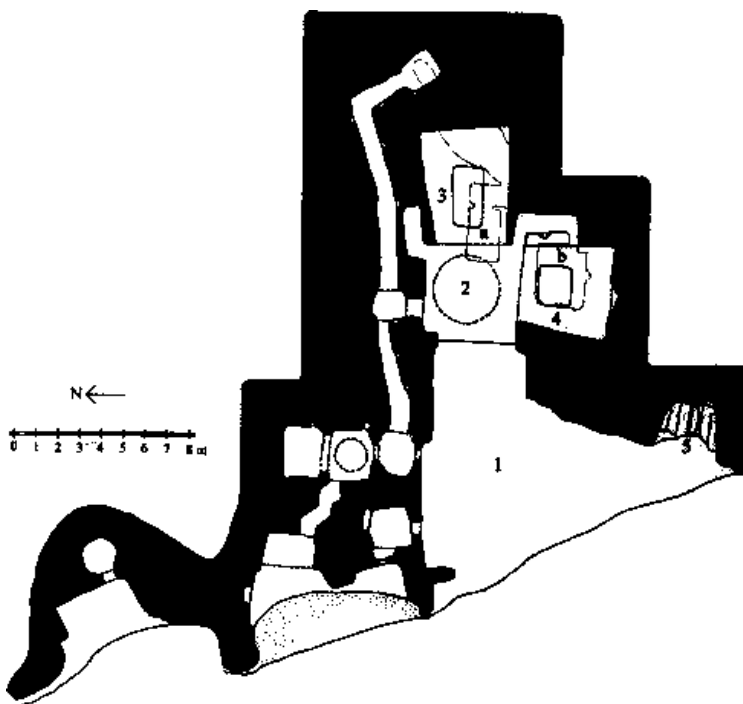


Fig. 5. Plan of Rasadkhana caves in Maraghe, Northwest Iran (Azad, 2010: 216).

The rectangular stone blocks in chambers "a" and "b" (Fig. 5) might represent the same blocks in Buddhist monasteries in Kizil Grottes and Dun Huan specimens in North

China. To Ball they looked like the Buddhist circumambulatory pillar caves of Afghanistan and Central Asia (Azad, 2010: 218).

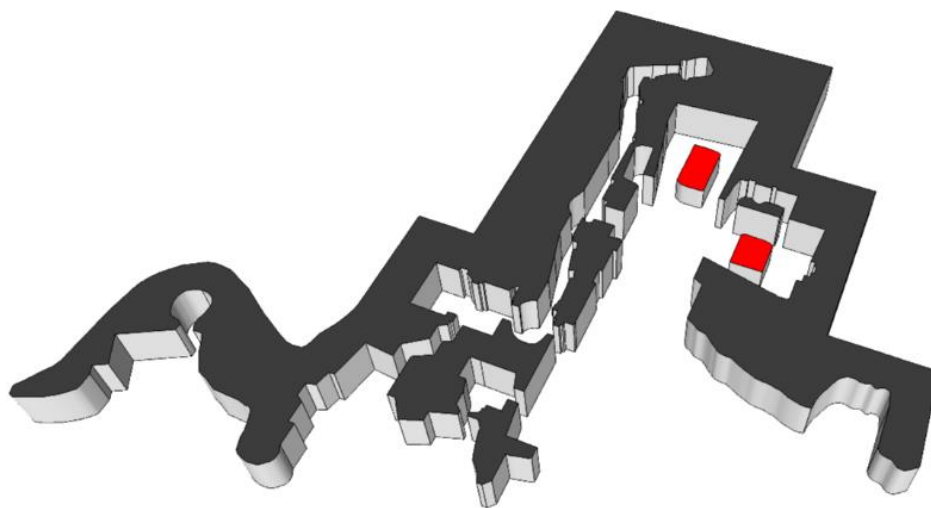


Fig. 6. 3D sketch of Rasadkhana caves and the position of stone benches in it

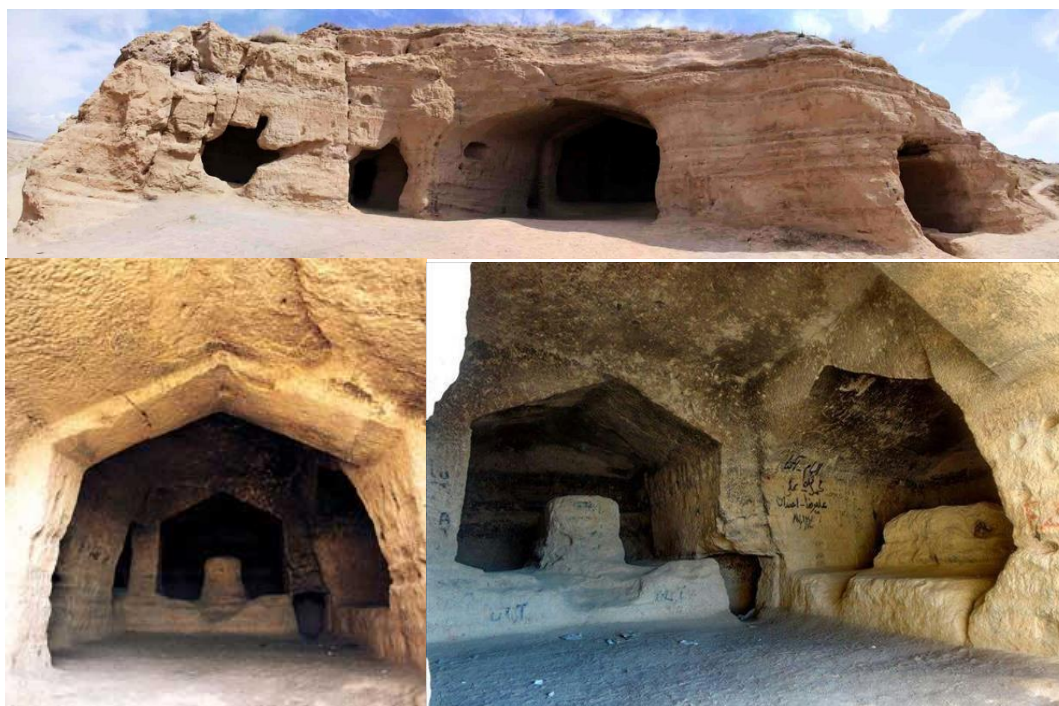


Fig. 7. Rock Cut architecture in Maraghe Province; Northwest Iran

Zakariya Ibne Qazvini reports that: "... In the Outskirt of Maraghe there is a cave in which chambers have been carved in shape of rectangular rooms. Here there are stone

benches which probably were used to carry the sculptures. At the moment there is a tagged sculpture similar to kind of a curse and would damage someone who try to get closer"

(Qazvini, 1994: 642). According to Qazvini\_ died in 1303 A.D.\_ the religious application of Maraghe's cave has been confirmed. (Fig. 6) Hence, the architectural accordance with Buddhism monasteries as well as historical reports and Ilkhanid background of this site, here might be used as a Buddhism monastery during Mongol invasions.

From the perspective of the architectural tradition, a valuable approach was promoted by Sattarnejhad (2019) in which he advanced the viewpoint that the current troglodytic remains in "Girkh Kuhul" caves, in "Kahjug" village, 20 km southwest of Maraghe province, might be a combination of a Buddha hall and surrounding monastic residential cells, so characteristic of northern China (Sattarnejhad et.al 2019). These caves have been carved in a rock cliff and divide into two Northern and Southern sections. Although his study suggests a probable link with the mausoleums of Central Asia and Anatolia, the lack of suitable comparative data hindered the possibility of pinpointing when, how, in which aspect and under which condition these prototype appeared in northwest Iran. In his

study entitled "An investigation of troglodytic architecture in Girkh-Kuhul" he paid more attention to the concrete analysis of building structure, rather than discussing the textural sources. Nevertheless, the relevance of their research stays on the fact that the architectural configuration of this building with opposite functions is a conscious imitation of non-Muslim complexes in Central Asia (Fig. 8).

These units are located about 25 m from each other. Here, the maximum dimension of chambers does not exceed more than 20 square meters, and the sign of stone benches at level ground might represent the same idea of Buddha's sculpture placement at a glance. Although there is no datable finding from these cave, but the selection of this region as the early capital of Mongol and the combination of semicircular cells and the sculpture hall has kept its original form which can be seen in North China's temples. (Fig. 9) The close geographical and political collusion between North China, Inner Mongolia and Mongolia should be considered as the probable reasons in sharing the same architectural mentalities.



Fig. 8. The entrance of "Girkh Kuhul" caves in "Kahjug" village

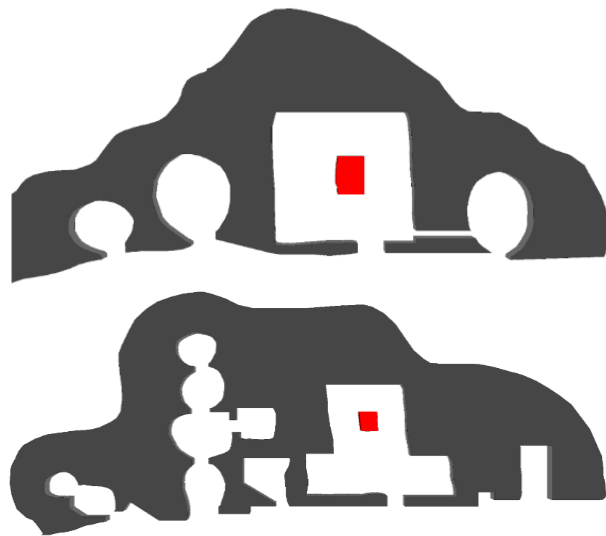


Fig. 9. Plan of "Girkh Kuhul" caves

### Conclusion

At the Ilkhanid capitals of Northwest Iran (Maraghe and Tabriz), different Mongol rulers adhered to different religions; some

followed Mongol shamanist beliefs, others married Nestorian Christian women and had Christian leanings, and still others converted to Buddhism. Considering the Buddhist

background of Northwest Iran during Mongol's era and overlapping the historical contexts proclaiming the Kings interests into Buddhism sect, with spatial composition of Buddhist temples in Central Asia, this part will

categorize the Rasadkhana caves as well as Girkh Kohul caves- both in Maraghe- as remains of Buddhism in the Ilkhanid capital of Iran.

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## مناطق مقدس معماری بودایی در شمال غرب ایران

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**چکیده:** حکومت مغول در قرن سیزدهم و چهاردهم مبادله مستقیم ایده‌ها و اعمال بین فرهنگ‌ها و مذاهب گوناگون تقویت می‌کرده است. از این منظر، درحالی‌که مغولان به شمنیسم اعتقاد داشتند، آنها به دلایل مختلف - اعم از یک تمایل شخصی یا معنوی - پذیرای دین‌های دیگر بودند تا از این طریق مسائل مربوط به انسجام سیاسی و اجتماعی را کنترل کنند. از این رو، قرن سلطه مغول در ایران بزرگ (۱۲۵۶-۱۳۵۳ میلادی) شاهد حضور دین‌های بودایی، مانوی، زرتشت، یهودیت، مسیحیت و اسلام بود. درحالی‌که به‌طور کلی اهمیت دوره ایلخانیان برای تاریخ معماری جهان اسلام اثبات شده است، توضیحات مربوط به ظهور بناهای صخره‌ای موجود در ایران که تحت سیطره مغول بوده است، برخلاف معماری اسلامی، چندان رضایت‌بخش نیست. با تمرکز بر مطالعات انجام شده، هدف این پژوهش در این است که به طبقه‌بندی معماری صخره‌ای ایلخانی موجود در ایران با مشخصه‌های معماری بودایی و مراحل ساخت بناهای تاریخی از این قبیل در شمال غربی ایران بپردازد. با توجه به نتایج به‌دست آمده، درحالی‌که بررسی معماری بودایی در شمال غربی ایران، با نمایش چگونگی پاسخ معماری ایلخانی به دین‌ها و سنت‌های گوناگون، می‌تواند چهره‌ای پر جنب‌وجوش از زندگی در دوره ایلخانیان ایران را نشان دهد، همچنین می‌تواند نگاهی تازه به تاریخ اجتماعی سیاسی ایران اسلامی در برخورد با فرهنگ مغول را نیز به تصویر کشد.

**واژه‌های کلیدی:** دوره ایلخانی، صومعه‌های بودایی، غار معابد، شمال غربی ایران.



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