


Documenting the decorations of Bastam mosque and minaret during the Seljuk period

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Abstract

The Seljuk period is one of the important periods of Islamic art in Iranian architecture, which is known for its special style and valuable buildings. The second Bayazid Mosque and Bastam Minaret are part of the magnificent architectural works of the Seljuk period in the historical city of Bastam, which are decorated with arrays of brickwork and moqrans-work. Considering that so far, little attention has been paid to these places from a technical and visual point of view, the study of these historical works becomes important. This research is organized around two basic questions: What are the technical and visual features of the arrays in the second mosque and Bastam minaret located in Bastam during the Seljuk period? And what is the most prominent decorative aspect of the architectural arrays of these buildings? The current research aims to analyze the technical features and structure of visual elements used in the arrays of the second mosque and Bastam minaret of Bastam city in the Seljuk period and also to determine the most prominent decorative aspect of the architectural arrays of these two buildings. The current research, historical-analytical method with historical approach was used and the information of this research was collected as Library and field. The findings show that in the second Bayezid Mosque and the Bastam minaret, the most important technical feature is brickwork and the different types of decorative bricks, based on their construction and usage techniques, include bricks, carved and pressed, and also the most frequent motifs are geometrical (Shamse and Chalipa) and plants respectively.

Keywords: Seljuk era architecture, Architectural features, Bastam mosque, Bastam minaret.

1. Introduction

Islamic-era buildings such as mosques, schools, minarets, and caravanserais exhibit diverse architectural decorations throughout Iran's historical periods. However, the available information on the architectural ornaments of Islamic-period buildings—particularly in the Bastam region and during major periods such as the Seljuks—is limited and often repetitive. The materials and methods employed by Seljuk-era artisans in constructing and decorating significant buildings in this region were deliberate and purposeful. Various types of decoration—including brickwork, tilework, muqarnas, and stucco—feature prominently in Seljuk architecture and reveal the artistic creativity and refined aesthetic sensibilities of the architects of that era. In addition, inscriptions occupy an essential place among these decorative arts, playing a decisive role in conveying cultural, religious, and artistic concepts. Among all forms of decoration, brickwork reached the highest level of development during the Seljuk period, as artists employed innovative techniques and designs to transform it into one of the most distinguished features of the age.

Bastam, located in Semnan Province, was one of the important centers of Seljuk civilization and home to monumental structures such as the Second Bayazid Mosque, which is approximately 930 years old. This valuable edifice, along with its magnificent minaret, is considered one of the richest examples of Seljuk art and architecture, providing crucial insights into the construction methods and decorative styles of the period. Given the limited research conducted on the architectural decorations of these two monuments and the damage they have suffered over time—resulting in the loss of some decorative elements—it is necessary to examine carefully the ornamentation of the Second Bayazid Mosque and the Seljuk Minaret, both of which were created according to the principles of Islamic architecture.

2. Literature Review

Research indicates that the technical and visual characteristics of the decorative features of the Bastam Mosque and Minaret during the Seljuk period have received little scholarly attention.

Among the few relevant studies are:

Abdolvahid Soufizadeh (2021), "A Study on Seljuk Architecture", published in *Selçuklu Araştırmaları Dergisi*, which discusses general features of Seljuk architecture and decoration. Marzieh Alipour (2016), "Methods of Implementing Decorative Arrangements in Iranian Architecture during the Seljuk Period", published in *Iran Studies*, which introduces Seljuk architectural characteristics and decorative techniques. Sanaz Khodadadi Dehkordi (2016), "Iranian Seljuk Architecture with Emphasis on the Decorative Brickwork of the Kharqan Towers of Qazvin", published in the *Journal of History Culture and Art Research*, which analyzes the architectural and decorative elements of the Kharqan Towers. A review of existing sources shows that the technical and aesthetic dimensions of the architectural decorations of the Bastam Mosque and Minaret during the Seljuk period have not been studied comprehensively or independently. The present research aims to fill this gap by analyzing these decorations from the perspectives of execution methods, visual principles, and artistic expression, using both field observations and surviving decorative evidence.

3. Research Methodology

The technical characteristics of the decorative arrays involve the materials, construction techniques, and methods used in the creation of structures such as mosques and minarets. Brick, often combined with plaster or lime mortar, is the main material used in the northern wall of the Second Bayazid Mosque and the Seljuk Minaret of the Bastam historical complex. The combination of brick with plaster or lime mortar, known as brick-bottomed plaster banding, was a decorative masonry technique commonly employed

during the Seljuk and Ilkhanid periods. The bricks used in the Second Bayazid Mosque and Bastam Minaret vary in dimension and were crafted using different techniques typical of Seljuk construction. Field studies revealed that in the northern wall of the Second Bayazid Mosque, the raised and recessed brick patterns form inscriptions (in Kufic script), as well as geometric and vegetal motifs such as stars and almond shapes. The presence of lead bricks and stamped bricks suggests the use of several techniques, while the variation in brick size and the creation of positive and negative spaces indicate the use of cut bricks. These designs were likely created using tools such as wires and knives.

The curved frames of the northern wall also display cut bricks, suggesting multiple decorative methods were employed. Thus, in the northern wall of the Second Bayazid Mosque, various types of decorative brickwork—carved, pressed, and cut—can be observed, each reflecting specific construction and aesthetic intentions. The Bastam Minaret, likewise, is built entirely of brick, consistent with other Seljuk-period minarets.

4. Findings

The study reveals two significant findings regarding the architectural decorations of the Second Bayazid Mosque and the Bastam Minaret during the Seljuk period:

Technical Features:

Brick, often combined with plaster or lime mortar, was the sole construction material used in the northern wall of the Second Bayazid Mosque and the Bastam Minaret. The mosque's northern wall features various types of brickwork and inscriptions. The brick dimensions differ from standard Seljuk proportions, resulting in asymmetry and variation in arches and artistic details. In both structures, the artists deliberately introduced subtle irregularities to achieve visual dynamism and aesthetic balance. The variety in brick size and design reflects three primary

decorative methods: cutting, stamping, and carving.

Decorative Motifs:

The northern wall of the Second Bayazid Mosque includes diverse motifs—botanical, geometric, and epigraphic—distributed across its surface, with geometric motifs being predominant. The inscriptions, rendered in undotted Kufic (or Ma'qal) script, include Qur'anic verses, prayers, and dedicatory inscriptions.

The first inscription features the opening verse of Surah al-Fath, which refers to the conquest of Mecca. Another inscription cites verse 18 of Surah al-Tawbah: "Only those who believe in Allah are fit to build the mosques of Allah," highlighting the spiritual significance of mosque construction. A further inscription proclaims the Islamic creed ("La ilaha illa Allah, Muhammad Rasul Allah"). The final inscription provides the identity of the patron and the construction date—514 AH. The Bastam Minaret also displays geometric, vegetal, and epigraphic designs arranged across its shaft. Geometric motifs dominate the composition, while two Kufic inscriptions—one containing part of Ayat al-Kursi, affirming divine unity—decorate the minaret. The second inscription is unfortunately illegible due to damage.

5. Conclusion

The results demonstrate that the predominant decorative technique in the Bastam complex during the Seljuk period was ridged brickwork. On the northern wall of the Second Bayazid Mosque and the Bastam Minaret, the decorative patterns—comprising geometric and vegetal motifs as well as inscriptions—were achieved through raised and recessed brick arrangements, often enhanced by the combination of plaster and molded bricks (mehri). Simple interlocking brick patterns form geometric motifs such as rhombuses, circles, and squares.

The use of brick, combined with plaster or lime

mortar, provided both aesthetic appeal and durability. Given Bastam's cold and rainy climate, the brickwork has preserved its beauty over centuries. The minaret's muqarnas decorations, also executed in brick, further exemplify Seljuk artisans' technical skill. From a visual standpoint, the redesign and analysis of the motifs confirm the use of a variety of geometric, vegetal, and epigraphic patterns, among which the geometric shamsa and chalipa motifs—often arranged in lattice or non-flat techniques—stand out as the most prominent. In Seljuk architecture, such geometric compositions were not merely decorative but deeply symbolic, expressing spiritual concepts such as unity, divine light, and cosmic order. In the decorations of the Second Bayazid Mosque and the Bastam Minaret, these motifs and inscriptions are harmoniously integrated to convey religious messages emphasizing faith, divine unity, and devotion. Thus, the architectural decoration of the Bastam historical complex during the Seljuk era represents not only an artistic achievement but also a spiritual manifestation of the Islamic worldview.

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Author's Contribution

The research was conducted solely by the author.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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