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A BRIEF NOTE ON THE YEMENITE *CHAHĀR TĀQ* MAUSOLEUMS. THE CASE OF BARĀQISH

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The chahār tāq, a type of building frequently used as a mausoleum in Iran during the Islamic era, has an undeniable Iranian pre-Islamic origin, but its architectural form, together with its function as a mausoleum, crossed the Iranian border and was attested in Yemen too. The 17th-century chahār tāq mausoleum at Barāqish seem to be a specific choice, probably of a Shī‘ī matrix.

Keywords: Barāqish; Yemen; *chahār tāq*; Islamic; architecture

Barāqish is located about 30 km north of the Mā’rib dam and 190 km east of Ṣan‘ā’, in Yemen.

The city walls date back to the Minaean epoch, but their upper part was rebuilt in Islamic times (around 1200). They enclose a semicircular area of some four hectares, where a small Islamic mausoleum also stands (figs. 1-2).¹

This mausoleum, built in local white stone, is very close to a circular tower with which, however, it has no connection. It has a square plan (each side is about 4 m externally) and a dome on four open pointed arches, for a total height of about 6 m.

At a certain point in time some works were carried out, probably to prevent the collapse of the building. Two of the four doorways have been walled-up with the placement of a wall against the north side and part of the west side (figs. 3-4). A building made of very coarsely cut stones – now collapsed – had been raised on the west side, and both the latter and the mausoleum had been externally clad (see the detail in fig. 3, below). Internally a layer of mud coating was applied to the walls and dome in order to make them smooth and homogeneous (figs. 5-6).

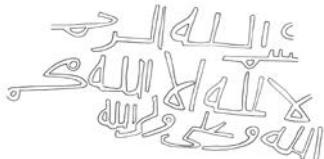
1. DESCRIPTION

Exterior (figs. 2-3, 4).² The base of the four ‘L’ shaped pillars supporting the dome is constituted by a unique slab; the other masonry stones are cut coarsely, except for those that outline the arches and present very regular cuts. The arches of the doorways are double, the inner ones are recessed and smaller and rest on a stone cut like a bevelled impost. The keystones of these arches are small wedged fragments, positioned to offset the opposite slope of the voussoirs. The external transition is highlighted by an octagon. A rectangular niche is cut into the south side of the dome, in correspondence with the apex of the arch below. The walls and dome are covered with a layer of white plaster, the greater part of which has fallen away; above the apex of the arch of the main entrance (to the south) thicker plaster forms a crescent moon *alīm* finial.

¹ Just mentioned by Paolo Costa (1984, 255, pls. Vb-VIa-b; English repr. 1994, V/3, pls. Vb-VIa-b).

² The reconstructing drawing (fig. 4) was made by Giuseppe Labisi whom I thank.

An inscription is incised into the plaster, to the right of the latter:³



Drawing taken from a photo by Paolo Costa published in 1984 (© M. Massullo, 2015).

In the name of God, the Compassiona[te, the Merciful]
there is no God but Allāh. Muḥamma[d is the messenger]
of Allāh and 'Alī is the vicegerent of Allāh.

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ مُحَمَّدٌ رَسُولُهُ
اللَّهُ وَعَلَى وَلِيِّ اللَّهِ

*bismi-llāh al-rahmān al-rahīm]
lā ilā illā Allāh Muḥammād rasūl]
Allāh wa 'Alī wali Allāh*

Interior (figs. 5-6). The internal transition between the square and the dome is achieved by four squinches constructed like those of Sarvistān,⁴ but each is framed by a double-pointed and projecting arch. The dome, preserved over the western half of the mausoleum, is composed of rings of pitched stones; these are set without mortar and are held in place by the lateral pressure they exert on one another. Apparently the first ring is composed of small stones laid like a sawtooth frieze, interrupted in correspondence with the keystones of the outer arches of the squinches, and interspersed with flat slabs. The second ring consists of flat slabs interspersed with very thin slabs placed over the flat slabs of the first ring only. The third ring, like all the following ones, is made up of stones of the same height but different sizes; however, unlike the other rings, stones are omitted in correspondence with the thin slab of the lower row, giving rise to small openings.

2. PARALLELS

As far as I know, mausoleums featuring the same shape are attested in Yemen in at least two other locations. There are twelve similar mausoleums in the cemetery west of Sa'da, four of them bearing a fluted dome (fig. 7); they were built in stone and baked brick (the domes are made of bricks). Giovanna Ventrone Vassallo read the date found in the internal inscriptions of two mausoleums (both with a fluted dome): 970/1562 or 980/1572, and 1067/1656.⁵ There is another similar mausoleum in Ta'izz, immediately east of the town, on the road before the Ibb-'Aden crossroads (fig. 8); it was built in stone.

³ In the 1990s when I took my photos (fig. 2) only the last line of the inscription was visible. In a photo taken by P. Costa, published for the first time in 1984 (Costa 1984, pl. Vb; English repr. 1994, pl. Vb), three lines of the inscription are visible. They were reproduced in the drawing by Martina Massullo whom I thank.

⁴ For the squinches of Sarvistān palace, see Bier 1986, 42-43, with illustrations.

⁵ Ventrone Vassallo 1996, 52.

This type of mausoleum recalls, in plan and elevation, the well-known *chahār tāq* (Persian; lit., four arches), a construction raised on the Iranian plateau in pre-Islamic times and built or re-used there in the Islamic period too.⁶

Among the famous Aswān mausoleums, in Egypt, reasonably dated to the 11th-13th centuries,⁷ there is a type (Type IIIA, according to Monneret de Villard,⁸ or Type IIA, according to Creswell,⁹ for a total of four mausoleums¹⁰), that can be included in the *chahār tāq* type. The latter, judged by Creswell as a prototype,¹¹ could in all probability date back to the Fatimid period (11th to early 12th century).

3. CONTEXT AND DATING

The inscription above the main entrance of the Barāqish mausoleum, to the south, suggests a sure Shī‘ī context; indeed, Shī‘is often add “and ‘Alī is the vicegerent of Allāh” to the *shahāda*.¹² The current inscription, coarsely incised on the plastered surface of relatively recent date, most probably replaces the original one. I believe it is not unlikely that the original inscription, almost certainly on stone, i.e. a stele, containing the same words and possibly others (?), may have occupied the rectangular niche still visible on the southern side of the dome (figs. 2 and 4). This position is attested for the steles of mausoleums of this type in Aswān.¹³

The Shī‘ī context¹⁴ of the Yemenite *chahār tāq* mausoleums suggests a dating for the Barāqish mausoleum to the late 16th or, more likely, 17th century, which is also supported by its masonry and elevation details.

⁶ See Huff 1975. On the debated question of the re-use of pre-Islamic buildings or of new buildings in the Islamic era in Iran, see also Grotti 2014. Among the Iranian *chahār tāq* mausoleums most probably re-used in Islamic times, we can mention the old *chahār tāq* in the Masjid-i Sha‘yā, in Isfahān (Golombok 1974, 24, fn. 15, according to Siroux 1954, 2, fig. 2); among the new buildings, a *chahār tāq* at Zagħ, north of Fīrūzābād, located in a cemetery (Huff 1975, 245, fig. 4), with four pointed arches (cf. Grotti 2014, 88).

⁷ Monneret de Villard 1930, 51; Creswell 1978, 137-138.

⁸ Monneret de Villard 1930, fig. 6; see also fig. 5 (mausoleum no. 17) and fig. 55 (mausoleum no. 33).

⁹ Creswell 1978, figs. 65-66.

¹⁰ Creswell 1978, 135, fn. 4.

¹¹ Creswell 1978, 134-135.

¹² This phrase is frequently attested from the Fatimid period onwards (Walker 2002, 96). Furthermore, Shī‘is extend the *tasliyya*, the statement of blessings on the Prophet, to include his family (Dammen McAuliffe 2006, 173).

¹³ «Essa [i.e. the “stele sepolcrale”] viene invece posta sopra l’apertura a sud, se il mausoleo ha tre o quattro aperture, in una nicchia» (Monneret de Villard 1930, 33). It is more difficult to suppose that the original inscription may have been inside the mausoleum, as in Sha‘da (cf. above).

¹⁴ See Stern 1951 and Sayyid 1974; see also Sayyid (ed.) 2002.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The *chahār tāq*, a type of building frequently used as a mausoleum in Iran during the Islamic era, has an undeniable Iranian origin, but its architectural form, together with its function as a mausoleum, crossed the Iranian border and, starting from at least the 11th century, was attested in Egypt.¹⁵ However, considering the wide multiplicity of shapes seen in the mausoleums in Aswān, the introduction of the *chahār tāq* type among the other ones does not seem particularly significant.

On the other hand, in Yemen the current twelve *chaḥr tāq* mausoleums of the western cemetery of Ṣa'da, where no other type is attested, are very interesting. Even the now isolated *chaḥr tāq* mausoleum at Barāqish, like that in Ta'izz, seem to be as many examples of a specific choice, probably of a Shi'ī matrix,¹⁶ conveniently ‘competing’ with the Sunnī Ottomans.

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¹⁵ It is now clear that in Egypt the mausoleum as a place of the ‘cult of the saints’ preceded the Fatimids and endured also after the end of their dynasty (see Taylor 1992, 8). As for a suggested significance of the Aswān mausoleums, see Grabar 1966, 25-26.

¹⁶ The Ṭayyibī *da'wa* of the Sulaymānīs.

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Fig. 1 - Barāqish. The *chahār tāq* mausoleum and a tower (© M.V. Fontana 1992).

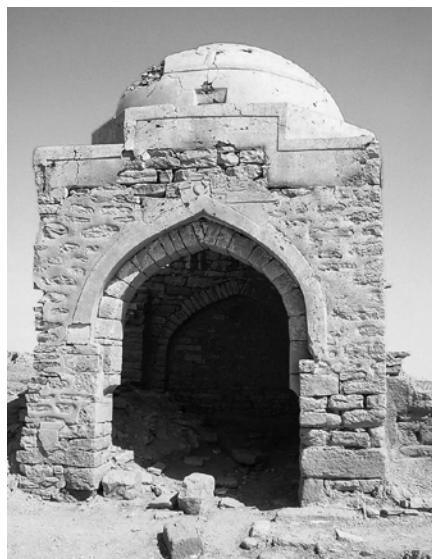


Fig. 2 - Barāqish. The *chahār tāq* mausoleum, south side: main doorway and inscription (© M.V. Fontana 1993).



Fig. 3 - Barāqish. The *chahār tāq* mausoleum, south and west sides: a later building placed against the west side of the mausoleum (© M.V. Fontana 1993).

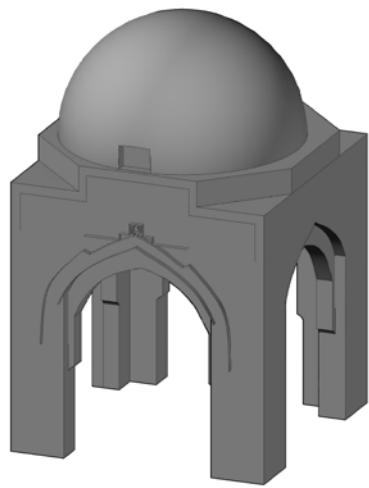


Fig. 4 - Reconstructing drawing of the exterior of the *chahār tāq* mausoleum at Barāqish (© G. Labisi 2015).



Fig. 5 - Barāqish. The *chahār tāq* mausoleum, west half: the interior, showing walled-up doorways, squinches and the dome (© M.V. Fontana 1992).



Fig. 6 - Barāqish. The *chahār tāq* mausoleum: the interior, showing a squinch and the lowest rings of the dome (© M.V. Fontana 1992).



Fig. 7 - The cemetery west of Sa'da. Two *chahār tāq* mausoleums (Dep. CS 15942/11; © M. Jung 1985).



Fig. 8 - The road east of Ta'izz. A *chahār tāq* mausoleum (© M.V. Fontana 1993).