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**SAFAVID AND PORTUGUESE CHRISTIAN
INFLUENCE ON SAINT STEPANOS
MONASTERY IN JULFA, IRAN**

INTRODUCTION

Architecture, as one of the first human endeavours for security and admission to civilisation, is of particular importance for an accurate understanding of the course of human society. Man-made structures have an evolutionary course that has been constantly influenced by political, cultural, geographic and economic components. After creating his own, man built religious places as an urgent daily need. Therefore, one must state that the history of temples and religious edifices constitute a history dating back to the commencement of human society. With the appearance of various religions, diversity and multiplicity in the construction of religious places of worship in different parts of the world can be perceived. In the religion of Christianity, issues of religious worship have played a major role in its dissemination and promotion. A study of the churches of Iran demonstrates that such places of worship existed in ancient times, and in accordance with the prevalence of this religion were erected in various parts of this geographical area. An overview of the structural variations of monasteries and churches worldwide indicates that the influence of indigenous, cultural and geographical factors on the diversity of church architecture is worthy of focus. One of the

remaining large churches in Iran is the Monastery of Saint Stepanos, in Julfa. The diversity of styles in this historical building raises the need to recognise the possible similarities between the architecture of this building and the architecture of the Safavid period.

The Safavid period (1501–1722) is important as it provides a link between the medieval and modern periods in the region as a whole. It is often identified as the period in which Iran adopted Shiism as its formal, state religion. The rise of power of the Safavid dynasty in the early sixteenth century marked a crucial turning point in Persian history.¹

In this period, Iran's political, social, economic and cultural spheres began to interact with those of the West on a previously unparalleled scale, especially as Spanish and Portuguese dominance in trade gave way to British and Dutch trading systems.² Most importantly, the Safavids introduced the concept of patrimonial kingship, combining territorial authority with religious legitimacy that, with modifications, would endure until the 20th century.³

The expansion of relations with the West during the Safavid period and the enhancement of cultural trade between European Christian communities led also to cultural influences in the field of architecture.

At the beginning of this period, the European presence in the Islamic world was largely based on trade. Dutch, French, English, and Portuguese merchants first arrived in the late fifteenth century, attracted by the wealth that could be acquired by exporting luxury items to the European market, and encouraged by the Mughal and Safavid governments, which desired trade partners to stimulate their economies.⁴

At the same time the Safavid state emerged in the early sixteenth century, Iran was largely terra incognita in Europe. Yet the Crusades did provide the backdrop to a new relationship with Iran. The

1 See Mahnaz Shayestehfar, 'The impact of the religion on the painting and inscriptions of the Timurid and the Early Safavid periods', *Central Asiatic Journal*, 47 (2) (2003), 250–293.

2 See *Society and culture in the early modern Middle East: Studies on Iran in the Safavid Period*. Islamic History and Civilization, vol. 46, ed. by Andrew J. Newman (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 24.

3 For more information, see *Encyclopædia Iranica*, 7 (08) (New York: Center for Iranian Studies, Columbia University, 2019).

4 Marika Sardar, 'Europe and the Islamic World, 1600–1800', *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000), http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/erpr/hd_erpr.htm (October 2004) [accessed on 20.08.2022].

establishment of the Safavid dynasty as Iran's ruling house in 1501 represented a breakthrough in relations with Europe. Shah Isma'īl sought contact with the Portuguese, and the Portuguese sent their first envoy to Tabriz in 1514;⁵ the first Portuguese missionaries arrived in Iran during Shah Tahmasp's reign.⁶

Therefore, we can say that missionaries were sent to Iran to proselytise during the Safavid era⁷, along with other such as the Portuguese Augustinian missionary who converted to Islam in late seventeenth century Iran and worked as a court translator for the Shah. The reign of Shah Abbas I (1587–1629) inaugurated a new chapter in Iranian-European relations.⁸ Catholic preachers and missionaries were mainly dispatched to Iran by the Vatican Court during the reign of Shah Abbas I. The main goal of their dispatch and their attempts to bring Christianity to Iran was the formation of an alliance between European states and the Iranian monarch. Among the catholic preachers dispatched to Safavid Iran, the Carmelite missionaries played more salient roles and were able to wield influence in various political, religious, cultural, and social arenas. As a result of the support that they received from the Safavid monarchs, catholic missionaries succeeded in establishing a couple of preaching centres in different parts of Iran.⁹

The Shah allowed Christian missionaries to build convents and set up schools.¹⁰ Keen to enhance Isfahan's role as a nexus of domestic and

5 Rudolph P. Matthee, 'Iran's Relations with Europe in the Safavid Period: Diplomats, Missionaries, Merchants, and Travel', *The Fascination of Persia: The Persian-European Dialogue in Seventeenth-Century Art and Contemporary Art of Tehran*, ed. by Axel Langer (Zürich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2013), 6–7.

6 Rudolph P. Matthee, 'The Shah's Silk for Europe's Silver: The Eurasian Trade of the Julfa Armenians in Safavid Iran and India (1530–1750)', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 121 (2) (2001), 339–342

7 Alberto Tiburcio, *Muslim-Christian Polemics in Safavid Iran* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

8 Matthee, 'Iran's Relations with Europe in the Safavid Period: Diplomats, Missionaries, Merchants, and Travel', 12.

9 Azam Fooladi-Panah, Jamal Moosavi, 'Missionary Activities of Carmelites under Coverage of Medical Services in Safavid Period', *Journal of Research on History of Medicine*, 9 (1) (2020), 35–42.

10 The number of European missionaries who arrived in Iran in this period was infinitesimal by comparison, never amounting to more than a handful for each order: The Augustinians, the Carmelites, the Capuchins and the Jesuits, in that order of arrival. For specific examples of clerical unhappiness with the presence of missionaries in Iran, see Rudolph P. Matthee, 'Safavid Iran and the Christian Missionary Experience. Between Tolerance and Refutation', *MIDÉO. Mélanges de l'Institut dominicain d'études orientales*, 35 (2020), 65–100.

foreign trade, Shah Abbas forcibly resettled thousands of Armenians from the town of Julfa, located in north-western Iran, to a newly created suburb of Isfahan named New Julfa. The New Julfans gained the right to freely profess their faith, and the Shah deeded them the land and supervised the construction of a cathedral.¹¹ In this period, the atmosphere of tolerance can partly be explained by pragmatism, involving the role missionaries played in Safavid society as cultural brokers, diplomats, translators, and interpreters.¹²

By the end of the Middle Ages the Church had invested heavily in the spread of Christianity in other parts of the world during its political and religious rule. In addition, the Persian Gulf had been one of the most important missionary attractions since the beginning of the age of exploration, as exemplified by Alphonse Albuquerque, the famous Portuguese admiral, capturing Hormuz in 1514 AD. The island was then under Portuguese control until the time of Shah Abbas I, who commanded the expulsion of the Portuguese from Hormuz.

According to some researchers, the relationship between the Safavid ruling elite and the representatives of Christianity was marked by ambiguity and ambivalence.¹³ For all the tolerance they exhibited, it is important to remember that interest in and sympathy for Christianity in the Safavid realm had its limitations. It could never compete with politics, *raisons d'État*, so to speak, having to do with wielding and maintaining power. The Shah was clearly a protective buffer against clerical intolerance.¹⁴

Hence, this article strives to examine the similarities between the architecture of Saint Stepanos's Monastery and Safavid and Portuguese Christian architecture in order to reveal a clearer perspective on the influence of cultures in the realm of architecture. In this regard, in this paper, the architectural characteristics of Saint Stepanos's Monastery in Julfa are compared with Portuguese Christian and Safavid architecture. Therefore, comparing the structure and architectural decorations of Portuguese Christian

11 Sebouh David Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: the global trade networks of Armenian merchants from New Julfa* (California: University of California Press, 2014).

12 Mathee, 'Safavid Iran and the Christian Missionary Experience. Between Tolerance and Refutation'.

13 Ibid.

14 John Chardin, *Sir John Chardin's Travels in Persia* (New York: Cosimo, Inc., 2010), 514–519.

art and the Safavid era with the monastery of Saint Stepanos as a Religious-Christian building can be effective in recognising this historical religious building.

ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES OF SAFAVID ARCHITECTURE (STRUCTURAL AND DECORATIVE TRAITS)

After the decline of the Timurid Empire, art continued to influence other cultures in Iran.¹⁵ A study of the state of architecture in the Safavid period reveals an increase in government consideration of architecture as important. In the initial years of Safavid rule, due to the greater significance of political change and conflict, structural importance was considered less imperative. This situation changed with the coming to power of Shah Abbas I (1589–1627). From this period a golden age of architecture commenced in Iran and throughout the Islamic world. During the reign of Shah Abbas I, the plan and design of the cathedral remained important, something that played an important role in attracting and matching the decorative components in the exterior and interior of the structure. By selecting Isfahan as Persian capital the city developed into a centre for the erection of innovative structures and edifices. The existence of numerous mosques, bridges, palaces and streets in the city of Isfahan is a manifestation of the architectural splendour of the Safavid period. The architecture of the Safavids bestow features that are either rooted in the architecture of previous epochs or are exclusive to this period. Visual transparency, as one of the distinct characteristics of the period, is created with elements such as lattice, colourful sash and outlet windows along with other spatial elements that act as regulators of space and light. Emphasis on the use of structural elements such as courtyards, domes and porches are additional architectural features of this period that can also be seen in most religious and non-religious monuments and buildings, including the Imam Mosque and Hasht Behesht Palace.

In Safavid architecture, spaces are defined in structure. However, from the innermost to the outermost, from the room to the mezzanine, from the dome to the courtyard and even to the most public urban

15 For more information, see Mahnaz Shayestehfar, 'Musical instruments in Timurid paintings: An organological approach (Persian miniatures)', *Goya: Revista de arte* (2003), 245–255.

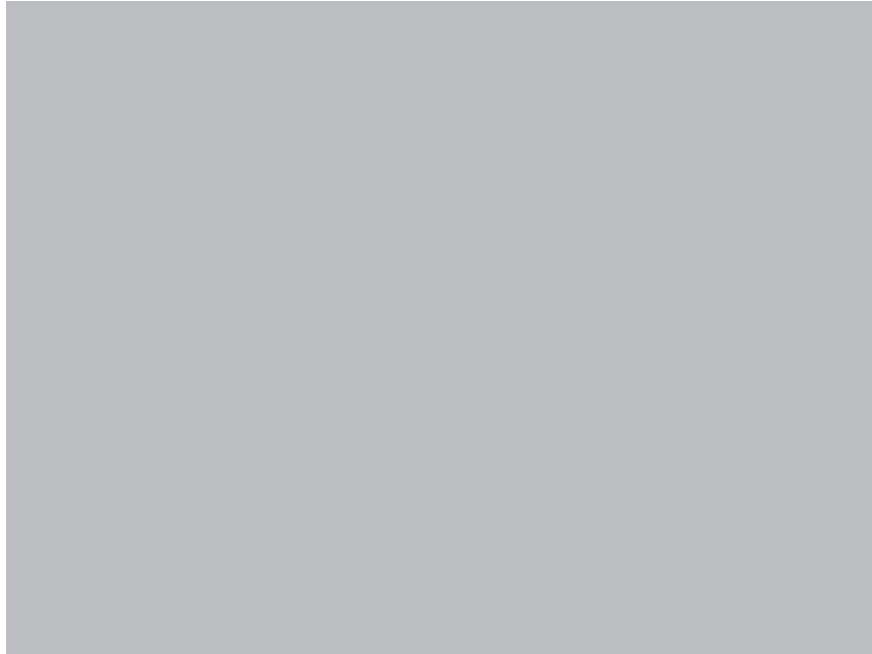


FIG. 1. VIEW OF THE INTERIOR STRUCTURE OF JERONIMOS MONASTERY IN LISBON, PORTUGAL. PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

spaces, they are interconnected. The sequence and continuity of these spaces is one of the most important features of Iranian architecture in this historical period. As a result, Iranian architecture, especially that of the Safavid period, forms a clear and continuous relationship between inside and outside, something that is a distinction from Western architecture.

PORTUGUESE CHRISTIAN ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES (STRUCTURAL AND DECORATIVE TRAITS)

Christian religious architecture in Portugal has gone through a period of ups and downs influenced by political and cultural developments. During the 13th and 14th centuries, Gothic architecture was one of the most important architectural styles in Portugal. As part of this style, columns were used to distribute the weight of the ceiling; moreover, sharp arches, and truncated and serrated arches were taken from Gothic styling. In addition, in this type of architecture windows were

made larger.¹⁶ In the Gothic style, the focus was more on the height of the building, with churches and monasteries having tall towers. Furthermore, geometric symmetry was not considered so highly.

The other style present in Christian architecture in Portugal is Manueline style, or Portuguese late Gothic, according to which church and monastery columns were decorated. An example of this approach can be seen in Jerónimos Monastery, Lisbon, Portugal (Fig. 1).

Manueline style (c. 1490–1535) was a transitional style that combined Renaissance and Gothic decorative elements into buildings that were architecturally close to Gothic, although the style did not last long. During the Renaissance, there were also changes in Portuguese religious architecture. The simplicity of the architects in Portugal was not taken into account.¹⁷ The St Peter's Basilica is one of the oldest basilica style of the Catholic Church in Renaissance churches, its origin dates back to the beginning of the 17th century, is an example of the application of this style.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE SAINT STEPANOS MONASTERY

An examination on the geographical location of the Saint Stepanos Monastery indicates that this building is located in north-western Iran sixteen kilometres west of Julfa, in the province of East Azerbaijan, and three kilometres south of Aras. The monastery is so named since it is located in the village of Sham Valley. Regarding its historical background, Saint Bartholomew the Apostle first founded a church at the site around 62 AD, under the reign of the Parthian Empire. The first monastery was built in the seventh century, and was later expanded in the 10th century. The monastery was damaged during the wars between the Seljuks and the Byzantine Empire in the 11th and 12th centuries. Following the conquest of the region by the Mongols of Hulagu Khan, grandson of Genghis Khan, in the middle of the 13th century, a peace agreement was signed between the Armenian Church and the Ilkhanids, and the Christians maintained an equitable situation. The monastery was restored in the second half of the 13th

¹⁶ See James Stevens Curl, Susan Wilson, *The Oxford Dictionary of Architecture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹⁷ Diana Darke, *Stealing from the Saracens: How Islamic Architecture Shaped Europe* (London: C. Hurst & Co Publishers, 2020), 7.

century, and was completely rebuilt under the leadership of Zachariah in 1330. By the 14th and 15th centuries, Saint Stepanos Monastery was at the height of its cultural and intellectual influence, producing paintings and illuminated manuscripts on religion, history, and philosophy.¹⁸

In the early 15th century, the then new Safavid dynasty protected the Armenians, but the region was at the centre of conflict with the Ottoman Empire, who invaded western Armenia in 1513; moreover, the monastery gradually declined in the 16th century.¹⁹ Shah Abbas I expelled the inhabitants of the region in 1604, and the monastery was abandoned. After 1650, the Safavids reoccupied the region and the abandoned monastery was restored in the latter part of the 17th century. Hence, according to experts, the majority of the building was built in the seventeenth century, i.e. in Iran Safavid rule and in Portugal the Habsburg dynasty.

As a result, the complexity of the architectural structure and various materials in this building has caused disagreements about the exact time of construction. As mentioned, various statements have been made regarding the history of the church building. Some, such as Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, attribute its construction to the Safavid period.²⁰ In addition, Zak'aria of K'anak'er published a book chronicling this period. Shah Abbas I routinely socialised with foreign visitors. Ṭahmāsb Qulī Hān was said to love Christians and to eat and drink with them without being concerned about the law of purity.²¹

Its architectural style is a combination of different Urartu, Parthian and Roman architectural styles that were renovated during the Safavid period.²² This variety of materials, structure and ambiguity at the time of its establishment is probably due to the fact that this religious building has evolved from its inception to the present day and has been reconstructed in various periods.

18 Darke, *Stealing from the Saracens: How Islamic Architecture Shaped Europe*, 21.

19 Naser Pazouki, Abdul Al-Karim Shadmehr, *Iran's registered works in the list of national works* (Tehran: Cultural Heritage Publishing, 2006), 498.

20 For case studies on this period see F. Richard, *Raphaël du Mans, missionnaire en Perse au XVII^{ème} siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris: Société d'histoire de l'Orient, 1995).

21 See Zak'aria of K'anak'er, *The Chronicle* (Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publishers, 2004), 87. Pietro della Valle noted how interested Iranians were in this type of discourse. See Angelo Michele Piemontese, *Persica vaticana* (Città del Vaticano: Biblioteca apostolica Vaticana, 2017), 282–283.

22 Golnaz Keshavarz, 'St Stepanos Church with the background of the ancient shrine of Iran', *Quarterly Journal of Oriental Art and Civilization*, 10 (2015), 24–25.

An analysis of the name of this building indicates that Stepanos is known from the Greek word Stepanos meaning crown and symbol of the perfection of martyrdom in Christianity. Saint Stephen is considered a direct messenger from Saints Peter and Matthew, apostles of Christ. In the visual arts, Stephen is pictured carrying three stones, symbolic of his martyrdom by being stoned to death. He is referred to as the patron of stonemasons. The symbol to the right, the red banner and palms, represents martyrdom.²³

The building includes a meeting hall and a place for baptism.²⁴ The Daniel Stove is a hall attached to the north wall of the church with a width of 6 metres and a length of about 20 metres, and is divided into three equal parts. 1) The Daniel Stove is separated from the hall by a wall and is known as Daniel, one of the saints of the 5th century AD. 2) The throng of communities which is in the middle part. 3) The place of baptism which is at the eastern end of the hall with high platforms and a stone baptismal table in the middle. Furthermore, the monastery is built on a stone outcrop and the main chapel of the church has been built in the shape of a cross.²⁵ The interior consists of a porch, a prayer hall and the altar. Part of the structure and decorations of this building are influenced by the architecture of the Qajar period as the entrance is inlaid. The carvings of the pedestals, arches, half-columns and chains on the sides of the Muqarnas and the mid-decorations are also very innovative.

SAFAVID AND PORTUGUESE CHRISTIAN INFLUENCE ON THE ARCHITECTURE AND PATTERNS OF SAINT STEPANOS MONASTERY

The study of Portuguese Christian architectural style and the historical monuments of the Safavid period is of special importance because of the cultural and religious trade between Iran and Portugal. During the early Portuguese colonial period, the presence of Christian

23 Keshavarz, 'St Stepanos Church with the background of the ancient shrine of Iran', 21.

24 Sahar Zekavat, Soniya Noori, 'A Comparative Study of Architectural Decorative Motifs of Saint Stephanos and Ghara Kelisa Churches with Ancient Iran Architectural Decoration (A Study of the Sun, Cedar and Lotus Motifs)', *Glory of Art (Jelve-y Honar) Alzahra Scientific Quarterly Journal*, 10 (2) (2018), 45–54; doi: 10.22051/jjh.2017.13135.1198 [accessed on 20/08/2022].

25 Keshavarz, 'St Stepanos Church with the background of the ancient shrine of Iran', 23.

missionary groups in Iran increased. Protestant priests, and to a much larger extent Catholic priests, as mentioned above, were active. Morales was the first Augustinian evangelist to be officially accepted by the Safavid government as the religious representative of Philip II at the Persian court. Portuguese Christians were scattered in different parts of Iran, including the Armenian-populated areas such as Julfa, Azerbaijan. European governments, while having religious motives, from time to time used missionaries to promote or conduct their political and commercial affairs in other countries.²⁶ The Monastery of Saint Stepanos is the second most important Armenian church in Iran, located in green countryside in the border region between Julfa and the Republic of Azerbaijan.

In the architecture of the Monastery and in that of Safavid buildings, similar decorative features exist that will be discussed in detail. In the following sections, the characteristics of the designs and structures of Safavid and Portuguese Christian architecture are analysed.

STRUCTURAL FEATURES

The Monastery of Saint Stepanos has three main and distinct buildings, as well as various subdivisions. The three main parts are: the main prayer house, Daniel's stove and the bell tower.²⁷ The main chapel of the church includes an interior in the shape of a cross. The interior consists of the prayer hall porch and the altar. The bell tower, which has an octagonal pyramidal dome, is another part of the building. Daniel's stove, attached to the north wall of the building, also includes a meeting hall and a baptismal area.

Regarding the structural similarities between Safavid architecture and Saint Stephen's Church, it can be understood that one of the similarities is the geometric shape of the dome.²⁸ Likewise, the bell tower has an octagonal pyramidal dome (Fig. 2).

26 Ensieh Sadat Hoseyni Sharif, Hamid Hajianpur, 'The motivation of European governments for sending Christian missionaries to Iran during Safavid era', *Journal of Historical Researches*, 6 (2) (2014), 67–88.

27 Norman A. Horner, 'Is Christianity at Home in Iran?', *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 3 (4) (1979), 151–155.

28 Keshavarz, 'St Stepanos Church with the background of the ancient shrine of Iran', 24–25.

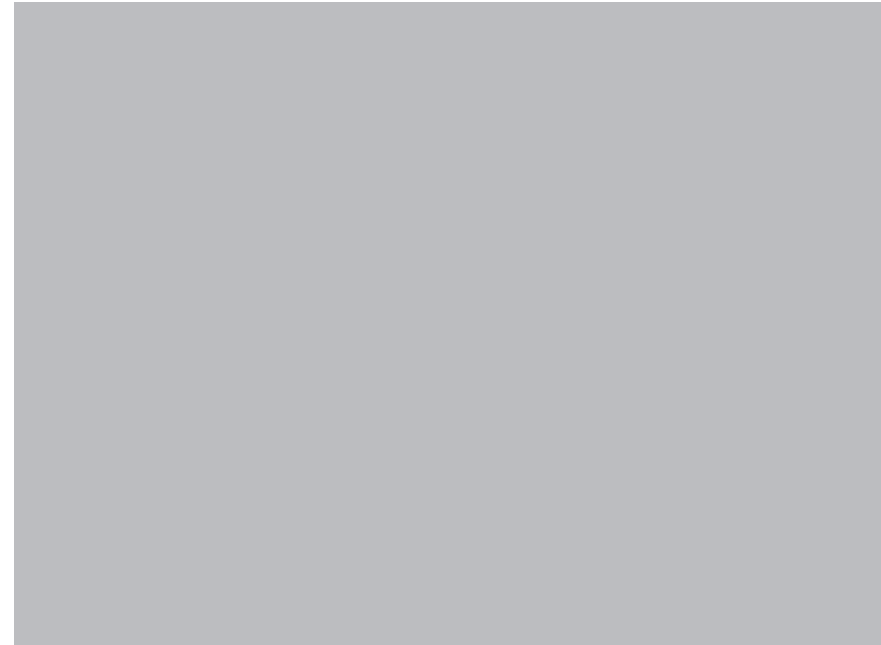


FIG. 2. VIEW OF THE EXTERIOR STRUCTURE AND BELL TOWER OF SAINT STEPANOS MONASTERY. PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

Studies show that the use of octagonal towers or domes in Iranian architecture has been around for a long time; Hillenbrand (2012) believes that there is no exact information as to why this choice was made. However, the Ilkhanid era tomb of Oljaito in Soltanieh was built with a domed octagon, and later the dome of Sheikh Zahed Gilani's tomb (Fig. 3), the mentor of Sheikh Safi al-Din Ardabili, was built with this type of architectural style. On the other hand, in Islamic architecture, the use of geometry and symmetry is common.

In general, Sheikh Zahed Gilani's tomb consists of a square room with a dome and porches that surround the room. Of course, there is another room that seems to have been added to the original later, on the west side of the dome, and the two rooms are connected from the inside. According to the local architecture of the region, the building stands on a foundation and the roof is covered with four layers of pottery.²⁹

29 Mojtaba Poor Ahmadi, 'Geometry in the Dome of the Tomb of Sheikh Zahed Gilani: A Model for Dome Design on the South Shore of the Caspian Sea', *Architecture and Urban Planning*, 43 (2010), 83–93.

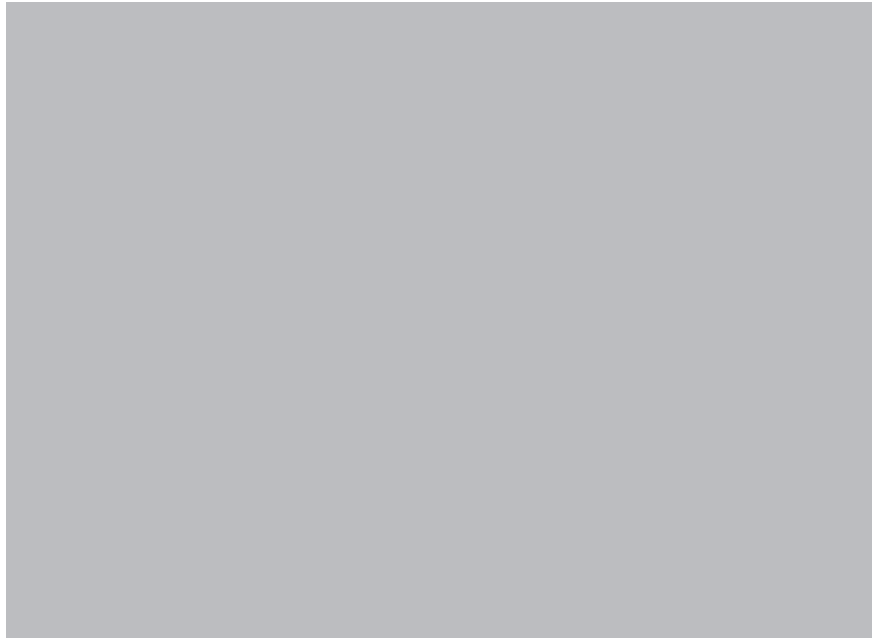


FIG. 3. SHEIKH ZAHED GILANI'S SHRINE, 9TH CENTURY, LAHIJAN. PHOTO: AUTHOR.

A comparison of Figures 1 and 3 shows the resemblance between these two buildings in terms of structure and geometric shape. The two buildings consist of a polygonal chamber with a dome, the difference being that the structure of Sheikh Zahed Gilani's tomb is enclosed within a square space. The composition of the pyramidal space of the octagonal dome in these two buildings is significant in that it is located in the central and focal point of the dome leading to the crown. The dome of Sheikh Zahed Gilani's tomb is a polygonal pyramid whereas the dome of Saint Stepanos Monastery is placed on a cylindrical base.

DECORATIVE FEATURES

One of the common decorative features observed in the monuments is the presence of abstract and plant motifs in the form of shamseh and muqarnas patterns. The Monastery of Saint Stepanos is located within a rectangular plan on both sides of which flowers in the form

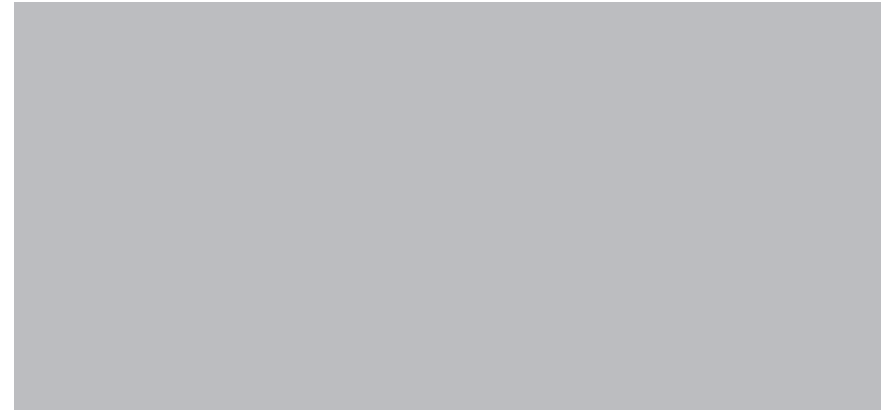


FIG. 4. DECORATIVE HERBAL PLANTS IN SAINT STEPANOS MONASTERY. PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

of the sun or the shamesh are seen, in addition to which engraved cross motifs can also be found (Fig. 4).

This application of **herbal motifs**, which is a unique feature in the decorations of Islamic buildings, is also present in the decorations of this monastery. Specifically, shamseh pattern in the form of spiral motifs and arabesque designs. Moreover, in a number of such patterns, herbal motifs are combined with geometric themes. The existence of herbal motifs in the architecture of the Safavid period is also evident, with the use of natural elements such as flowers and trees from Safavid architecture abundantly applied.

Animal and transhuman motifs – in the decorations of the Saint Stepanos Monastery, depictions of angels with four wings are carved on the arch of the dome, and above them the image of a cow's head can be seen. On the southern aspect of the prayer hall, stone carvings are visible (Fig. 5).

Nike, the goddess of victory, is often seen as a winged boy.³⁰ In Islamic art, this role of the winged angel motif reached its peak in the Qajar period. Another significant ornament of the Monastery is the combination of floral and transhuman motifs of the angel and flower adjacent to each other (Fig. 6).

³⁰ Michael Grant, John Hazel, *The Culture of Classmates*, transl. by Reza Rezaei (Tehran: Mahi Publishing, 2005).

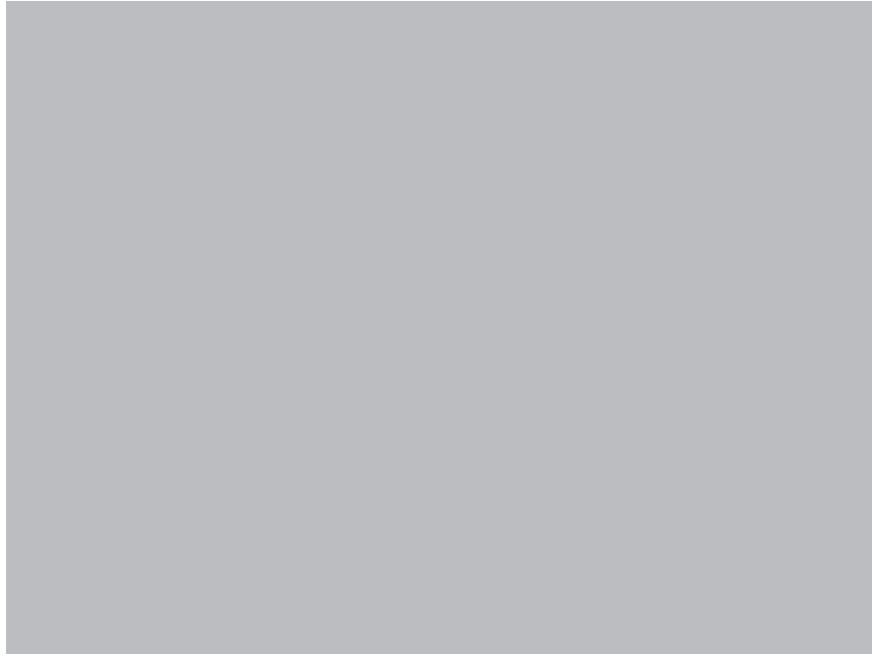


FIG. 5. CARVINGS OF ANGELS AND COW'S HEADS ON THE EXTERIOR OF THE MONASTERY. PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

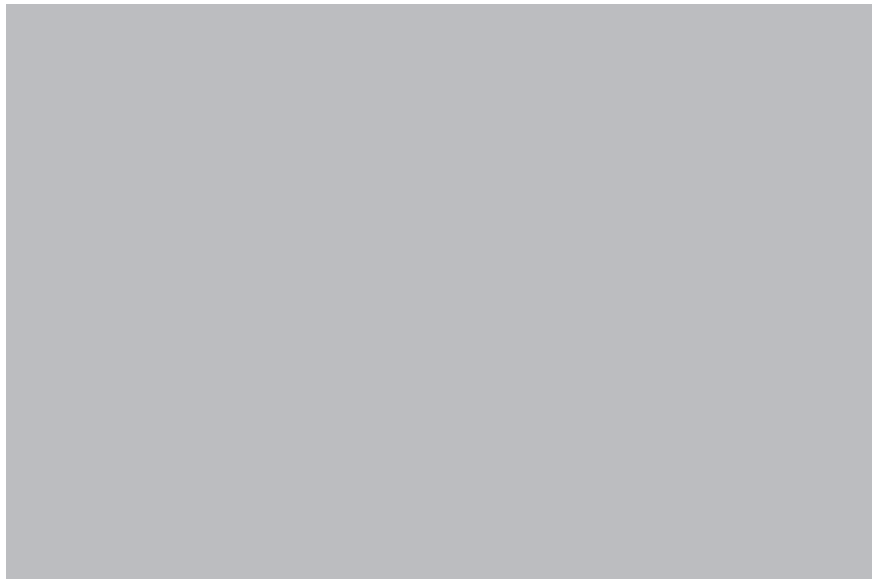


FIG. 6. THE APPLICATION OF ANIMAL AND HERBAL MOTIFS IN SAINT STEPANOS MONASTERY. PHOTO: AUTHOR.



FIG. 7. THE SYMMETRICAL APPLICATION OF ANIMAL MOTIFS IN THE ORNAMENTATION OF SAINT STEPANOS MONASTERY. PHOTO: AUTHOR.

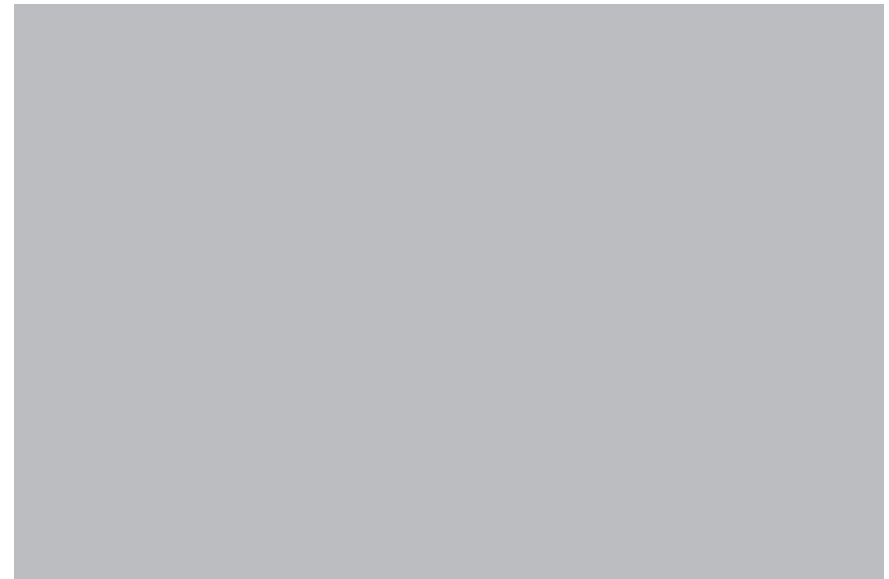


FIG. 8. THE MOTIF OF THE EAGLE WITH SYMMETRICAL SHAMSEH PATTERNS IN THE ORNAMENTATION OF SAINT STEPANOS MONASTERY. PHOTO: AUTHOR.

The most important decorative features of the Monastery are a skylight in the form of a cross. Images of animals are seen on this cross, such as in the top section an image of a crow on the right and a cow on the left. There is a snake in the bottom right section, and on the opposite side two fish. In the last part, two male lions are engraved symmetrically (Fig. 7). Among other animal motifs applied in the monastery is the eagle. The symbol of the eagle is related to religious concepts and symbolism usually accompanied by sun-like flowers on either side (Fig. 8). Images of eagles can be abundantly observed in Christian art and in European churches.

In ancient Greek and Indian mythology, the eagle was associated with the god of heaven and was considered sacred. In Roman burial art, the eagle accompanies the dead to heaven and ascends with the deceased. The role of the eagle on the flag of the Roman army was a symbol of power and victory. In addition, in Christian art, the eagle symbolises the ascension of Christ to heaven and in Renaissance allegory, the eagle is a symbol of sight as one of the five senses; it also resembles pride, one of the seven deadly sins.³¹ In Safavid architecture, animal motifs are also seen in ornamentation including the motif of winged humans. Images of animals such as peacocks, parrots, ostriches and dragons can be seen in abundance (Fig. 9).

The composition of this inscription consists of plant and animal motifs, and occasionally a combination of the two in the form of the Waqh pattern³². The use of the role of the pheasant, which is a symbol of beauty, is an allegory of colourful lights, brightness and the manifestation of solar power.³³ This bird, which is a symbol of

31 Rezvan Pilevar, Gholam Rezaei Tusian Shandiz, Hossein Shojaei Qadi Kalaei, 'The effect of birds used in Sassanid decorations in Islamic art and textiles and its application in logo design', *International Conference on Research in Science and Technology* (Athens, 2016).

32 Waqh motifs are a modified and evolved species of talking tree that have taken on a decorative aspect. These motifs can be considered the final stage of the evolution of sacred trees: 1) transformation of the shape of the tree of life into a talking tree; 2) transformation of the tree into a talking tree with animal or legendary heads making a Wagh Wagh sound; 3) animal designs are gradually separated from the tree and transformed into plant shapes with animal heads and are used independently. These combined forms of 'plant-animal' or 'plant-human' quickly attracted the attention and use of Islamic artists and became decorative elements. The scope of their application covered almost all types of art, including tiles. A. R. Taheri, 'Sacred tree, speaker tree and the process of formation of the role of Waqh', *Bagh Nazar Quarterly*, 19 (2011), 52.

33 Jean Knight, Allen Gerbran, *Dictionary of Symbols*, vol. 1, transl. by Soodabeh Fazaili (Tehran: Jeyhun, 1999).

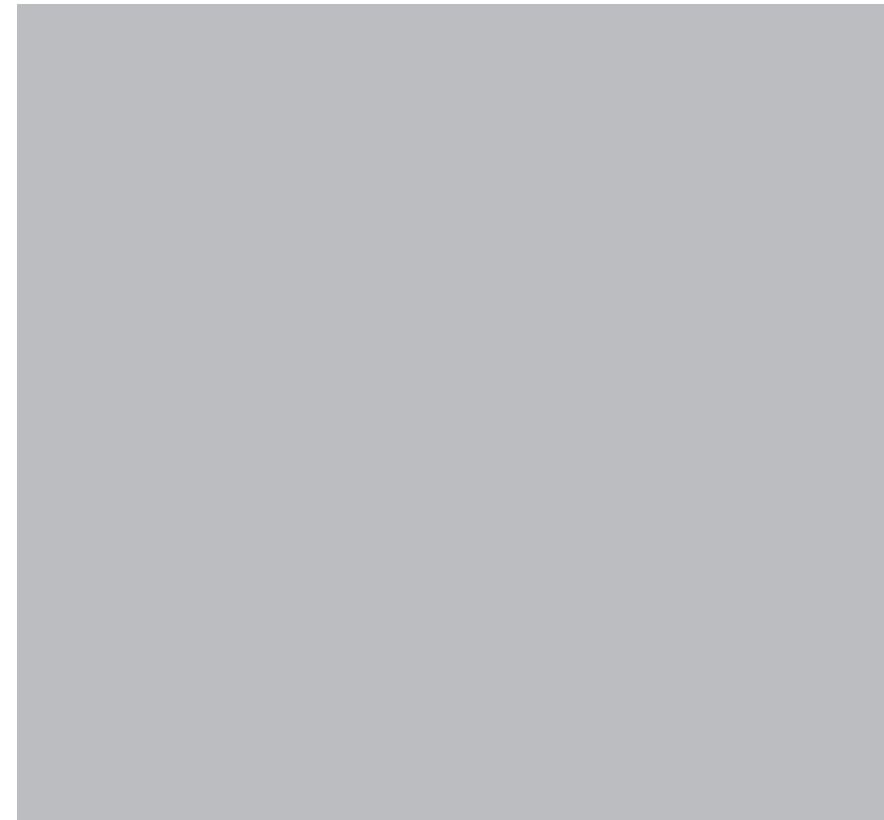


FIG. 9. BIRDS (PHEASANTS) AS A MOTIF IN THE DECORATIVE TILES OF ALLAHVERDI KHAN DOME IN THE HOLY SHRINE OF RAZAVI, MASHHAD. SAFAVID PERIOD. SOURCE: ATIEH KHAN HOSSEINABADI, MEHDI ISHRAQI, 'SYMBOLIC CONCEPTS OF ANIMAL TILE PATTERNS OF GONBAD ALLAH VERDIKHAN FROM THE SAFAVID PERIOD IN THE HOLY SHRINE OF RAZAVI, *SCIENTIFIC-RESEARCH JOURNAL OF ISLAMIC ART STUDIES*, 31 (2018), 11.

spiritual seeking and harmony, is a widely used motif in mosques of the Safavid period.

An inscription designs in Nasta'liq script from the year 1245 AD can be seen above the entrance to the monastery (Fig. 10). This inscription, which is very similar to mosque inscriptions, displays the modelling of Islamic architecture.

The text of the Qajar inscription, added to the structure after completion, relates to the purchase of the village of Darsham in Julfa by 'Abbas Mirza Nayeb al-Saltanah' and is a dedication to the



FIG. 10. THE MONASTERY'S QAJAR INSCRIPTION. PHOTO: AUTHOR.

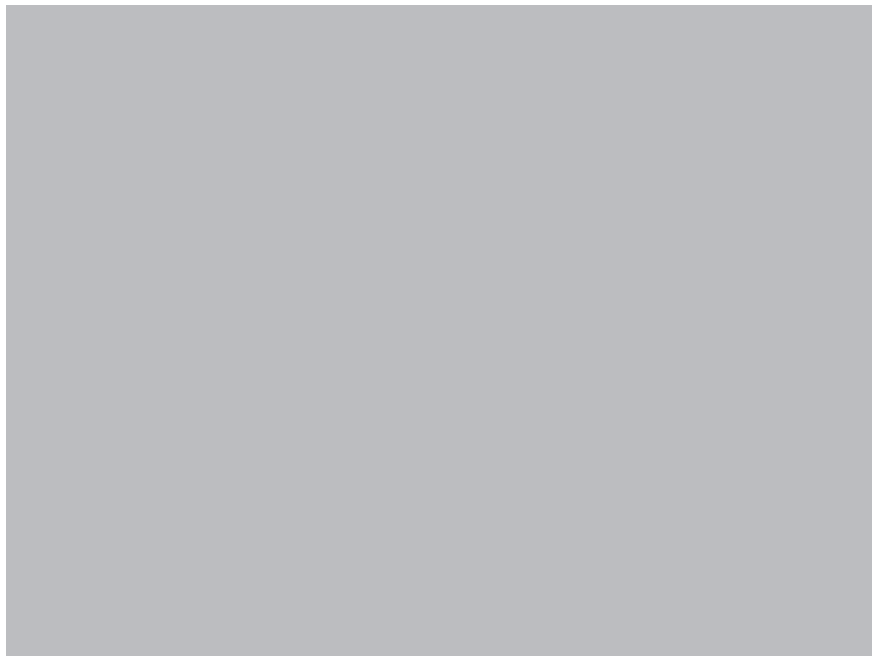


FIG. 11. SUN OR SHAMSEH PATTERNS IN TILE DECORATIONS AT SHEIKH SAFI AL-DINE ARDIBILLI TOMB, SAFAVID PERIOD. PHOTO: AUTHOR.

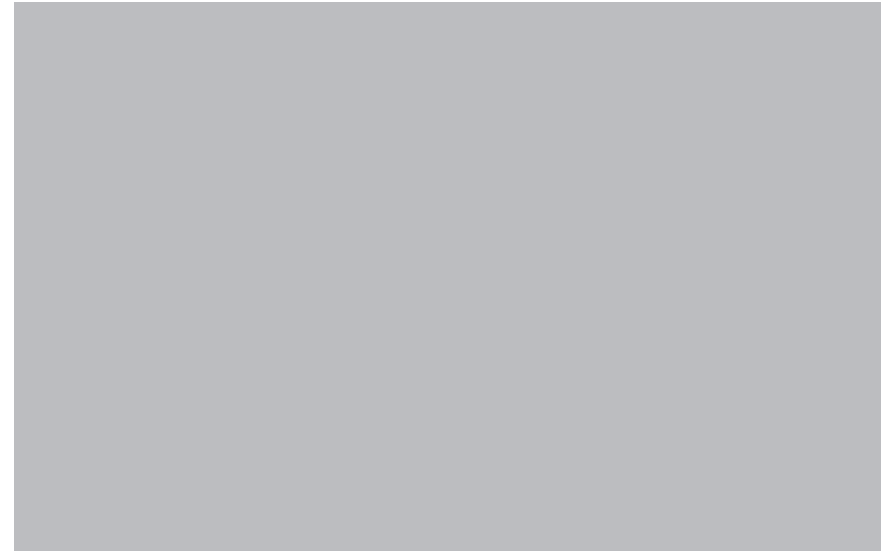


FIG. 12. MOTIF RESEMBLING THE SUN IN DECORATIONS AT SAINT STEPANOS MONASTERY. PHOTO: AUTHOR.

monastery. The roof is created using Muqarnas patterned in the form of overlapping elements and regular geometries that are reminiscent of the geometric proportions of mosques.³⁴ Likewise, Muqarnas patterned to form of semicircles surround the inscription.

The use of geometric patterns like stars, or Shamseh patterns, was common in Islamic architecture during the Safavid period and is undoubtedly related to religious principles. These forms are related to concepts such as light as the manifestation of the existence of truth and the sky as the source of light and divine manifestation. The use of this decorative motif can be seen in many buildings of the Safavid period, including the tile decorations of the tomb of Sheikh Safi al-Din Ardabili (Fig. 11).

On the entrance wall of the monastery chapel, decorations such as the sun motif can be seen. At the top of the building, below the top of the roof slope, there is a circular pattern in the centre of which there is a smaller circle, probably a symbol of the sun and similar to the Islamic sun. In the lower part, the image of Christ's crucifixion can be seen (Fig. 12).

³⁴ Keshavarz, 'St Stephanos Church with the background of the ancient shrine of Iran', 24–25.

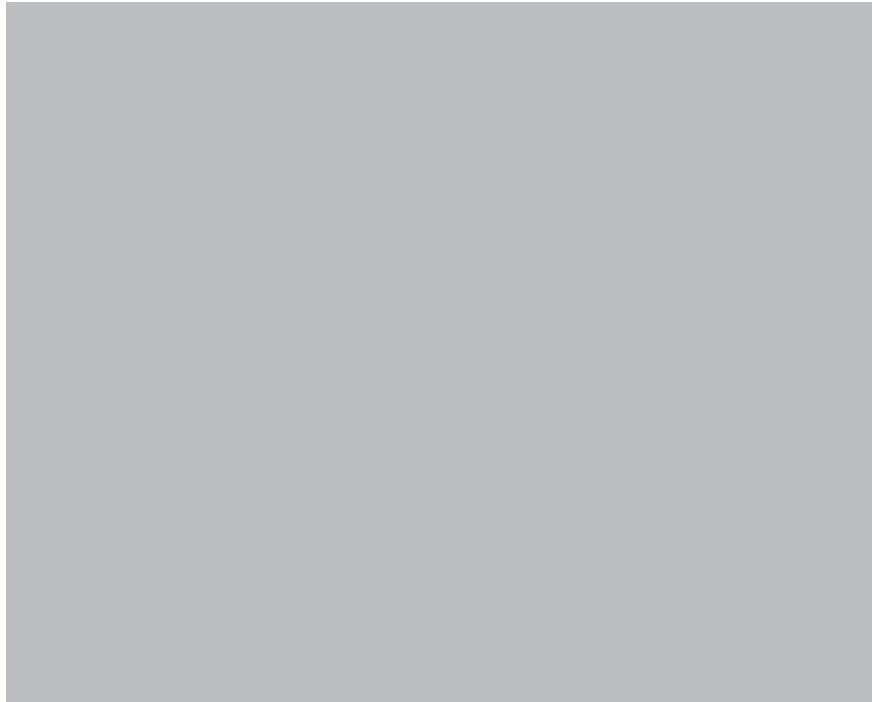


FIG. 13. THE SUN PATTERN ABOVE THE ENTRANCE. LISBON CATHEDRAL, PORTUGAL. 16TH CENTURY. PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.



FIG. 14. TOMB OF SHEIKH SAFI AL-DINE ARDIBILLI IN ARDEBIL, IRAN. PHOTO: AUTHOR.

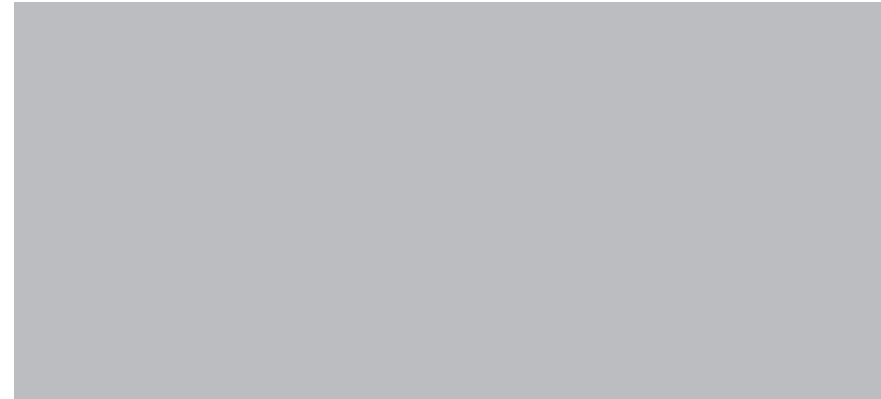


FIG. 15. MUQARNAS PATTERNS IN ALI QAPU PALACE, ISFAHAN, IRAN. PHOTO: AUTHOR

An investigation of this style of architecture and the shape of the sun can also be seen in Portuguese architecture. Rotating lines such as flower petals are typical of ornamentation as observed in the entranceway to Lisbon Cathedral in Portugal (Fig. 13).

Other geometric decorations at St Stepanos Monastery include Muqarnas decoration around the inscriptions as well as on the walls. In the architecture of this structure, there are three windows in the lower part of the tower surrounded by cruciform motifs. Many Muqarnas and Chalipa patterns are visible in the lower part of the arch in the prayer hall entrance. The Chalipa pattern is also common in Safavid architecture. For instance, the minaret of Isfahan Grand Mosque has these cruciform motifs in profusion, with the whole body of the minaret decorated in this way. Moreover, Chalipa patterns were applied abundantly at the Safavid tomb of Sheikh Safi al-Din (Fig. 14).

As apparent from the image above, the use of Chalipa motifs is one of the most significant decorative approaches in the dome and tomb of Sheikh Safi al-Din Ardabili. In this monument, the most beautiful plaster Muqarnas designs especially bare and semi-bare Muqarnas patterns accompanied with flower and herbal motifs with various scallop plaster Muqarnases, decorate the architecture in the finest conceivable way.³⁵ This type of decorative architecture can also be seen in Ali Qapu Palace in Isfahan (Fig. 15).

35 Hossein Zomarshidi, *Traditional Materials Science* (Tehran: Emerald, 1998).

Murals³⁶, paintings on stone plinths, paintings on plaster with Islamic designs, carvings, stone inscriptions, and gilt are some of the decorative features of Safavid period architectural splendours. For instance, the tomb of Shah Abbas Thani is located southwest of the shrine of Imam Masoumeh, built in 1077 AH/1666 AD. This twelve-sided tomb with a height of approximately twelve metres and a height of up to 5 metres is covered with marble and stone inscriptions executed on the stones with white, green and brown flowers. The upper part of the building from the top of the stone inscription is made of Muqarnas painted with beautiful flowers; the building is decorated with herbal and Islamic motifs³⁷ (Figs. 16 and 17).

A comparison of the altar of the two Christian churches demonstrates that they are not comparable in style with the altar of European churches. The Muqarnas design above the altar is also significant, nonetheless. Despite the use of Muqarnas in Safavid architecture, the shape of this decorative element is not similar (Fig. 18).

The comparison reveals that the columns leading to the altar are very similar, especially in terms of the capitals. Inside the Lisbon cathedral's arch of Grioband, a window has been installed which has a nested crescent arch, a feature that was common to Portuguese Christian architecture at this time.

Among the decorations inside, there are, the church is three stone prayer halls, one is in the middle of the altar (apse) and the others are on the north and south sides of the prayer hall. The whole church is made of red, pink and white stone. The dimensions of this church are about 15 to 22 metres wide and there are two entrances. Inside church, right next to the wall, is the bell tower. The exterior walls of this building are made of well-cut stones that are combined with very beautiful carvings (Fig. 19). In the Church of Sao Francisco in Portugal, the use of a circle resembling a sun or a flower can be seen, which is similar to the architecture of Saint Stepanos Monastery in terms of decoration. In addition, the use of pink stone is evident in both churches (Fig. 20).

36 Safavid period murals, the most attractive Islamic period tourist sites in Iran (2014). The first National Conference on Geography, Tourism, Natural Resources and Sustainable Development, Kavous Khosravi and Jamshid Samadi Beghe Jan.

37 Ahmad Gholamzade Kalaei, Kuros Samanian, 'Structural Analysis of Materials and Techniques of Plinth Ornaments of Safavid Era: A Case Study of Shah Abbas II Mausoleum in Qom', *Journal of Visual and Applied Arts*, 10 (20) (2018), 117–131; doi: 10.30480/vaa.2018.617 [accessed on 20/08/2022].

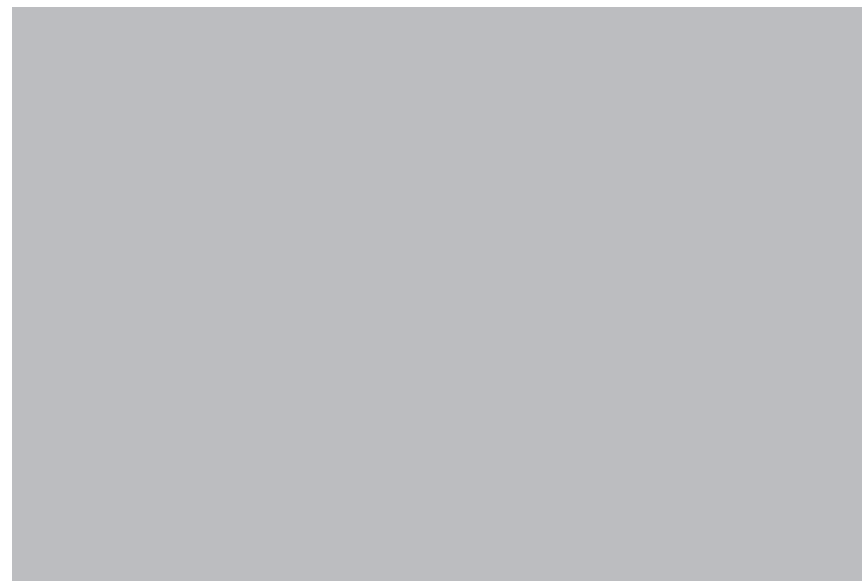


FIG. 16. THE TOMB OF SHAH ABBAS THANI, QOUM, IRAN. PHOTO: TASNIM NEWS.



FIG. 17. MUQARNAS PAINTED WITH FLOWERS IN THE TOMB OF SHAH ABBAS THANI, QOUM, IRAN. PHOTO: TASNIM NEWS.

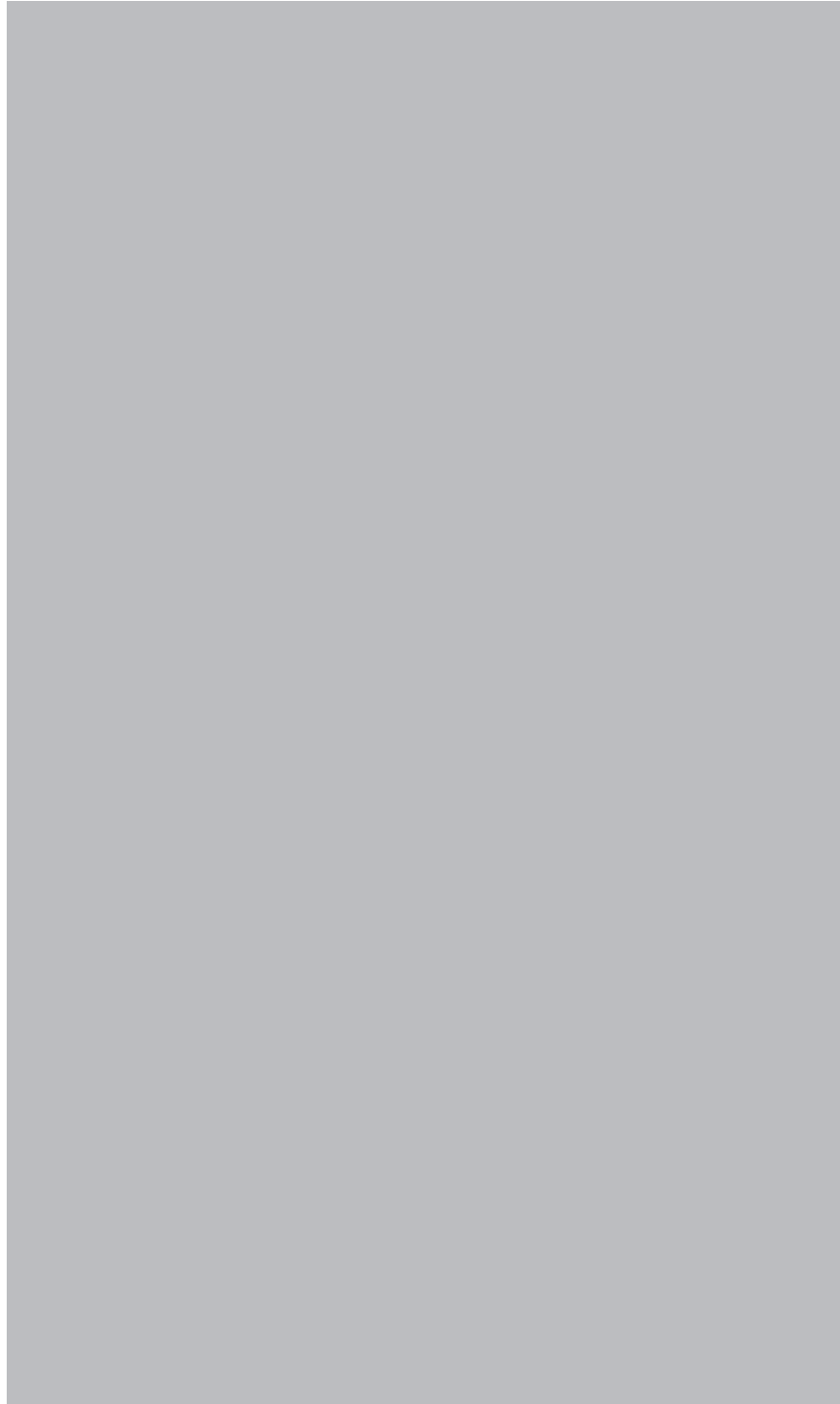


FIG. 18. CATHEDRAL AND ALTAR IN LISBON, PORTUGAL. GRADUAL CONSTRUCTION FROM 1150–1755. PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

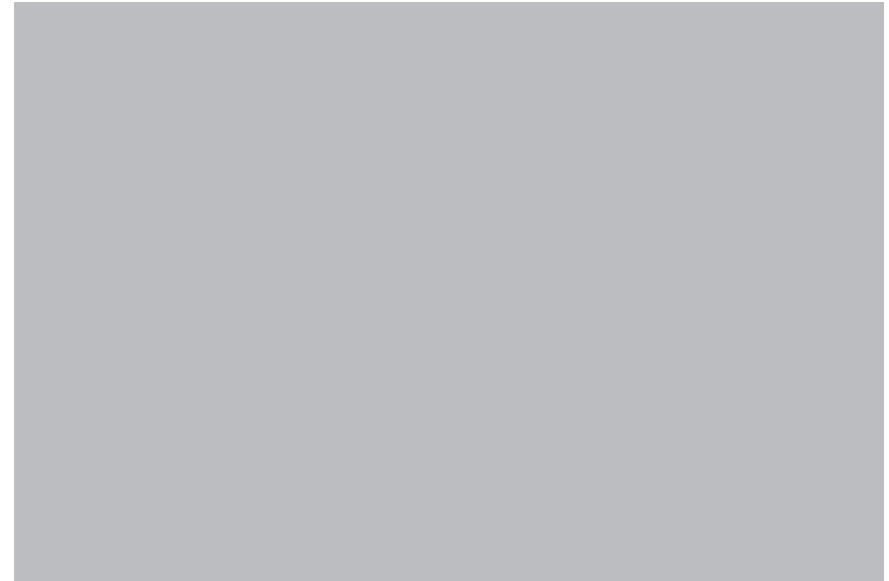


FIG. 19. THE APPLICATION OF COLOURFUL STONE IN THE ORNAMENTATION OF SAINT STEPANOS MONASTERY, JULFA, IRAN. PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.



FIG. 20. THE APPLICATION OF COLOURFUL STONES IN THE ORNAMENTATION OF THE CHURCH OF SAN FRANCISCO IN PORTUGAL, 16TH CENTURY. PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

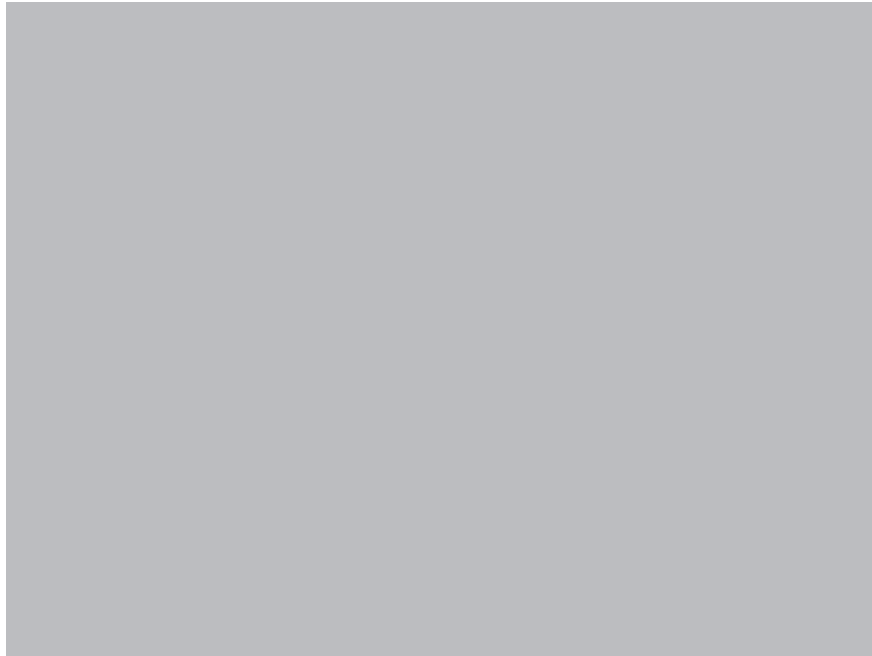


FIG. 21. THE SCENE OF THE KILLING AT SAINT STEPANOS MONASTERY, JULFA, IRAN. PHOTO: AUTHOR.

Below this relief are two flowers and below them in a rectangular frame is a scene from a story that is probably the martyrdom of Stepanos. There are also three stones above Stepanos' head and an incense burner. Three angels are also depicted as a sign of the sanctity of the protagonist (Fig. 21).

What is certain is that these motifs are clearly different from the common motifs of Safavid art. We can see a difference in these **human motifs** even from a distance in the elongation of human figures that is common in Safavid art, or the type of clothing used. Figure 22 shows an example of human motifs used in the Safavid era (Fig. 22).

These differences are identified by adapting the shape and proportions of the statues in Saint Stepanos Monastery and the common human motifs of the Safavid period. The turban on the Safavid man body is completely different to the headpiece of the monastery engraving. The stretch of the Safavid dress is not seen in the



FIG. 22. RIGHT: THE PRINCE OF TABRIZ, BOSTON MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS. SOURCE: YAGHOUB AZHAND, *ISFAHAN SCHOOL OF PAINTING* (TEHRAN: PRINTING ORGANIZATION OF THE MINISTRY OF ISLAMIC GUIDANCE AND THE ACADEMY OF ARTS, 2006), 49. LEFT: A PIECE OF LAMPAS CLOTH, 1567 AD. SOURCE: *GIFTS OF THE SULTAN: THE ARTS OF GIVING AT THE ISLAMIC COURTS* (LOS ANGELES: LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART, 2011), 2044.

monastery figure. By studying the architectural elements and decorations of Saint Stepanos Monastery and the architecture of Safavid buildings, a brief review of the similarities in structure and decorative elements was made. It was found that in addition to structural and decorative similarities, method of application and creation of architectural elements in the monastery was very similar to elements of Islamic architecture common in the Safavid period, reinforcing the hypothesis that the architects and artists involved with this church may have been Iranian, or that they were Europeans inspired by Safavid architectural elements. What is remarkable is the application of proportions and contexts in the structure and decoration, which are very close to the aesthetic principles of Islamic art. This correspondence in structure and motifs is outlined in the table below:

TABLE 1. DESIGN AND STRUCTURAL CORRESPONDANCES BETWEEN SAINT STEPANOS MONASTERY, JULFA, IRAN, AND SAFAVID ARCHITECTURE. SOURCE: AUTHOR.

Features		Saint Stepanos Monastery	Safavid Architecture
Structure		Similarities in the geometric aspects of the architecture and the octagonal pyramidal dome	Similarities in the geometric aspects of the architecture and the octagonal pyramidal dome
Decorative	Herbal	In the form of spiral branches and plant spirals	The branches are twisted and intertwined
	Animal and Transhuman Motifs	Cows and angels, four-winged angels and eagles	Flower, bird and pheasant motif
	Inscriptions	Inscription in the Nastaliq script	Inscription on mosque walls
	Geometric Patterns	Use of stars, Shamseh and muqarnas decoration around the inscriptions. Scallop ornaments similar to the role of the sun. Chalipa patterns	Shamesh patterns Muqarnas designs and Chalipa motifs
Human Motifs		Short figures	Tall figures

The most significant feature distinguishing the architecture of Saint Stepanos Monastery is the octagonal geometry of the pyramidal dome, which can be considered a legacy of previous periods of Iranian architecture. There is no evidence as to why the architectural structure of this building should have used this geometric design. Nonetheless, it can be argued that the architects of this monastery attempted to reference common religious buildings. Unlike the circular domes that are the basis of Islamic architecture in mosques, Saint Stepanos Monastery strives to use the same composition as church buildings in Europe, however, bearing minor alternations that

demonstrate Iranian architectural elements, especially those from the Safavid era. This harmony can also be seen in the application of patterns. On the one hand, the use of spiral and twisting herbal motifs, animal motifs and motifs such as the Shamseh and Chalipa, form the basis of Islamic geometric motifs, while on the other hand, the monument expresses the integration of Safavid Islamic art with Portuguese Christian architecture. In a number of the motifs, such as geometric and herbal motifs, and the use of symmetrical elements, the domination of Safavid artistic influence has become apparent. In contrast, in human or superhuman motifs, the influence of Portuguese art is more readily visible.

CONCLUSION

A comparative study of the structure and architectural decoration of Portuguese Christian churches and the architecture of the Saint Stepanos Monastery in Julfa, Iran, shows that they have similarities in the use of materials such as coloured stone, in spatial arrangement and in a number of specific herbal and animal motifs. A further comparison with the architecture of the Safavid period confirms the use of murals, the use of Shamseh patterns, geometric designs and other decorative features that show Safavid influence on the construction of this monastery. In addition, attention to symmetry in construction and decoration is specific to Iranian Islamic, and specifically Safavid, architecture, and this can be seen in the decoration of the Monastery, while this feature was not much used in the Christian architecture of Portugal. A number of the Monastery's architectural features, such as floral, animal and human motifs, as well as Muqarnas patterns, were used both in Safavid architecture and the architecture of Portuguese churches. What is clear is the issue of the evolution of architectural styles in Iran and the world. This evolution of architectural styles makes it difficult to accurately identify of the temporal affiliation of decorations and structures in architectural works related to a particular period.

MAHNAZ SHAYESTEHFAR: SAFAVID AND PORTUGUESE CHRISTIAN INFLUENCE ON SAINT STEPANOS MONASTERY IN JULFA, IRAN

KEYWORDS: ARCHITECTURE; SAINT STEPANOS MONASTERY; JULFA; SAFAVID ARCHITECTURE; PORTUGUESE CHRISTIAN ARCHITECTURE; MOTIFS AND DECORATIVE FEATURES

SUMMARY

The Monastery of Saint Stepanos, in Julfa, is located in north-western Iran, in the province of East Azerbaijan. Whilst the exact date of construction is unknown, the building displays exceptional architecture. It is believed that the monastery was built between the tenth and seventeenth centuries, and this doubt emphasises the need to investigate the nature of structure and decoration. The Monastery is situated in a deep canyon beside the Araxes river, on the Iranian side of the border between Iran and the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic in Azerbaijan. It was originally built in the ninth century, and was rebuilt during the Safavid era after being damaged by wars and earthquakes. Considering that scholars and travel writers, such as the French Traveller Taurine, consider the construction of this building to be from the Safavid period, probing the structural and decorative similarities of this building with Safavid period architecture can be a way of dating this outstanding historical monument. During the Safavid period, the Portuguese arrival on the island of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf (1515–1622 AD) prepared the ground for the arrival and activity of European Christians, who spread Christianity and its culture. One of the earliest consequences of this was the construction of the Monastery and other Christian architecture. The basic objectives of the article are to study the influence of Portuguese Christian architecture on the construction of Saint Stepanos Monastery, and to investigate the influence of Safavid structural design on its architecture. The main questions, are what influence has the architecture of Saint Stepanos Monastery had on Christian architecture in Portugal, and what influence did the architecture the Monastery have on the architecture of the Safavid period?

This research for this article is descriptive and analytical based on historical information, available documents and existing images. An examination of the architectural similarities between Saint Stepanos

Monastery in Julfa and Christian architecture in Portugal is essential for a more accurate understanding of the Monastery.

CV

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