

THE SYMBOLOGY OF SWASTIKA IN THE GONBAD-E-SORKH TOMB

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Abstract. *The Swastika was used on many of Iran's monuments dating from pre-Islamic and post-Islamic times. It cannot be said that the Swastika sign has always had only one meaning, for if it was so, it would lose its mystery and become merely a word. In addition to being a beautiful image with deep and prominent notions, the Swastika is a key element in the art and creation of various pleasing motifs, especially in Islamic art. It appeared on the pre-Islamic Iranian artworks and remained visible on those of the Islamic era, indicating an inextricable link between the visual presentation and the past. Therefore, this research, which is an applied research of the qualitative approach, investigates the Swastika array in the Gonbad-e-Sorkh Mausoleum or Red Dome in Maragheh and analyses this sign printed in brick from a symbolic point of view. The results show that the Swastika is associated with the deceased soul in the tomb buildings and the reason for its creation must be related to this spiritual relationship.*

Keywords: Swastika, Gonbad-e-Sorkh, Maragheh, Iran, Symbology.

Rezumat: *Simbolistica svasticii în mormântul Gonbad-e-Sorkh. În epocile pre-Islamică și post-Islamică semnul svasticii a fost folosit în arhitectura monumentelor din diferite părți ale Iranului. Nu se poate spune despre semnul svasticii că a avut întotdeauna o singură semnificație pentru că, dacă ar fi astfel, și-ar pierde misterul și ar deveni un simplu cuvânt. În afară de faptul că reprezintă o imagine frumoasă cu semnificații adânci și importante, svastica este un element cheie în domeniul artistic și în crearea unor motive estetice, în special în arta islamică. Semnul svasticii a apărut pe operele de artă iraniene pre-islamice și a rămas vizibil pe cele din epoca islamică, ceea ce arată legătura indestructibilă dintre reprezentarea vizuală și trecut. Prin urmare, această lucrare, care reprezintă o cercetare aplicată cu abordare calitativă, investighează dispunerea svasticii în Mausoleul sau Mormântul roșu Gonbad-e-Sorkh din orașul Maragheh și analizează semnul imprimat în cărămidă din punct de vedere simbolic. Rezultatele arată că svastica este asociată în clădirile*

funerare cu sufletul decedaților, iar motivul utilizării sale trebuie pus în legătură cu această relație spirituală.

INTRODUCTION

Revered in various rituals and beliefs, the Swastika has generated various discussions and opinions on its origins and symbolic significance. Regardless of its name – "the cross",¹ "the sun-wheel"², "the Swastika"³ – it represents two intersecting lines, perpendicular to each other⁴ or a branch with 90 degrees to the right or left. It can be said that, throughout the history of mankind, the Swastika has appeared illustrated in various ways among different ethnic groups⁵ symbolizing good fortune, good things, and good wishes, the sun and the goddess of the sun, religious mystery, etc.⁶ It occurs in Egyptian, Trojan, Roman, Teutonic and Celtic stone carvings, as a symbolic motif of the American Indians, throughout North, Central and South America, and in Persian, Central Asian, Indian, Chinese, Japanese and Southeast Asian art. In ancient Greece, the Swastika was known as a "Greek Cross" or a gammadion formed by four clockwise-rotating Greek gamma letters. In early Christianity, the Greek letter gamma symbolize the cornerstone; therefore, it became a symbol for Christ as 'the cornerstone of the New Temple or Church'. Later, the gammadion or fylfot appeared as a geometric pattern in the lower areas of the stained-glass windows in cathedrals and churches.⁷ This symbol has been also discovered in Europe in one of its most beautiful forms as a

¹ Ernest Herzfeld, ایران در شرق باستان [Iran in the Ancient East], Translated by Homayoun Sanatizadeh, Tehran: Publications of Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies of Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman, 2002, p. 21.

² Malihe Keshtgar, بررسی تطبیقی چلیپا به عنوان نماد دینی در تمدن‌های ایران باستان، هند و چین، بین النهرین [The Comparative Study of Cross as a Religious Sign in Iran, Mesopotamia & Indochina Civilizations], "Naghsh Mayeh", Vol. 5, 2012, No. 12, p. 63.

³ Nusratullah Bakhturash, گردونه خورشید یا گردونه مهر [Sun or Mehr Wheel], Tehran: Atai Publications, 2001, p. 148.

⁴ Mohammad Ja'far Yahaghi, فرهنگ اساطیر و اشارات داستانی در ادبیات فارسی [Culture of Mythology and Fiction in Persian Literature], Tehran: Soroush, 1996, p. 278.

⁵ Reza Rezalou, Yahya Iramloo, Asadollah Mirza Aghajani, مطالعه سیر تحول نقوش چلیپایی در تزئینات معماری دوره اسلامی ایران و زیبایی شناسی و نماد شناسی آن [A Study of the Evolution of the Swastika's Motifs in the Decoration of Iranian Islamic Architecture and its Aesthetics and Symbolism], "Journal of Fine Arts – Visual Arts", Vol. 18, 2013, No. 1, p. 16.

⁶ Nusratullah Bakhturash, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

⁷ Robert Beer, *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan symbols and motifs*, Boston, Shambhala Publications, 1999, p. 343.

horse's head.⁸ If in the Buddhist art the Swastika indicates the stability of the element "earth", in the Nazi ideology it became a symbol of racial extremism.⁹

The word 'swastika' derives from Sanskrit ('swastika').¹⁰ The motif of a "+" sign was engraved on some earthenware vessels from around 5,000 BC that have been found in Khuzestan province. The sun and moon depicted on potteries are placed between the horn of a cow and on the back of a goat along with a broken Swastika.¹¹ Rectangles and cross are the most common shapes of the signs which in some cases seem to represent birds.¹² A distinctive feature of pottery art in Tel-Bakun is that the cross, including its random additions, is not placed in a crowded design, but constitutes the main and predominant symbol.¹³ The Swastika is painted on the objects discovered in a few Parthian (**Arsacid**) graves.¹⁴ **Naqsh-e Rostam**, the tomb of the Achaemenid kings was shaped like a Swastika. In the Sassanid era, this sign was used as the main symbol in palaces decoration. It can be seen among the niches of the ruined palaces in Bishapur and the Kish area¹⁵ (See **Figure 1**).

There are various theories about the graphic simplicity of this sign, which is indicated by the two-barred or broken-lines cross. Some interpretations of Islamic art cannot be considered correct since many of these concepts in Islamic art are still obscure words. For example, the broken type is considered to be a symbol of motion, a rotating sun, or a chariot.¹⁶ The sign of Swastika continued in the Islamic period, taking on various other forms. Gonbad-e-Sorkh of Maragheh represents one of the earliest examples of the Swastika pattern engraved in brickwork. This

⁸ Radu Petcu, *Swastika-shaped fibulae with horse-head decorations (Almgren 232) from the Roman period in Dobrudja (Moesia Inferior)*, "Studia Antiqua et Archaeologica", Vol. 25, 2019, No. 1, p. 115.

⁹ D. N. Jha (Ed.), *Contesting Symbols and Stereotypes. Essays on Indian History and Culture*, Dehli, AAKAR BOOKS, 2013, p. 103.

¹⁰ Micah Issitt, Carlyn Main, *Hidden Religion. The Greatest Mysteries and Symbols of the World's Religious Beliefs*, Santa Barbara – Denver – Oxford, ABC-CLIO, 2014, p. 160.

¹¹ Nusratullah Bakhturash, *op. cit.*, p. 148-150.

¹² Ali Sajjadi, هنر گچبری در معماری ایران [The Art of Plastering in Iranian Architecture], "Journal of Work", 1988, No. 25, pp. 194-214.

¹³ Ernest Herzfel, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

¹⁴ Seifollah Kambakhshfard, گورخمره‌های اشکانی [Parthian Tombs], Tehran: Academic Publishing Center, 2015.

¹⁵ Malihe Keshtgar, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

¹⁶ Jane Cooper, فرهنگ مصور نمادهای سنتی [Pictorial Culture of Traditional Symbols], Translated by Malihe Karbassian, Tehran: Farshad 2001, p. 145; دایره المعارف، روهین پاکباز، هنر: نقاشی، پیکره سازی و هنر [The Encyclopedia of Art: Painting, Sculpture and Graphic Art], Tehran: Contemporary Culture. 2008, p. 342.

paper seeks to answer the question: why was the Swastika sign used in the construction of Gonbad-e-Sorkh's tomb?

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Much research has been done on the Gonbad-e-Sorkh's building so far. For the first time in his travelogue, James Morier named it as "the tomb of one of the descendants of the Genghis Khan Mongol" and painted an image of it.¹⁷ Robert Byron is also one of the travelers who briefly mentioned this building.¹⁸ Walter Harris visited Maragheh in the 19th century. In his journey, he referred, in short, to the structure of the tomb towers at Maragheh.¹⁹ Antoin Sevriugin, a Russian-Georgian photographer who saw the Gonbad-e-Sorkh during the Qajar period, took some pictures of the monument.²⁰ Like him, Abdul Hussein Mirza Farmanfarma arrived in Maragheh in 1891, capturing images of the city's historic buildings, including the Gonbad-e-Sorkh; based on these, he wrote *The tomb of Minister Holako khan outside Maragheh*.²¹ André Godard, a French architect, and archaeologist described some of the architectural features of Gonbad-e-Sorkh.²² Other scholars, such as Hylen Brand, Arthur Pope, and Christie J. Wilson referred to this historical monument in their works. Isa Behnam, Nosratollah Moshkuti, Ismail Dibaj, Gholam Ali Hatam, Mohammad Ali Mokhlesi, Mohammad Yousef Kiani, and Sirus Kheiri are some of the Iranian scientists who have studied its structure and function. In 2001, in research on the towers of Maragheh's tombs, Manouchehr Arian underlined the astronomical use and purposes of these buildings. In 2008, Mehran Bahartash, one of Maragheh's scholars, published a book entitled *The Gonbad-e-Sorkh of Maragheh as a Symbol of the School of Architecture of Azerbaijan*.²³

¹⁷ James Morier, *A second journey through Persia, Armenia, and Asia Minor, to Constantinople, between the years 1810 and 1816; with a journal of the voyage by the Brazils and Bombay to the Persian Gulf: together with an account of the proceedings of His Majesty's embassy under His Excellency Sir Gore Ouseley*, London: Printed for Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1818, p. 290.

¹⁸ Robert Byron, *Road to Oxiana*, London, 1936, p. 68.

¹⁹ Walter Harris, *From Batum to Baghdad: Viâ Tiflis, Tabriz, and Persian Kurdistan*. Edinburgh – London, William Blackwood and Sons, 1896, p. 143-144.

²⁰ Asghar Mohammadzadeh, مراغه دار الملک [Dar al-Molk Maragheh], Tehran: Ouhadi Publications, 2018, p. 347.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Andre Godard, *The Art of Iran*, New York – Washington: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965, p. 300-303.

²³ Mehran Bahartash, گنبد سرخ نمادی از مکتب معماری آذربایجان [Gonbad-e-Sorkh is the Symbol of Azarbaijan School of Architecture], Tabriz: Azar Abadegan, 2008.

However, beyond the considerations and analysis developed by the specialists in the field²⁴, there is still no comprehensive study on the reasons for decorating the bricks of the Gonbad-e-Sorkh tomb with the Swastika symbol. Consequently, this research can be considered the first scientific step in this direction.

THE BUILDING OF GONBAD-E-SORKH

Maragheh is situated in the north-western part of Iran and the southern part of East Azerbaijan Province. Its famous historical monuments and especially the towers of the ancient tombs made it known as "the city of domes". The oldest remaining brick building in the city is the Gonbad-e-Sorkh. This dome has been recorded on the National Iranian Monuments List on 15 January 1931, No. 1310.²⁵ The Gonbad-e-Sorkh is located on Arjmandi Street, and 400 meters from Aghalar's Garden (See **Figure 2**). The area was considered to be one of the historic cemeteries of the town and the main burial area of the followers of the Tariqat Haidari in Maragheh. According to the remaining pictures of the Qajar period, the tomb and monuments (including the White Tomb) were formerly placed there, but no trace of them is visible today. The Gonbad-e-Sorkh is the oldest and most exquisite of the four tombs in Maragheh (See **Figure 3**). It derives its name from the red colour of the bricks used on the building's facade.²⁶ The monument has a quadrilateral layout and two floors. The inner chamber of the tomb consists of a square plan, each side measuring 5.95 meters. The main floor is covered with large rectangular slabs, over which is currently superimposed a layer of ordinary brick²⁷ (**Figure 3**).

Each of the Maragheh's towers has underground floors, which could be the burial places. While the memorial tombstone is in the upper room,²⁸ the lower part forms a square-shape basement (cellar), with a size of 5.55 meters.²⁹ In the middle of the **Dakhma** (Tower of Silence) stands a base of 65 cm wide and 90 cm

²⁴ Reza Rezalou, Yahya Iramloo, Asadollah Mirza Aghajani, مطالعه سیر تحول نقوش چلیپایی در تزئینات معماری دوره اسلامی ایران و زیبایی شناسی و نماد شناسی آن [A Study of the Evolution of the Swastika's Motifs in the Decoration of Iranian Islamic Architecture and its Aesthetics and Symbolism], "Journal of Fine Arts - Visual Arts", Vol. 18, 2013, No. 1, pp. 15-24.

²⁵ Ismail Dibaj, آثار و ابینه تاریخی آذربایجان [Works and Historical Background of Azerbaijan], Tehran: Imperial Publications, 1967, p. 88.

²⁶ Robert Hillenbrand, معماری اسلامی [Islamic Architecture], Translated by Iraj Etesam, Tehran: Urban Planning and Processing Company, 2000, p. 277.

²⁷ Gholam Ali Hatam, معماری اسلامی ایران در دوره سلجوقیان [Islamic Architecture of Iran during the Seljuks], Tehran: Academic Jihad Publications, 2000, pp. 132-133.

²⁸ Arthur Pope, Ackerman Phyllis, سیری در هنر ایران [A Survey of Iranian Art], Vol. 3, Tehran: Cultural and Scientific Publications, 2008, p. 1231.

²⁹ Mehran Bahartash, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

high, with brick arches on one side and sidewalls on the other, on which appear square or star-shaped signs. On the west side of the **Dakhma**, along its entrance, it can be seen as a window that opens to the outside, providing the enclosure with a flow of air and light.³⁰ The main front of the building faces North; its opposite side consists of a staircase with five, six, and seventh steps inside the doorway. The front is supported by strong half columns that adorn the corners of the building, creating a wide, luxurious border to the front door. The door itself is placed in a beautiful vault decorated with geometric engravings. The inscription is encircled by the Kufic script, as is the one at the top of the arch.³¹ The side and rear corners, between half columns, are decorated with two arches and the same inscription at the top of the main façade, surrounding the entire building. The lower parts of the building, above the half-columns, the angles, and above the pillars on which the arches are placed, are all of stone. The rest of the bricks are finely clad in delicacy, and their red colour reflects a few pieces of turquoise blue tile.³² The porch was also adorned with blue tiles, this practice of decorating the exterior wall with coloured tiles becoming popular.³³ It should be noted, however, that this porch has a special appearance in terms of decorating with blue tile, fine brickwork and stucco, Kufic brick inscriptions, and various paintings (See **Figure 4**). Gonbad-e-Sorkh is a miracle that lasts, like several other tombs from the early Middle Ages³⁴ and a reminiscence of the great political figures of the past.

BRICK DECORATION

Brick is one of the most important materials in the history of Iranian architecture and the main material in its Islamic era. Mehdi Makinejad drew attention to the important role played by climatic conditions in the erecting of edifices and preserving the beauty of architecture.³⁵ The buildings of the Seljuk period make it clear that the estimation of all structural problems, such as tensile, compressive, and even shear forces, have been done with such precision that the transfer of power in the bricks has resulted in a standstill.³⁶ Brick was mentioned as the dominant material

³⁰ Gholam Ali Hatam, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

³¹ Andre Godard, *op. cit.*, p. 301; Robert Byron, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

³² Andre Godard, *op. cit.*

³³ Christie J. Wilson, تاریخ صنایع ایران [The History of Iranian Industries], translated by Abdullah Faryar, Tehran: Farhangsara Publications, 1987, p. 160.

³⁴ Robert Hillenbrand, *op. cit.*, p. 277.

³⁵ Mehdi Makinejad, تاریخ هنر ایران در دوره اسلامی (تزیینات معماری) [History of Iranian Art in the Islamic Period (Architectural Decoration)], Tehran: Samt Publications, 2008, p. 94.

³⁶ Mahmood Golabchi, Dizaji Javani Aydin, فن‌شناسی معماری ایران [Iranian Architecture Technology], Tehran: Tehran University Publications, 2013, p. 346.

for all constructions such as caravansaries, ditches, royal, and public buildings, mosques, tombs, and tall bars of the mosques, in some cases forming their skeleton-frame. It was used also as a separate cover, proving, in different combinations, the good taste, and creativity of the builders.³⁷ The laying capacity of the bricks provided decorative facades, appropriate to the shape of the buildings.

The Gonbad-e-Sorkh of Maragheh and especially its columns on the front corners are recognized as the best example of brickwork in Iran³⁸ and the most beautiful in the world.³⁹ Inside the monument, the Swastika was widely used, especially the broken Swastika, which is specific to the architecture of the Seljuk period.⁴⁰ The brickwork of the building is decorated with the Swastika and is visible on the walls on all four sides. However, the Swastika on the south and west facades is particularly attractive and can rightly be considered as a masterpiece of the creation of this sign (See **Figure 5**). The columns of the Gonbad-e-Sorkh, which are located at the four corners of the building to provide its structural strength constitute also very beautiful brickwork. In the Red Dome, the angular columns consist of ten shapes of brick of which at least eight moulds perfectly aligned with the curved profile of the columns. The brickwork of the Red Dome columns bears some resemblance to the Brick Dome monument of Qazvin (See **Figure 6**). However, the designs implemented in the Red Dome are more elaborate and finer-grained than the Kharqan ones. The combination of a cross with a dome and the way they are composed and repeated reveal the uniqueness and accuracy of the work.

THE SWASTIKA AS SYMBOL OF DEATH AND IMMORTALITY

The architecture of the Islamic era contains many ornamental patterns, each of which has been used in most Islamic art proportional to the location and compatibility with the type of materials. Some of these motifs or signs are not limited to a particular period or place and do not apply to particular materials. Rather they can be seen on all buildings of the Islamic era, at different times and materials.⁴¹ The Swastika is the part of those pre-Islamic designs used in various buildings in the Islamic era. It could be found especially in tomb decorations, implying a special connection between the material and the spiritual. The application of the Swastika in these edifices is seen with significant complexity and in a variety of geometric

³⁷ Hussain Zomorshidi, مصالح‌شناسی سنتی [Traditional Meteorology], Tehran: Azadeh Publications, 2005, p. 16-17.

³⁸ Mahmood Golabchi, Dizaji Javani Aydin, *op. cit.*, p. 348.

³⁹ Christie J. Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

⁴⁰ Reza Rezalou, Yahya Iramloo, Asadollah Mirza Aghajani, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

patterns. Artists of the Islamic era were keen to use this sign in the brickwork decoration of tombs (See **Figure 7**).

The reason for using this sign in the tombs may be attributed to the thinking of ancient people. The Swastika was identified in the archaeological excavations of the hot area of Ardebil province inside the gravestone⁴² (See **Figure 8**). Thus, there is a meaningful relationship between the sign of the Swastika and the life after death.

In some religious, philosophical, and mythological traditions, the human soul after death is visualized as a bird flying through the sky. As the bird was depicted as a Swastika, this sign becomes a symbol of the soul. Based on the Islamic teachings, God is the Light of Being ("Allah is the light of the sky and earth"). Since the Swastika is a symbol of the sun and resuscitation – thus explaining the widespread use of the Swastika on the walls of tombs – the spiritual connection between the deceased soul with divine light and life is re-established. In Qur'an, verse 97 of Surat al-Nahl refers to the pure life that the righteous and faithful servants will receive after death by the permission of God who possesses the light and existence. It seems that in the Islamic era the architectural or carving artists decorated the tombs with the Swastika as a symbol of the soul, believing that the deceased will receive life again.⁴³

CONCLUSION

Tombs or tomb-buildings have been mentioned as an eternal home in some religious beliefs, especially in Islamic teachings. In these edifices, the deceased soul ascends to heaven and will be restored to life by God who is the light of existence. Such beliefs have been shared and strongly accepted by the Iranians from ancient times to the present day. Therefore, since the Swastika is a symbol of the spirit and reincarnation, a meaningful connection has been established between the deceased and their eternal life. The Gonbad-e-Sorkh is one of the Seljuk tomb building in Maragheh city, where the architect has attempted to make a spiritual tie between the spirit and revitalization of the Seljuk prince buried in the building, by making extensive use of the Swastika in brickwork.

⁴² Seifollah Kambakhshfard, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

⁴³ Mehdi Hassan, (چلیپا و چلیپا شکسته؛ نماد روح (نمونه‌ای در هم تنیده از این دو نقش در ایران) [The Swastika and the broken Swastika; the Symbol of the Soul (An Intertwined Example of these Two Motifs in Iran)]], Translated by Ahmad Hob Ali Mosvani, "Journal of Archeology and History", 1989, No. 2, p. 46-49.



Figure 1. The sign of Swastika in the pre-Islamic works of Iran⁴⁴

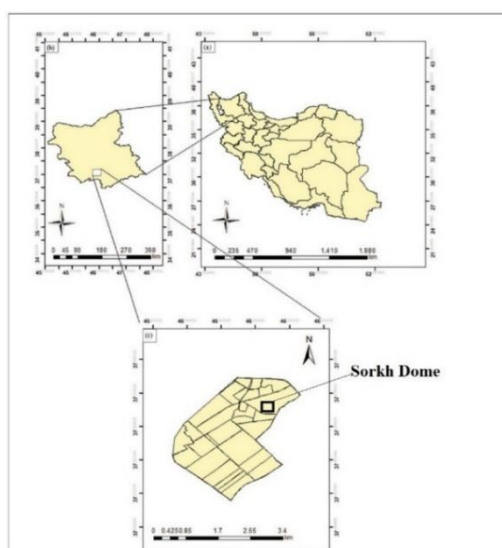


Figure 2. Geographical location of Gonbad-e-Sorkh by breaking down the map of Iran and East Azerbaijan Province⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Nusratullah Bakhturash, *op. cit.*, p. 150-160.

⁴⁵ P. Najafi, H. Navid, B. Feizizadeh, I. Eskandari, *Object-based satellite image analysis applied for crop residue estimating using Landsat OLI imagery*, in "International Journal of Remote Sensing", Vol. 39, 2018, No. 19, p. 6121.

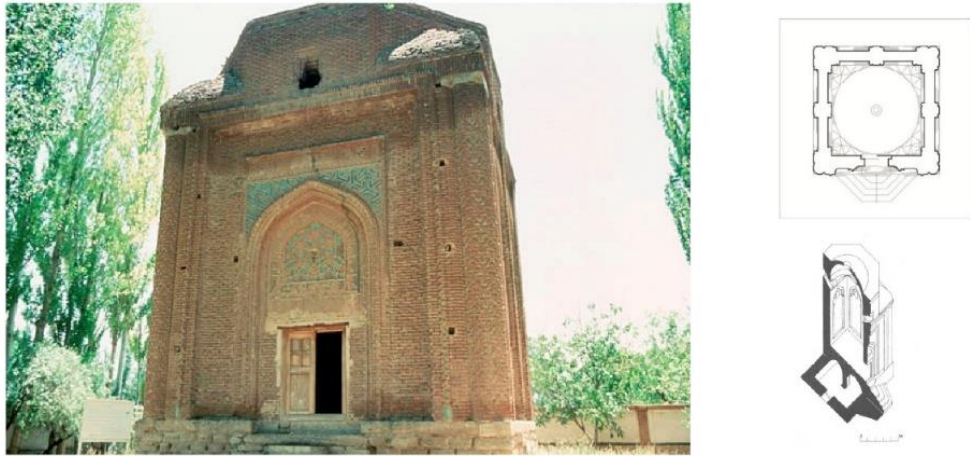


Figure 3. *Gonbad-e-Sork of Maragheh*⁴⁶

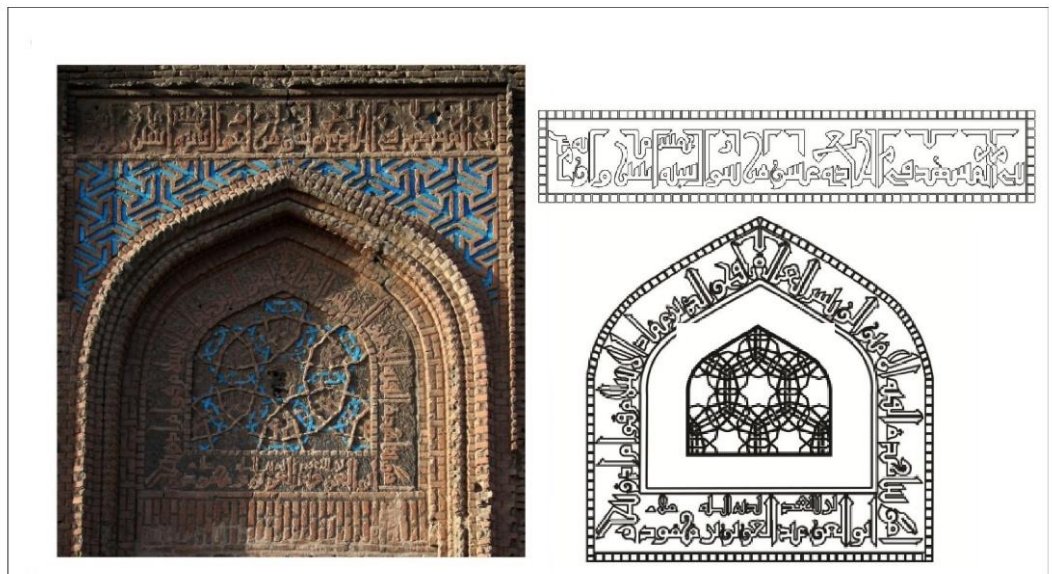


Figure 4. *The porch of the Gonbad-e-Sork entrance*⁴⁷.

⁴⁶ Robert Hillenbrand, *op. cit.*, p. 277.

⁴⁷ Somayeh Khodaei, بررسی و مقایسه تزیینات برج مقبره‌های سرخ و کبود مراغه [Study and Comparison of Decorations on Maragheh's Red and Blue Tombs], an MA thesis in Visual Communication, Al-Zahra University, 2016, p. 95.

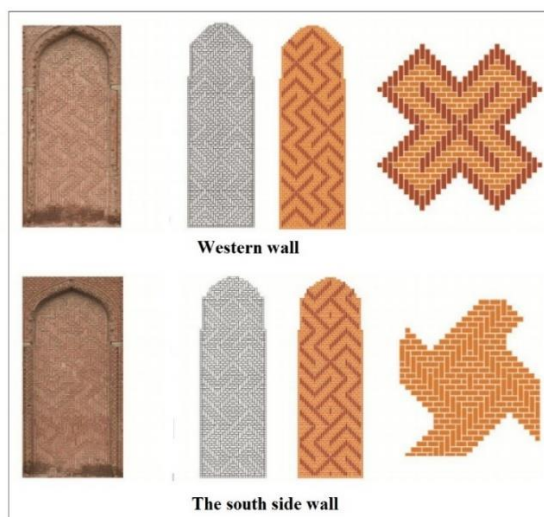
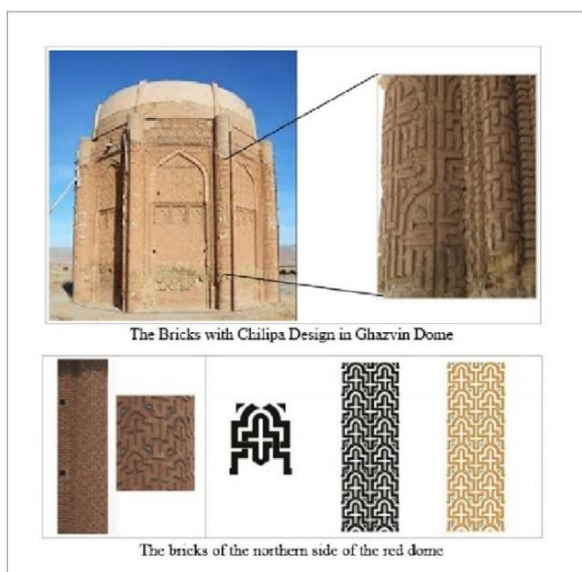


Figure 5. Executed Swastika in the brickwork of the western and southern facades of Gonbad-e-Sorkh⁴⁸.



**Figure 6. a) Brickwork with Swastika sign of the tomb tower of Kharghan
b) Brickwork part of Gonbad-e-Sorkh's column⁴⁹**

⁴⁸ Somayeh Khodaei, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

⁴⁹ **A)** Reza Rezalou, Yahya Iramloo, Asadollah Mirza Aghajani, *op. cit.*, p. 18; **B)** Somayeh Khodaei, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

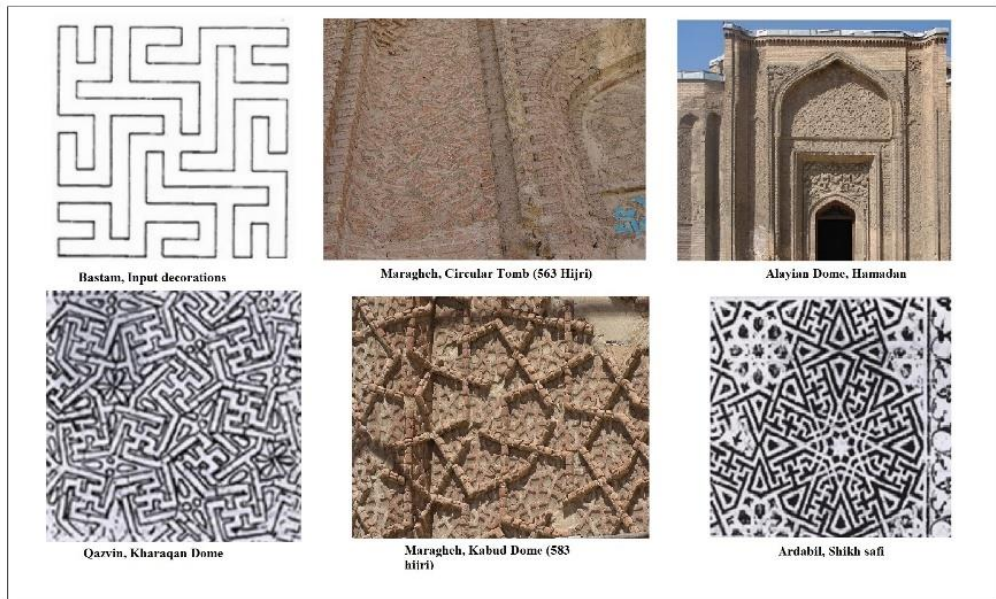


Figure 7. The sign of Swastika in a number of monuments in Iran⁵⁰



Figure 8. Graves of Parthian period and cloths adorned with the sign of Swastika⁵¹

⁵⁰ Reza Rezalou, Yahya Iramloo, Asadollah Mirza Aghajani, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

⁵¹ Seifollah Kambakhshfard, *op. cit.*, p. 71.