Ziyārāt of Ghazni: Three Case Studies about Marble Re-Employments

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Abstract

An astonishing number of ziyārāt (funerary areas worshipped by the local population) is documented in Ghazni. A peculiar phenomenon involves some of them: marble slabs, belonging to the architectural decoration of ancient monuments, were re-employed inside the ziyārāt with decorative and celebrative reasons. Three different case studies are presented.

Keywords

Islamic Archaeology, ziyārāt, Ghaznavid and Ghurid marbles

Among the different fields of research the Italian Archaeological Mission in Afghanistan investigated in 1957-1978, that of Islamic funerary architecture is by far one of the most interesting.1 Several surveys led in the area of Ghazni

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documented, along with tombs and cemeteries, an astonishing number of 
ziyārāt. The latter immediately appeared as a fascinating theme.

The photographic material collected is extremely rich, although fragmentary. Pictures are not always easily comprehensible due to the lack of detailed captions. Unfortunately, it is still impossible to resume fieldwork in the area, as a consequence of the present situation in the country. Moreover, such exposed sites are likely to have suffered all kinds of damages and destruction during the last decades of war, so that their present condition would hardly be comparable with the one portrayed by the Italian Mission. Therefore, the documentation represents an invaluable evidence for many funerary sites, monuments, and materials that have already disappeared.

The presence of many ziyārāt in the same area implies a strong tradition of worship of the dead, longing for an intercession. Quran and Sunna strictly forbid such practise, but it is still widely diffused in many Muslim countries, especially in Central Asia and the Iranian world. It is probable that, at a certain time, a shift in the use of the term ziyāra (“visit”) occurred: the term, previously referring to the habit of visiting tombs, started to indicate the tomb itself, which had become a sacred place of worship and a destination of pilgrimage. The graves of some personalities, distinguished for their spiritual qualities or political role, attracted devotion on the part of the local population, making that place into a ziyāra. Funerary areas grew more and more around them, keeping alive the memory of the original eponymous throughout the centuries.

This paper represents an extract of a broader, in-progress research on the ziyārāt. The study relies on data from two main sources: the Italian Mission archives and the Riyāḍ al-alwāḥ by Muḥammad Riḍā, a manuscript written at

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3 Luckily, not all is lost: since 2010-11, UNESCO and the Afghan government have undertaken a restoration campaign of the main mausoleums.

4 A paper on the ziyārāt of Ghazni as a whole is in preparation: a list of about ninety ziyārāt and a map showing their distribution on Ghazni territory will be the main outcomes. See also Szuppe, Maria, “Une description de lieux de pèlerinage (ziyāaratgāh) autour de Ghazna, Afghanistan (fin du XVIIe s. ?)”, in Bernardini, Michele and Tornesello, Natalia (eds.), Scritti in onore di Giovanni M. D’Erme (Napoli: Università di Napoli “L’Orientale”, 2005): 11, pp. 1167-1200.
the very beginning of the 20th century in order to record the huge epigraphic documentation still present inside the ziyārāt at that time. Information given by the two sources do not ever match: some changes occurred during the broad fifty-year gap between Riḍā’s work and the arrival of the Italian Mission (cf. infra: ziyāra of Ibrāhīm). Moreover, Riḍā employs a number of different terms for the ziyārāt, also defining them boqʿa, maqbara, and mazār: such variety often generates confusion.

Re-Employment as a Phenomenon

A peculiar aspect to underline is the presence of re-employed marble elements inside the ziyārāt. To our knowledge, this phenomenon involves about twenty ziyārāt. This feature is particularly interesting since it links, through marble finds, the funerary context to the greater historical past of the city. Attempting to reconstruct and follow the transformations undergone by the ziyārāt on the territory of Ghazni through their long-lasting history is a challenging effort. Dating the ziyārāt is a major issue: evidence at disposal consists of the architectural style of the monuments – when there is one – and the dated tombs documented in these sites.

Among the finds collected by the Italian Mission inside the ziyārāt there were many epigraphic and un-epigraphic marble slabs, retrieved outside their original context, which dated back to the Ghaznavid and Ghurid period: some of them were tomb’s elements; many others belonged to the architectural decoration of the Ghazni palace. Martina Rugiadi already carried out a study of the Ghaznavid marble, so we shall not examine the material itself.

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6 I wish to thank Martina Rugiadi and Viola Allegranzi, both members of the Islamic Ghazni Archaeological Project, for the information on marble finds that they have kindly shared with me.

We propose here, instead, some remarks on the role played by marble re-employsments inside the ziyārāt.

It seems clear that, in the centuries that followed Ghazni’s golden age, these valuable pieces had been widely reused in many different ways. Marble slabs, which were the product of a highly skilled craftsmanship and the outcome of a refined court taste, fulfilled a decorative requirement inside the ziyārāt. Additionally, they also had a celebrative meaning: the most beautiful traces of the Ghaznavid wealth were re-employed to grant dignity to sacred places whose power was entirely spiritual. This is most clear if we look at the marble slabs that were re-used to cover, hence ennoble, the simple mounds of earth belonging to dead “holy men” (awliyā’).

Three case studies are here presented to deepen this issue: three ziyārāt have been chosen on the basis of their relevance, but also to offer a significant sample of the different existing situations.

The ziyāra of Sultan Ibrāhīm

The palace unearthed by the Italian Mission was undoubtedly the greatest discovery in Ghazni. The excavation, which would result in such a find, began near a sanctuary identified as a ziyāra (Pl. IX.1). It was attributed by the local population to the Ghaznavid sultan Ibrāhīm, who ensured Ghazni with a long-lasting reign of prosperity in the second half of the 11th century (1059-99).⁸

As the excavations came to their end, it was clear that the ziyāra had been built on the western īvān of the palace, a few centuries after it had been abandoned (Pl. IX.2). The ziyāra, provided with a domed chamber and an īvān, remained untouched and is still there nowadays.

From this ziyāra came an incredible number of finds: fifty-three fragments of marble were reused on the floor and the inner and outer wall of the sanctuary; many of them are likely to have been part of the architectural decoration of the palace, as testified by the similarity with those retrieved in situ during

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the palace excavation (Pl. X.1). Among the evidence was also the upper part of a small arch in marble, bearing an inscription referring to sultan Masʿūd III. It was retrieved in the qiblī wall, reused as a miḥrāb niche.

Some tombs recorded in the Riyāḍ al-alwāḥ are put in relation with the maqbara of sultan Ibrāhīm: the author probably refers to a funerary area, which was actually found by the Italian Mission on the north side of the palace, and subsequently excavated. Five epitaphs, all belonging to men, are documented in the Riyāḍ al-alwāḥ: two of them date back to the second half of 14th century, one to the 16th century, and the other two have no date at all. It is not possible, at this stage of research, to determine which site is from the earliest period, but it would be logical to presume that the funerary area came later, growing in that place because of the presence of the ziyyāra. Although we do not exactly know when the sanctuary was built, the epitaphs in the near funerary area testify to the site’s existence and usage, at least in post-Mongol period.

Both the Italian Mission and the Riyāḍ al-alwāḥ agree in dedicating the ziyyāra to sultan Ibrāhīm. Nevertheless, no trace of any grave belonging to the Ghaznavid ruler has been found. The main tomb, still inside the sanctuary, is definitely too late to belong to the Ghaznavid sultan, and it bears no epitaph.

If we assume that a ziyyāra starts with the tomb of the eponymous personality, such an absence is peculiar and may open a debate around the previous statement. This specific case, however, may be explained by the presence, underneath the ziyyāra, of the palace, whose attribution to Masʿūd III is nowadays under review in favour of an earlier period. New researches about its chronological stages are in progress, along with the analysis of finds (especially pottery): the palace foundation is likely to be dated to the second half of 11th century, therefore to the reign of Ibrāhīm (the father of Masʿūd III). A new hypothesis could then be formulated: the ziyyāra was built at a later time upon

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13 See “The Use of Persian in Monumental Epigraphy from Ghazni (Eleventh-Twelfth Centuries)” by Viola Allegranzi, in this issue.
the western īvān of his palace, probably meant to commemorate the sultan as the palace founder, rather than commemorate his burial.

**The ziyāra of Pir-i Falizvan**

The second case to consider is the ziyāra of Pir-i Fālīzvān, a large monument shaped as a domed chamber, with a projecting īvān framed by two towers (Pl. X.2).

This ziyāra stands out for a peculiar, even unique, feature: its core tomb seems to be entirely made of reused materials. More than thirteen Ghaznavid marble slabs were retrieved in situ: they had a key function, covering the four sides and probably the top of the large cenotaph that occupied the center of the mausoleum. Such well-arranged outline leads to believe that the tomb must have had this shape from its very first phase (Pl. XI.1). Again, the name of the eponymous personality is not mentioned in any epitaph.

Some slabs were also reused as stele on burial earth mounds outside the sanctuary, while others bear benedictory inscriptions or Quranic verses. Among the whole of the evidence, a peculiar case is a marble piece decorated with a torana pattern, testifying to the influence of Indian art on the Ghazni local tradition.

Numerous slabs found in this ziyāra suggest that a marble architectural decoration similar, while not identical, to the palace one is likely to have adorned other Ghaznavid monuments still unknown. It is most probable that the re-employed marble slabs came from an ancient monument near the ziyāra. Unfortunately, the Italian Mission did not have the opportunity to investigate sites close to each ziyāra interested by re-employments.

This site, which is located on the eastern side of Ghazni, is also mentioned by the Riyāḍ al-alwāḥ, and defined as both boq‘a and ziyāra. Three tombs, dating back to the Ghaznavid and Ghurid period, were found there by the Italian archaeologists, while the Riyāḍ al-alwāḥ only reports about one late epitaph dated to the 18th century – and some Quranic verses, probably carved on the lower element of a tomb.

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14 It is known both as Fālīzvān and Pālīzvān, a common variation in Arabic-Persian alphabet.
15 See Giunta, Les inscriptions funéraires de Ġaznī: p. 312.
17 For a description of late tombs from Ghazni, see “Marble Tombs From Ghazni (Fifteenth-Eighteenth Centuries): Morphological and Epigraphic Remarks” by Martina Massullo, in this issue.
The *ziyāra* of ‘Abd al-Salām

A third site deserves a mention in this brief paper: the *ziyāra* of ‘Abd al-Salām, a walled enclosure which stood in the north-eastern area of Ghazni. The most important tomb retrieved in the *ziyāra*, had undergone some transformations across the centuries: the three upper elements should had lost their original base. Thus, they had been elevated again through the re-employment of Ghurid tombs’ lower elements arranged upright.18 Ghaznavid slabs from unspecified marble architectural decoration also surrounded the grave, providing a sort of floor around it (Pl. x1.2).

According to the *Riyāḍ al-alwāḥ*, the *ziyāra* was dedicated to one of the Ghaznavid sultans’ umarāʾ, known as mīr ‘Abd al-Salām.19 Unfortunately, history does not record such person, nor does the name appear in any epitaph. Maybe, a misreading of the epitaph carved on the upper element of the tomb mentioned above could have led to identify this grave with the eponymous one (*‘Abd al-Salām*). Such attribution seems unlikely, since the tomb itself is dated to 1204, thus to a Post-Ghaznavid period.

The site also offers the opportunity to discuss the interesting period between the 13th and 14th century, after the Mongol invasions devastated the area of Ghazni. Both archaeological and epigraphical evidence are scanty. It is possible that, in this period, the impoverishment of the Ghazni area became so severe that the use of carved marble was precluded: this may, in turn, have stopped the production of new tombs and encouraged to re-use the ancient available pieces.

In conclusion, we can say that the documented *ziyārāt* are exceptional in number and territorial spread, probably testifying to the fact that the whole area around Ghazni became a sort of holy city. Surely, the worship of eminent personalities who had passed away was, over time, established as a tradition, fostered by many Sufi brotherhoods who used to revere their founders as “holy men” (*awliyāʾ*), as confirmed by several epitaphs. For the local population, the habit of burial near the *awliyāʾ* worked as a connection to the past, creating a permanent link to the city’s historical and religious tradition.

The phenomenon of collecting marbles from ruined Ghaznavid buildings (the palace, mosques, etc.) and their re-use in the *ziyārāt*, gave these pieces a new function in the most revered places Ghazni had at that time. These marble slabs were appreciated as ancient and precious goods no more available in Ghazni. They could be re-used to mark the qibla inside a sanctuary,

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or be walled-in the architrave of a ziyāra entrance, but also to cover a burial mound of earth. It is understood that they were re-employed with a mainly decorative purpose – and in a fortuitous order, in spite of any epigraphic logical sequence; on the other hand, they also played a role in glorifying spiritual greatness through ancient splendour.

We can easily recognise a consecration process in the development of the ziyārāt, as they were becoming more and more important and worshipped. The ziyārāt of Ghazni continue to be visited and revered by the local population nowadays. They preserve, untouched, a powerful spiritual tradition which dates back to the ancient and most famous ruler Maḥmūd – whose tomb in Rawza attracted popular devotion from the beginning, and contributed to making Ghazni a holy place.

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Biographical Note

A member (2008-) of the Islamic Ghazni Archaeological Project, Valentina Laviola is a PhD candidate at Università di Venezia Ca’ Foscari, under the supervision of Cristina Tonghini. Her doctoral research deals with Islamic metalwork from the Eastern Iranian area, and, in particular, the artefacts documented by the Italian Archaeological Mission in Afghanistan. She carries on her research on the funerary context in Ghazni (ziyārāt).
Plate IX.1  Ghazni, Ziyāra of sultan Ibrāhīm before the palace excavation. © ISIAO (Rome).

PLATE X.1  Ghazni, Marble dado panels reused inside the ziyāra of sultan Ibrāhīm.
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PLATE X.2  Ghazni, Boq‘a or ziyāra of Pīr-i Fālīzvān.
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PLATE XI.1 Ghazni, west side of Pîr-i Fâlîzvân cenotaph. ©ISIAO (ROME).

PLATE XI.2 Ghazni, Ghaznavid architectural decoration slabs. ©ISIAO (ROME).