

Analysis of the Masjids of the Great Seljukid Caravanserais: Case Study of Ribati Sherif

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Abstract

“Ribat”, an Arabic word, means “keeping watch along the border to prevent enemy attacks”. In the history of Islamic architecture, it was used for the structures where soldiers tied their horses and kept watch along the borders. In addition to military training, worship and scientific activities were also important in ribats. Volunteer soldiers, called Muraabituun, would spend their time outside of military training with Qur’an reading, worship and dhikr, and prepare themselves for jihad. Therefore, the military function and the spiritual dimension were intertwined from the beginning. The masjids of the ribats are of great importance when evaluated in this context. The first ribats were built in Central Asia from the VIII century onwards. The Great Seljuks built ribats following the Samanids and Ghaznavids. Ribati Sherif, which is the subject of the research, is one of the most mature examples of the Great Seljukid ribats. Kâtib Ali al-Mansûr Asad b. Muhammed es-Sarahsî was the architect of the caravanserai, which is thought to have been built by the governor Şerefü’-d-Dîn Ebû Tâhir b. Sa’d b. Ali b. İsa al-Kûmmî, in 1114-1115 and later became the vizier of Sultan Sanjar. Within the scope of this study, the architectural features and decorations of the two masjids of Ribati Sherif were analysed and evaluated within the architectural heritage of the Great Seljuks. As a result of the research in which literature review and field research methods were used as data collection methods, it is seen that the details of the Great Seljuk plan scheme, building technique, and ornamentation art can be called standardised spread over a large area.

Keywords: Great Seljuk, ribati sherif, masjid, history of architecture, calligraphy

1. INTRODUCTION

Shelter and worship are two basic needs inherent in the material and spiritual aspects of human beings. Therefore, the house and the sanctuary, which are the spatial equivalents of these needs, go back as far as human history. The chronology of shelters and temples built by the human hand with the skill of “techne” for two needs that we can also define as physical and psychological is open to discussion. For example, the realisation that the social sanctuary at Göbekli Tepe preceded sedentary life has revised the view that the sanctuary should be dated after the satisfaction of physical needs and the attainment of a certain socio-economic level. Important examples where the concepts of house and sanctuary are combined also point to the intersection of these issues in the history of architecture. For example, the Kaaba, the sacred centre and qibla of Muslims, is referred in the Qur’an as the “first house”. The Arabic word “bayt”, meaning house, was used for the first sanctuary built for God.¹

Also, in an example from Central Asia, where the Turks originated, the definitions of house and temple overlap. As a matter of fact, the Uighurs used the term “Ediz ev” (“high house”) in the sense of a high temple (Esin, 1982: 45). The relationship between sanctuary and shelter was also reflected in buildings and cities after the Islamisation of the Turks. Ribats, the predecessors of caravanserais and hans, are among the most important structures where the functions of shelter and worship can be read as joint programmes.

The Arabic word “ribat” means “to stand guard along the borders to prevent enemy attacks”. In the history of Islamic Architecture, the term, which is used for the structures where soldiers tie their horses and stand guard along the borders, is mentioned in the Qur’an in the context of jihad in the verses al-Anfāl 8/60 and Âl-i Imrân 3/200 (Köprülü, 1942: 268). The importance of “ribat”, which is also mentioned in the hadiths in the sense of keeping watch, is clearly seen. For example, the two hadiths in Bukhari: “A night’s vigil (ribāt) in the way of Allah is better than spending a month in fasting and worship”. and “A day’s vigil at the border in the way of Allah is better than the world and all that is on it” (Yiğit, 2008: 77), both of which are mentioned in Bukhari, explain the favour shown to ribat by volunteer soldiers (murâbit) in Islamic countries.

In addition to military training, worship and scholarly activities were also given importance in Ribats. Volunteer soldiers, called Muraabituun, spent their time outside of military training in reading the Qur’an, worship and dhikr, and prepared themselves for jihad. From the beginning of the Ribats, the military function and the spiritual dimension were intertwined (Marçais, G. 1988: 735-736). Therefore, it was important not to neglect the spiritual aspect as much as the military training of the Muraabids. The fact that they spent their time outside of training in reading the Qur’an, worship and dhikr shows the sensitivity of the volunteer soldiers on this issue.

Especially after the hadiths clearly emphasised the importance of the ribats and the murabits, the spiritual dimension of the ribats became of great importance. Therefore, in addition to the weapon depots and troop concentrations required for the jihad function, the mosque also has an important position for the soldiers who spend their time reading the Qur'an, dhikr and worship. Likewise, it is certain that the people of the neighbourhood, who took refuge in the ribat in the event of an enemy attack and sometimes could not leave for weeks, also benefited from this atmosphere. In Merw and Samarkand first ribats appeared in the VIIIth century (Köprülü, 1942: 271). From the Xth century onwards, with the progress of conquests in Iran and Transoxania, ribāts ceased to be a military necessity and were used for religious, mystical and educational functions by preserving their spiritual aspect. The size of some orders became expressed by the number of ribāts. For example, it is rumoured that the Kāzerūniyya sect had sixty-five ribats (Yiğit, 2008: 76). It is also mentioned that Abu Mansur Maturidi and philosopher Abu Kasım Hakimi Semerkandî, taught Kelam and Hikma (wisdom) at Ribât ı Gaziyan in Samarkand (Köprülü, 1942: 272). Following the Islamisation of the region and the shifting of borders, ribāts turned into structures that provided road security and accommodation. While there were ribats that turned into lodges-hankahs for dervishes, there were also ribats allocated to the poor or needy women who were separated from their husbands (Yiğit, 2008: 76).

The aim of this article is to analyse the formation of structural and decorative standards in the Great Seljuk masjids through the example of Ribati Sherif masjid. The research focuses on the caravanserais built or repaired by the Great Seljuks in Central Asia in the 11th and 12th centuries, most of which are on the scale of Sultan Khan. In the Ribati şerif caravanserai, in addition to the details of the structure, calligraphy and ornamentation, which are not usually included in architectural research, will be analysed in detail.

1.1 Literature Review

Although there are many publications on Caravanserais (Eryavuz, 2022; Akalın 1987; Pope, 1939; Kihitir, 2012; Godard, 1964; Erdmann, 1961; Erdmann and Erdmann, 1976; Köprülü, 1942) and Ribats (Marçais, G. 1988; Chabbi and Rabbat, 1995; Yiğit, 2008; Korn, 2018; Yetkin, 1965; Büyük Selçuklu Mirası, 2024; Kültür Envanteri, 2024;) there is no independent publication on Ribati Sherif in Turkish yet. The Ribati Sherif, which has partially survived to the present day as an important structure of the region and the Great Seljuk state, has been briefly included in the research of many experts (Aslanapa, 1972; Cezar, 1977; Altun, 1988; Şimşek 2014). It is also included in publications titled Iranian Architecture (Pope, 1965:131) or compared with Anatolian structures (Deljavan and Çınar, 2023: 27-43). While the doctoral thesis titled "Ribats in Islamic Architecture" (Arapoğlu, 2020) prepared by Arapoğlu in 2020 exemplifies the current interest and general approach to the subject in the context of Islamic architecture, the PhD thesis titled "Ribats and Socio-Cultural and Economic Functions in the Great Seljuk Period" prepared by Yasemin Akyol in 2024 can be called the most recent of the studies that include Ribati Sherif in the context of Great Seljuk caravanserais (Akyol, 2024).

A study on the stucco decorations of the Ribati Sherif mosque compares it with the Faryomad mosque. However, this study does not include the content of the calligraphy (Shekofteh, 2019: 101-121). There are no publications that specifically investigate the masjids of Ribati Sherif, which constitutes the special subject of our research, or the Great Seljuk Caravanserai or Ribat masjids. The Master thesis of Ayşe Denknalbant from 2004 focuses on the masjids of the Anatolian Seljuks (Denknalbant, 2004). However, there is no detailed information about the decorations of the masjid of Ribati Sherif, which constitutes another important part of our research. In the studies mentioning the plan schemes, it is enough to point out where the masjids are located (Deljavan and Çınar, 2023: 32).

2. METHOD

Within the scope of the article, which uses literature review and qualitative research method, firstly the plan schemes of the Great Seljuk ribats and the masjids in them will be analysed. In the light of the detailed data collected in the field and photographic documentation, Ribati Sherif First, the masjid in the first courtyard and then the masjid in the second courtyard will be examined and compared with each other in terms of material, construction technique and decorations. The content of the calligraphy on the mihrab ornaments will be analysed in detail. Finally, other calligraphic inscriptions and joint decorations in the masjids will be analysed in comparison with their counterparts in different geographies through photographs. The expressions used by the Great Seljuks in Ribati Sherif will be compared with their counterparts in Anatolian Seljuks and their meaning in terms of spatial readings will be analysed. Finally, the formation of standards in Great Seljuk decorations will be analysed through Ribati Sherif.

3. RESULTS

3.1 The First Turkish Ribats and Their Masjids

Turks had traded between Iran and China during the Uighur period and were familiar with trade routes and building culture (Arseven, 1984: 18-19). The Islamisation of the Turks began in the 9th century. The foundation of the famous city of Samarra is directly related to the increase in the number of Turkish soldiers. The commanders, who held important positions in the Abbasid palace, became more powerful and established emirates under the Abbasid dynasty. The Tolunid state established in Egypt is the first example of this (Sözen, 1987: 13). Thus, the cultural link with the Abbasids and the influence of their architectural experience go back to the 9th century.

The first ribats in Bukhara and Samarkand region were built in the 8th century. The graves of the soldiers who came to the region for jihad were placed around the ribats. Following the Samanids, the Ghaznavids were the first Turkish state to build ribats. According to the sources, the earliest Turkish caravanserai was Ribati Mahi / Ribati Çaha (410/1019), which was built near Mashhad on the Serahs road by order of Mahmud of Ghazni (Yiğit, 2008: 76). The ribats could be of different sizes, and the larger ones had weapon and supply depots, stables, rooms for soldiers, a masjid and a bathhouse.

Like the buildings of the Abbasid period, pre-Islamic Turkish buildings consisted of rooms grouped around courtyards. For example, the Western Turk or Turgish-era Tas-arık külliye in Kazakhstan, which survived from the 6th-8th centuries, has a hierarchical plan of courtyards (Esin: 1972: 102). The great Seljuk ribats also followed this tradition, and the courtyard consists of rooms grouped around one or two courtyards (Table 1). From this point of view, there was a unity of language between large palace buildings and small structures. Masjids or mosques could also occupy non-independent positions within these plan schemes. For example, the Great Mosque in Lashkar-i Bazar of the Ghaznavids of the early 11th century was one of the spaces around the courtyard with which the other rooms were combined (Aslanapa, 1993: 40). The Seljuk-Ghaznavid rivalry, which resulted in the victory of the Seljuks in the Battle of Dandanakan in 1040, caused the architecture to change hands like the lands and the architecture to spread. In the same way, the relations with the Karakhanids spread to the architecture. If we consider that the oldest surviving artefact of the Karakhanids is the Arap Ata tomb of 978, we can talk about a century and a half of Turkish Islamic architectural experience before the Ribati Sherif of 1114. In terms of construction techniques, this experience can be traced back even further. In these buildings, the brick technique in particular is very advanced.

3.1.1 Ribati Anushirvan

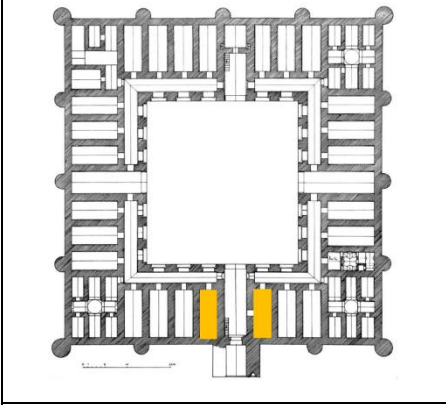
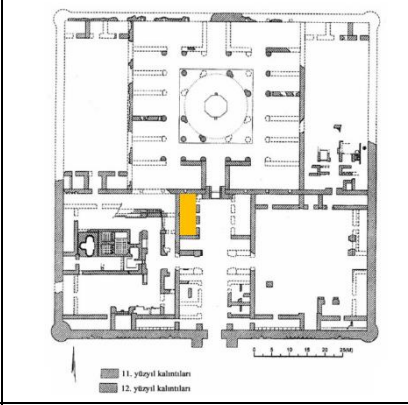
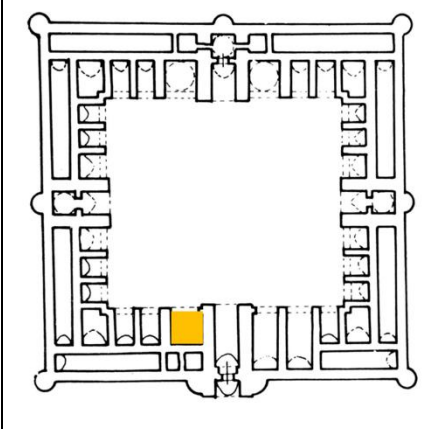
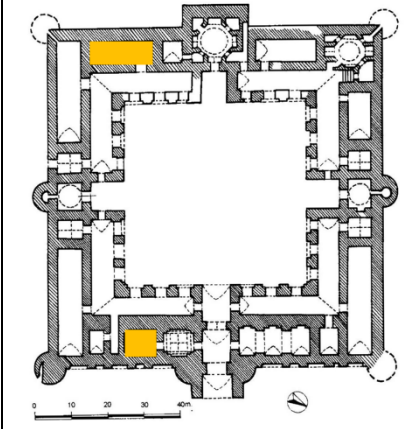
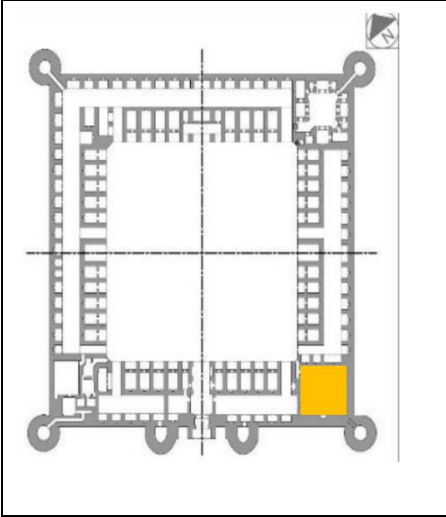
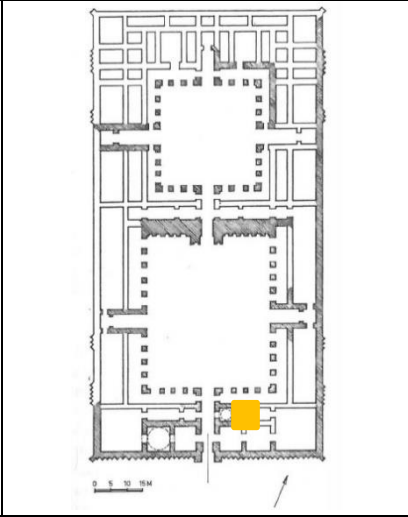
Located on the Simnan - Merv Road in Khorasan, the ribat was named after Ziyarid Sharaf al-Ma'ali Anushirvan, a statesman during the reign of Tughrul Beg (1029- 49) (Pope, 1939: 998). It is also possible that the ribat was built during the Sassanid period (Akyol, 2024: 103) and repaired by the Seljuks. The fact that most of the walls are made of stone and only the upper cover and arches are made of brick supports this view. Art historians, including Cezar and Aslanapa, argue that the building was built by Anushirvan in 1029-1049 during the reign of Tughrul Beg (Cezar, 1977: 206; Aslanapa, 1972: 93). The 72x72 m square ribat has a 37x37 m courtyard with four iwans surrounded by porticoes (Table 1). The iwans are arranged with openings that allow the porticoes to continue without interrupting the circulation. On both sides of the iwans, three rectangular cells, each with a short side parallel to the façade, are lined up behind the porticoes. There is a square planned space behind the iwan opposite the entrance iwan. In the 4 corners of the ribat, sections in the form of a centre-table plan are noteworthy. The facade is supported by semi-cylindrical towers. Although the exact location of the masjid is unknown, it is likely to be in one of the cells adjacent to the entrance iwan. The fact that there are no traces to determine the location of the masjid in Ribati Anushirvan today suggests that although a special space was allocated for the masjid in the first caravanserais, it did not yet have rich ornaments.

3.1.2 Ribati Melik

Ribati Melik from the Karakhanid period is on the route between Buhara and Semerkand (Kuyulu, 2000: 242). It was built in 1078-79 during the period of Nasr bin İbrahim (1068-1080) (Aslanapa, 1972: 32, Sözen, 1987: 28). Nasr bin İbrahim's marriage to Aisha Hatun, daughter of the Great Seljuk Sultan Alp Arslan, shows the close ties between the Great Seljuks and the Karakhanids. Therefore, cultural interactions between the two states extending to architecture should be considered natural and strong. Only the repaired crown gate of Ribati Melik shows integrity today. Although the main façade survived for a thousand years until the XXth century, it did not reach the 21st century.

Ribat-ı Melik has a square plan of 86x86m, and its mudbrick walls are covered with brick (Table 1). The developed plan scheme with four to five different courtyards, the monumental size indicates that it can be considered as a Cravanserai for the Sultan. Although the façade with cylindrical pillars resembling the walls of Abbasid palaces and mosques has been documented with photographs, only the crown gate has survived to the present day. The architecture of Ribat-ı Melik incorporates the features of the castle architecture in the Merv region as well as the Abbasid buildings (Aslanapa, 1972: 32). One masjid of the Ribat Anushirvan is situated at the left corner of the entrance area. Although it cannot be seen in the ruins, it is also possible that there was a second private masjid for the Sultan.

Table 1. Plans of some early turkish Caravanserais and the positions of their masjids (Created by author, 2024)

	
Ribati Anushirvan (1029-49) possible masjid positions	Ribati Malik and masjid position
	
Ribati Mahi	Daya Hatun Ribat and possible masjid position
	
Deyre Gachin	Akçakale Ribat

3.1.3 Ribati Mahi

Located on the important road between Nishapur and Marw (Korn, 2018: 4) Ribati Mahi was built in the 11th century during the rule of Sultan Sançar. Central courtyard 41.20 x 36.40 m. Like the Anushirvan ribat, the Ribati Mahi is organised around a single courtyard with four iwan and the cells open directly to the courtyard instead of being placed behind a portico (Table 1). Behind the cells, long rectangular spaces were placed parallel to the outer wall. In this arrangement, the rooms adjacent to the courtyard were preferred to be brighter. Probably some of these rooms had a courtyard wall while others were completely open to the courtyard like iwan. Behind the iwans there are square planned rooms covered with domes. In the iwan opposite the entrance, there are also four domed rooms to the right and left of the iwan and to the right and left of the square room behind it. This area must have been used by the sultan. To the left of the entrance iwan is another domed room. The caravanserai's prayer room is located here. Its location close to the entrance made it easy for the inhabitants of the neighbourhood or passers-by to use the caravanserai masjid in times of peace.

3.1.4 Ribati Daya Hatun

The Daya Hatun Ribat, which is thought to have been built in place of the Tahiriyya ribat left by the Arabs, is located on the road connecting Amul and Khwarizm. It was built at the end of the 11th century or the beginning of the 12th century in place of the ribat called Tahiriyya, which was 170 km away from the centre and built during the Tahirid period (Aslanapa, 1972: 35). The Daya Hatun Ribat, which is a very large building with dimensions of 112x125 m, has a plan scheme with four iwans close to square. The iwan opposite the entrance shows that it was specially arranged with a cluster of rooms in a domed central plan behind it. The other two iwans also open into domed rooms behind them. These are also connected to 2 square planned rooms on each side. There are security towers behind the iwan and at the corners. There is a section on the south-west wall of the building which is thought to be a masjid (Akyol, 2024: 112).

3.1.5 Ribati Deyre Gachin

The plan of Deyre Gachin, which is located along the route connecting Ray and Qom, bases on a four-iwan central courtyard plan with four security towers at each corner and two additional towers were flanking the main entrance (Table 1). Based on the building material, it is thought to have been built during the Sassanid period and the Great Seljuk period. In the Deyre Gachin caravanserai, the cells open directly onto the courtyard, with long corridors behind them. The short sections of these spaces in the form of benches towards the façade wall suggest that they were used as closed common areas. While private rooms were designed in 3 corners of the ribat, the southern corner was used as a masjid. The masjid in the form of 4 pillars in a square plan can be considered as a small application of the first 9-domed mosques as the Diggârân mosque (Akyol, 2024: 101; Deljavan and Çınar, 2023: 41; Kültür Envanteri 2024).

3.1.6 Ribati Akçakale

Located on the Merv-Amul road, Akçakale Caravanserai consists of two courtyards with 4 iwan. It is estimated to have been built in the late XIth and early XIIth centuries, considering the similarity of its brickwork to the Talhatan Baba Mosque and its plan scheme close to the Ribati Sherif (Aslanapa, 1972: 34). It has mudbrick and brick walls. The domed room to the left of the portal must be the masjid (Table 1). Akçakale Caravanserai (Great Seljuk or Qarakhanid) is understood to be a Sultan Caravanserai (Kuyulu, 2000: 242).

3.2 Ribati Sherif and Its Two Masjids (1114-15)

According to the inscription on the front of the Ribati Sherif, located between Mashhad and Serahs. It is thought to have been built by Şerefü'd-Dîn Ebû Tâhir b. Sa'd b. Ali b. İsa al-Kûmmî, who was governor of the region in 1114-1115 and later became the vizier of Sultan Sanjar. The inscription in the inner iwan indicates that the ribat was repaired in 1154-1155 (549 AH) by Terken Khatun, wife of Sultan Sanjar and daughter of Karakhanid Arslan Khan (Marçais, 1988: 737; Aslanapa, 1993: 49; Akyol, 2024: 114; Büyük Selçuklu Mirası 2024; Aslanapa, 1972: 200). During this restoration, the plasters of the caravanserais were renewed as well as the decorations of both courtyards and the iwan leading to the second courtyard. According to the inscription, the architect of Ribat-i Şerif was identified as Kâtib Ali al-Mansûr Esad b. Muhammed es-Serahsî (Aslanapa, 1972: 97; Cezar, 1977: 199; Akyol, 2024: 114). According to the parts that have survived to the present day, it is at a level to exhibit the political and economic power of the Great Seljuk state at the beginning of the 12th century. Ribat-i Sherif, which has a double courtyard, a symmetrical, mature plan scheme and ornaments, is one of the most magnificent buildings of Khorosan, which was personally used by the Sultan (Figure 1a, 1f) (Korn, 2018: 2). In addition to its function as a caravanserai, it also served as an outpost providing security on the Nîşâbur-Merv Road (Figure 1b, 1c). Ribat-i Sherif, which is also known as Iran's brickwork museum (Atefeh, 2019: 104) due to the diversity in brick workmanship, was built around a courtyard with two four iwan plan schemes (Figure 1e). The structure is similar to the two fortresses inside each other in the historical Turkish army organisation. While the sovereign, the army or the beg resided in the inner fortress, the foot and horse soldiers were located in the outer fortress. In Ribati Sherif, the first rectangular courtyard measuring 32.4 X 16.5m (Deljavan and K. Çınar, 2023: 32) at the entrance and the long hall on the right were used by the guards (Figure 1d).



Figure 1. a) Plan of Ribati Sherif caravanserai (Aslanapa, 1971: 81) b) outer walls c) satellite view (Robot Sharaf, 2024) d) first courtyard e) second courtyard f) Portal of the caravanserai g) decoration of the iwan between first and second courtyard (Created by author, 2012)

It is understood from the mihrab niche and decorations of the large room opposite this hall that it was the soldier's masjid. The Sultan, on the other hand, stayed in the secure section at the farthest point of the single-entrance ribat, controlling the crown gate and the magnificent second courtyard (Figure 1e). The two courtyards were designed with four iwans, but the Sultan iwan is the size and richness of the crown gate with its height and decorations. The rooms to the right and left of this iwan, in the central plan resembling the four iwan scheme, show that they were special rooms designed for the elders of the state. The square rooms behind the iwans are covered with domes and it is thought that they were used more in winter seasons. On the other hand, the iwans were used more during the summer seasons (Deljavan and K. Çınar, 2023: 32).

In the centre of the second courtyard, which we define as the Sultan's courtyard, in the form of a square measuring 31.8 x 31.3 m, (Deljavan and Çınar, 2023: 32) there is a circular water well. Water was of vital importance for caravans and armies travelling long distances. According to the researchers, rainwater was also transmitted from the roofs to the cistern under the ribat to increase the water supply. Especially in times of war, the possibility of not being able to leave the ribats for a long time increased the importance of these solutions.

It is understood from the ruins and plan that many rooms of the Ribati Sherif were covered with domes. The rooms behind the iwan, the sultan's private rooms and the masjid were covered with domes, while the other rooms and parts were covered with vaults. As is common in the architecture of the period, the exterior has a fortified appearance resembling a castle, while the simple crown door stands out with its kufic writing and ornaments. Brickwork, plaster, plaster imitation brick, brick-plaster mixture and terracotta were used in the decorations of Ribati Sherif (Cezar, 1977: 203; Akyol, 2024: 117).

3.2.1. Masjid of the First Courtyard:

On entering the caravanserai through the crown gate, a door opens to the left in the middle of the entrance iwan (Figure 2a). This door coincides with the mihrab level of the masjid in the first courtyard. The 13.00 x 3.5 m long rectangular masjid is parallel to the qibla and parallel to the iwan, and is deep enough to accommodate about 3 rows of prayer. There is a side entrance from the short side corresponding to the porticoes. The walls and, as far as can be deduced from the remains, the vaulting were made entirely of brick. Some ornaments from the upper part of the mihrab have survived (Figure 2d). Although not all the calligraphy, in which we saw two very fine examples of Kufic writing, has been preserved, it is possible to read some of its content from the parts that have survived.

A border of throne verse in Kufic script, engraved on the plaster ornament, surrounds the mihrab at the sides and top (Figure 3 d1, d2 and Table 3). There is a second calligraphy on the upper part of the mihrab. This writing is more detailed and has a higher degree of abstraction. The word of Tawhid is carved on the plaster in a very elegant Kufic script (Figure 3c). In order to be able to select the letters and read the writing, it is necessary to know the subtleties of Kufic writing and to examine it carefully. The traces of 2 rosettes are visible, corresponding to the right and left edges of the Kelime Tevhid writing (Figure 3, Table 2).

However, the content in the centre of the rosettes is no longer present. Between these two large rosettes, smaller circular motifs complete the composition.

It is understood from the remains of some ornaments on the mihrab that the ornaments continued at the vault level. Another remarkable ornamentation technique is the joint ornaments between the brickwork (Figure 2e). Horizontal and vertical lines and motifs between the bricks, which can reach up to the size of a brick, enliven the wall surfaces. The masonry in different directions and techniques on the walls and the clover arches with crescent-shaped bricks in the niches in the portico rows facing the courtyard are some examples of rich variations (Figure 2b, 2c).

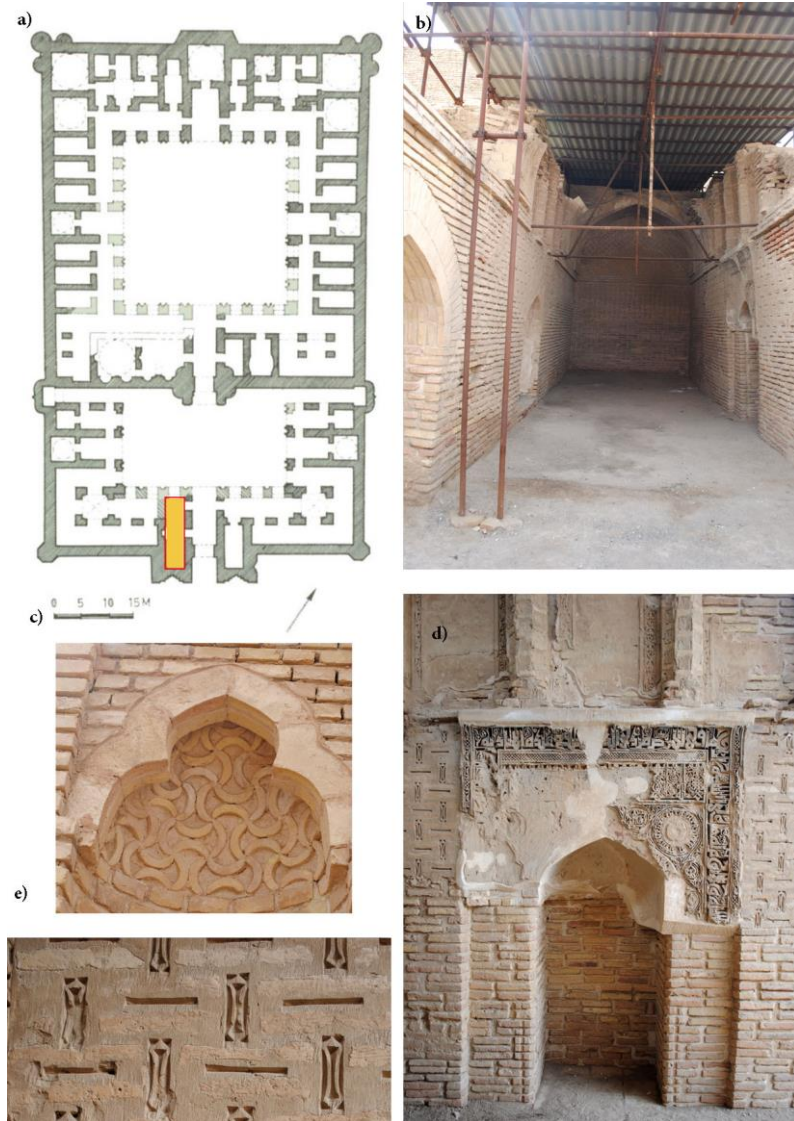


Figure 2. a) plan showing the Masjed of the first courtyard (created by author according the plan (Aslanapa, 1971: 81) b) praying area c) brick decoration at the portico niches d) Mihrab decoration e) stucco decoration between bricks (Created by author, 2012)

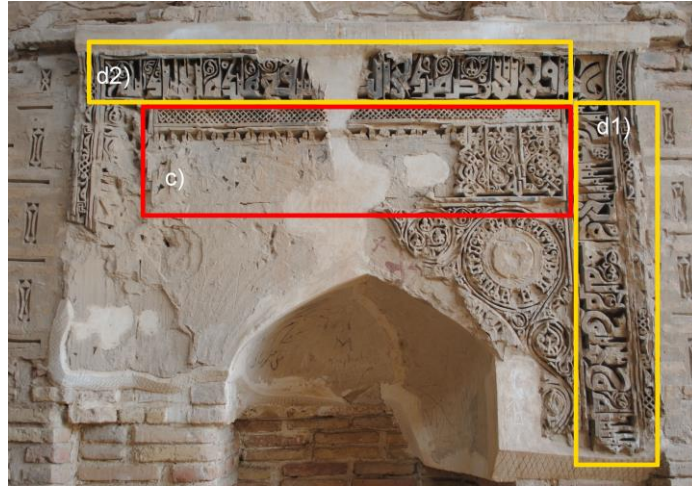


Figure 3. Kufic calligraphy of the mihrab in the first masjid (Created by author, 2024)

Table 2. Analysis of the calligraphy above the pointed arch of the first mihrab (Created by author, 2024)







Calligraphy above the pointed arch (Figure 3 c))

Letters within the decorative elements

... لا اله الا ...
Transliteration: Laa ilahe Illaa ...

Table 3. Analysis of the calligraphy around the first mihrab (Created by author, 2024)

first part of the remaining calligraphy (Figure 3 d1)

Letters within the decorative elements

سنة ولا نوم له ما في السموات
Transliteration: sinatun wa laa nawm; lahoo maa fissamaawaati
second part of the remaining calligraphy (Figure 3 d2)

Letters within the decorative elements

وما في الارض من ذا الذي يشفع عنده الا باذنه
Transliteration: Wa maa fil ard; man zal laze yashfa'u indahoo illa bi iznih

3.2.2. Masjid of the second courtyard

In the second courtyard of the caravanserai, there is a second masjid. It is understood that the Sultan and his close court officials used this more magnificent masjid. According to its walls, this masjid could only be entered from the centre of the left wall of the iwan, the passage between the two courtyards (Figure 4a). Immediately to the left of the entrance, a spiral staircase is built into the quarter-circular buttress (Figure 4c,4d,4f, 4g). This staircase leads to the roof and was probably used for the call to prayer. A cylindrical minaret may have continued at the roof level (Figure 4g). We know that in some of the caravanserais, such as Ribati Melik, the corner tower was high like a minaret.

The masjid in the second courtyard of the Ribati Sherif consists of 2 parts, both of which have a mihrab niche (Figure 4b, 4i). The ornate pulpit of the first part opposite the entrance

has survived to the present day. The pointed arched passages on the sides of this mihrab lead to the second part behind it (Figure 4h). Since most of the second part was completely rebuilt with new bricks, we do not have information about the old mihrab. An estimated niche was built in place of the mihrab. However, the mihrab of the second part, which is understood to be domed from its tromps, can be thought to be at least as magnificent as the first part. The fact that it is located at the front and that it is domed suggests that this part was used by the Sultan. One of the trumpets bears the inscription “Elmulku Lillah El azamatu Lillah” (Table 7). This phrase, which was also used by the Seljuks on their coins, may have adorned the part for the sultan.

Another possibility is that the surviving decorated mihrab belonged to the area reserved for the Sultan and the remains of the wall immediately behind the mihrab were part of this area. With this view, the position and richness of the first ornamented mihrab that survived to the present day becomes clear. On the south walls of the first part, which was formerly covered with a vault, there are 3 large niches with brick decorations and clover-shaped arches above them. The mihrab ornamentation is parallel to the ornamentation of the first masjid (Figure 5a, 5b). The upper part of the mihrab is surrounded by a border of ayat al-kursi in kufic script (Figure 5b1-5b3 and Table 5). The floral motifs placed between the letters clearly show the delicacy in design and workmanship. Immediately above the mihrab, the word “tawhid” is written in braided kufic. Circular motifs surrounding the mihrab complete the composition (Table 4).

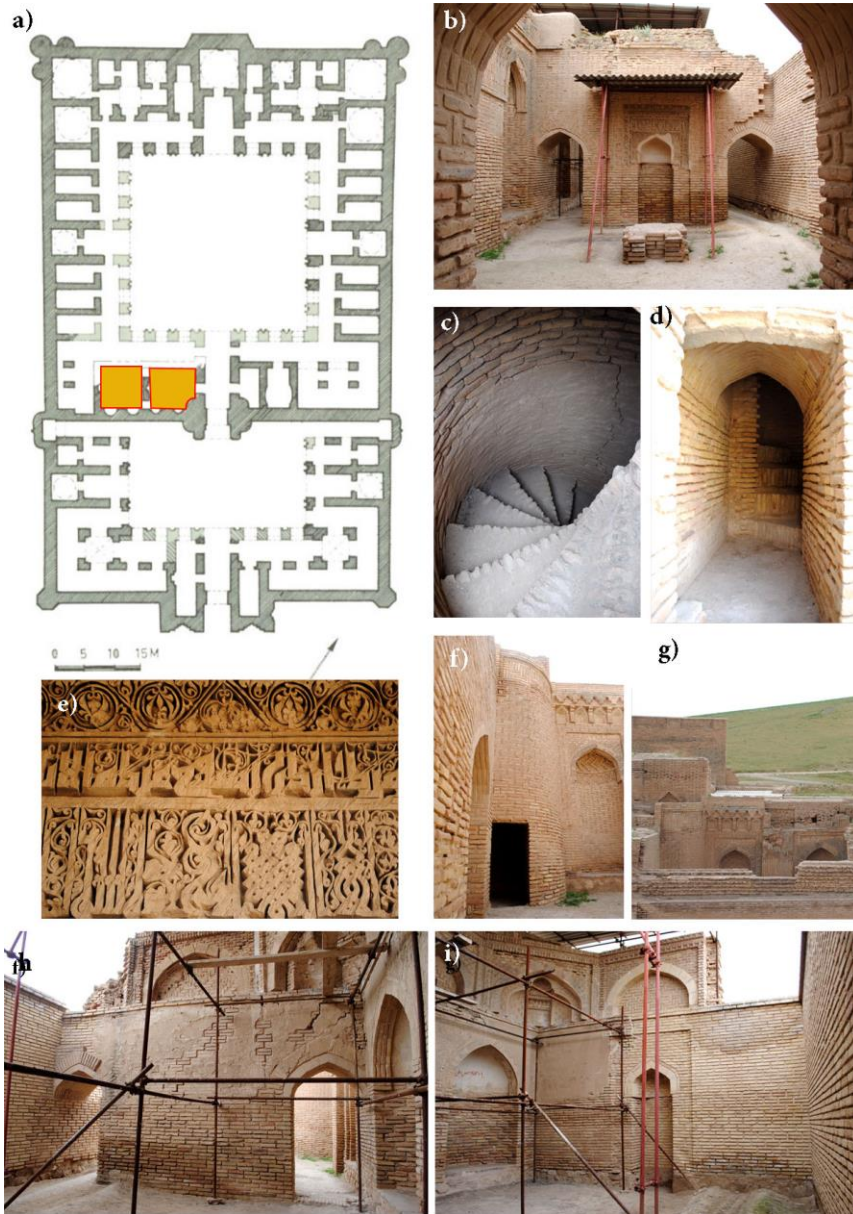


Figure 4. a) plan showing the Masjed of the second courtyard (created by author according the plan (Aslanapa, 1971: 81) b) first praying area and its mihrab c) stairs of the masjid niches d) entrance to the stairs e) detail of the stucco decoration f) cylindrical part with the stairs g) view on roof level h) Wall and trompes of the second part i) mihrab nish and trompes of the second part (Created by author, 2012)

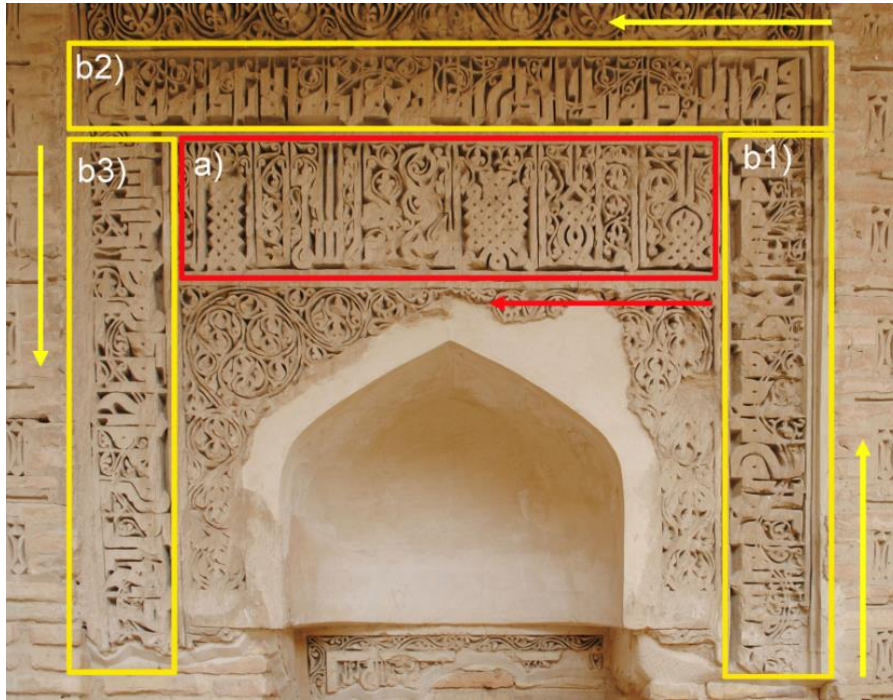








Figure 5. a) Word of Tawhid , b1) Throne Verse part 1, b2) Throne Verse part 2, Throne Verse part 3 (Created by author, 2024)

Table 4. Analysis of the calligraphy above the pointed arch of the second mihrab (Created by author, 2024)

Word of Tawhid (Figure 5 a)
Letters within the decorative elements
لا اله الا الله محمد رسول الله
1 Transliteration: Laa Ilaaha illa Allah Muhammad Rasoolullah

Table 5. Analysis of the calligraphy around the second mihrab (Created by author, 2024)

Throne Verse part 1 (Figure 5 b1)

Letters between the decorative elements

...ذہ سنة ولا نوم له ما في السموات...
(zuhu sinatun wa laa nawm ; lahoo maa fissamaawaati)
Throne Verse part 2 (Figure 5 b1) (created by author, 2024)

Letters between the decorative elements

...وما في الارض من ذا الذي يشفع عنده الا باذنه يعلم...
Transliteration... Wa maa fil ard; man zal laze yashfa'u indahoo illa bi iznih ya'lamu ...
B3) Throne verse part 3


ما بين ايديهم و ما خلفهم ولا يحيطو...
Transliteration: maa baina aydeehim wa maa khalfahum wa laa yuheetoo ...

3.2.3 Plaster decoration of brick compositions

Due to the importance of the wall surfaces, the joints between the brick surfaces are used for decorations. Although the brick is covered with plaster, the ornaments corresponding to the course parts are continued. In this way, important parts can be emphasised without any difference in material. In a style that can be called monochrome, hierarchies were created between materials and surfaces through the richness of ornamentation. In the following centuries, ornamentation evolved into a richness created with a variety of materials such as tile and marble.

On the tromp surfaces of the Ribati Sherif masjid, the course ornamentation in the form of a hendesî crossing (zencirek) motif consisting of two lines in the form of a cross and a circle with a circle in the centre draws attention. When important Great Seljuk buildings are analysed from this perspective, it is understood that this motif was used in many buildings. Therefore, this ornament, which seems to be a small detail, provides the opportunity to study architecture and art history by establishing a relationship between buildings in many aspects such as period characteristics, building technique, motif characters, symbol and meaning (Sokhanpardaz, 2021: 150; Atefeh, 2019: 101-121).

From the beginning of the Great Seljuk state, from Central Asia to Isfahan, gypsum joint decoration appears as an ornamentation technique used in the predecessor, contemporary and successor cultures with which it was in contact. Plaster grout ornaments made of gypsum alone or a mortar made of a mixture of gypsum, marble powder and lime adorned the interior and exterior facades of buildings constructed by the Abbasids (750-1258), Büveyhids (932-1062), Karakhanids (840-1212), Ghaznavids (963-1186) and Ilkhanids (1256-1335). The contents of the plaster grout ornaments may have been realised in the form of one- or two-word short inscriptions, especially hendetic and floral motifs. In Isfahan, Kazvin, Gulpayegan, Ardistan, Ardistan, Zawvare, Juma mosques of the Great Seljuk period and in Masjid-i Haydariye in Kazvin, the course decorations have survived (Sokhanpardaz, 2021: 151).

In addition to the Melikshah dome of the Friday Mosque of Isfahan, which was built in the Abbasid period (750-1258) and converted to a 4-iwan plan by the Great Seljuqs, we find the common ornamentation in Ribati Sherif on different surfaces, such as the harim walls around the mihrab.






In the harim walls of the Zevvare Mosque of 1135, which is defined as a mosque that combines all the innovations of the dome and four iwan mosque types in one plan, the same geometric form is used in the joints (Table 6). The use of the same motif at the joint scale in the Friday Mosque of a small town more than 1000 kilometres away from Ribati Sherif is an important indicator of the standardisation of architectural culture within the Great Seljuk Empire.

The Ardistan Friday Mosque, built in 1158-1160, is among the first Friday mosques with four iwan and is among the surviving Great Seljuk buildings (Aslanapa, 1972: 59). The walls of the Qibla iwan of the Ardistan Friday Mosque also feature a geometrical motif in the form of a circular cross with a guilloche in the centre (Table 6). Built in the 9th century during the Abbasid period and developed during the Great Seljuk period in the 11th and 12th centuries with the addition of iwans, another mosque is the Friday Mosque of Qazvin. The same geometric motif is also found on the walls of the dome-covered harîm of the Qazvin Friday Mosque. The geometrical motif in the Qazvin mosque is diversified with a thin-edged lens motif (Sokhanpardaz, 2021: 169) (Table 6). Different joint decorations were also used in the Gülpayegan Mosque built between 1108-1118 by Abu Shuca Muhammed, the son of Melikşah.

In the domed harim, the only surviving Great Seljuk section, the motif in the form of a geometrical guilloche (zencerek) in Ribati Sherif was used (Sokhanpardaz, 2021: 151) (Table 6). In the Friday Mosque in the village of Sin near Isfahan, the same moire form with a joint motif consisting only of crosses and no circles can be seen in the harim.

This geometrical form is a detail that is generally accepted as the common joint ornamentation of the dome and iwan structures around the mihrab of the Great Seljuk buildings and has spread over a wide geography (Table 6). The presence of the details with moulding and engraving technique in parts such as domes and iwan, which were first added by the Great Seljuks such as Isfahan, Ardistan and Kazvin, suggests that it was used as a Great Seljuk seal

Table 6. Stucco decorations of Ribati Sherif (created by author, 2024)

		
Ribati Sherif tombs decoration	Ribati Sherif niche plaster decoration	Ribati Sherif plaster decorations between bricks
		
Isfahan Friday Mosque stucco decorations on the upper parts of the calligraphy strip	plaster decorations on the upper and lower parts of the calligraphy strip in the mihrab section of Zawwareh Friday mosque	Plaster Decorations of Sin Masjid al-Juma (Sokhanpardaz, 2021: 173)
		
Plaster decorations around the arch in the iwan of the Friday Mosque in Ardistan	Gulpayegan Friday Mosque plaster decorations (Sokhanpardaz, 2021: 170)	Paster decorations in the Friday Mosque in Kazvin (Sokhanpardaz, 2021: 169)



Yazd Mosque plaster decorations containing Esmâül Hüsna

Table 7. Plaster ornament on the tromp: Stucco decoration on the surface of the tromp and its commonality with the Seljukid coin

	
<p>العظمة لله الملك لله Azametü Lillah El Mulku Lillah El</p>	<p>العظمة لله El-Azametü lillâh Seljuk coin minted in Sivas from the reign of Masud II (Ayan, 2022: 72)</p>

4. CONCLUSION:

The first examples of ribat structures built by Muslims date back to the period of Mu'awiya bin Abu Sufyan's governorship of Syria in the 7th century, and with the clear declaration of the importance of military duties in the hadiths, it was one of the structures that Muslims attach importance to. Thus, ribats spread rapidly in Ifrikiyye, Andalusia, Khorasan and Maveraunnehir in line with the conquests during the Umayyad and later Abbasid periods.

The Turks, who were renowned for their military skills during the Abbasid period, were familiar with the structures on trade routes. After Islamisation, they showed interest in the ribats used as military units. They built new ribats as well as protecting the ones built before them. Soldiers, who took their strength from spiritual sources for conquests, spent some of their time in the ribat with worship. Therefore, masjids are one of the most important parts of the ribats. The fact that both courtyards in Ribati Sherif have a mosque clearly demonstrates this. The spiritual character of the ribats was so decisive that even after the Islamisation of Khorasan and Mawraunnehir, the ribats continued to be used as spiritual centres by some sects or by pilgrims and dervishes.

The Great Seljuks continued to use the existing caravanserais by repairing them and built many new ribats. The common aspect of the caravanserais, which were realised in different plan types according to geography and period, is that they consist of spaces clustered around courtyards with four iwan, there are iwans and domed reception halls for the sultans, crown gates and corner towers on the closed facades supported by buttresses determine the silhouette. However, there is no doubt that the Great Seljuk caravanserais are of great importance in terms of brick oil technique and ornamental art. The most beautiful places where this architectural level is exhibited are the mosques of the ribats. The two masjids of the ribat-i Sherif were important examples of the Great Seljuk heritage and masjids in caravanserais. It is important to investigate the caravanserais, which, despite conservation and restoration steps, are nowadays destined to be demolished again due to dysfunction, in as much detail as possible.

If we compare the first Turkish caravanserais with each other, we see that in the four iwan plans the masjids were placed in roughly the same positions, near the entrance or at the corners. From the Ribati Sherif, which has two courtyards, it is likely that large caravanserais such as the Ribati Malik and Ribati Anushirvan also had more than one place of worship and that special places were designed for the sultan. Although the masjids of other caravanserais are not as well preserved as those of the Ribati Sherif, it is clear from their remains that they too show a synthesis of Abbasid and Asian building techniques in brick and stucco. In particular, the combination of brickwork and stucco decoration with calligraphy, which had matured over time, produced an impressive range of ornamental and architectural details. The Ribati Sherif, part of which has survived to the present day, is an important example of this.

In addition to the brick masonry techniques in the masjids of Ribati Sherif, the dome structure, the mihrab ornaments, which have partially survived to the present day, have original calligraphy. The mihrabs of both masjids are surrounded by ornaments consisting of ayat al-kursi and word tawhid. This shows that certain ornamental standards were established at the beginning of the 11th century within the Greate Seljukid Architecture.

The fact that the Ribati Sharif's brick joint decorations are also seen in the Zawware and Ardistan Friday Mosques, about 1000 km away, shows that such details were widespread as a sign of the Great Seljuk state rather than the preferences and tastes of local craftsmen. In conclusion, our research points to the connections that make it possible to investigate the plan schemes of the Ribats and the details of the masjids within them in terms of architectural history, building technique, symbolism and aesthetics in the first centuries of Turkish Islamic Architecture. The analysis of the calligraphy, which presents the readings of the calligraphy, is documentary in terms of the recognition of the Great Seljuk Heritage.

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Author Contribution Statement

The literature research, fieldwork, methodology, structure and tables of the article were designed and produced by the author.

Notes

¹ The first House (of worship) appointed for men was that at Bakka (Mekka): Full of blessing and of guidance for all kinds of beings.“ (Surah Âl-i Imrân, Verse: 96)

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