



OUNAR, A CEMETERY FROM THE SAFAVID ERA¹ OUNAR, SAFEVİ DÖNEMİNDEN KALMA BİR MEZARLIK

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ÖZ

Mezar taşları, insan inançlarına yakınlığı nedeniyle inanç ve sanat alanlarında büyük öneme sahiptir. Herhangi bir mezar taşının görünür kullanımına ek olarak, kültürel işlevi vardır ve hem dini hem de dini olmayan sembolik bilgileri içerir. Meshkinshahr şehri, belirli bir coğrafyadaki konumu ve Safevi dini sermayesine olan yakınlığı ile İslami mezar taşları açısından zenginliği ve bu alanda yeterli çalışmaların olmaması nedeniyle çalışılan alan olarak seçilmiştir. Bu şehrin mezarlıkları arasında, Onar mezarlığı mezarların ana örneği olarak incelenmiştir. Bu mezarlığın amacı mezarlık taşlarını tanımlamak, tipolojiyi tanımlamak, kullanılan sembolik tasarımları veya işaretleri, mezar taşlarını kronoloji incelemek, incelemek ve onar mezarlarının medeniyetini ve kültürünü temsil etmek için Onar mezar taşlarının önemini ortaya koymaktır. bir miras olarak bölge ve bu mezar taşlarının yıkımını engellemek. Bu araştırma, açıklayıcı analitik yaklaşıma dayalı alan araştırması ve kütüphane çalışmaları ile yürütülmüştür. Bu nedenle çalışmalar, mezarların veya mezarların çoğunun Kronoloji dönemi ile ilgili olduğunu ve kullanılan motiflerin dini alanda kullanıldığını göstermiştir. Motif ya da rehberlik eksikliği nedeniyle basit mezarların tarihi belirlenemedi. Onar'ın mezar taşlarında Safevi dönemine atfedilen özelliklerden bazıları, Safevî döneminin özel bir kapağına sahip insan motifleridir ve büyük Salavat namazını kullanmak mezar taşlarından Safevilerin girişine sıkça rastlanan dualardan biridir. Safavi döneminde yaygın olan İmam Hüseyin'in tabutunu simgeleyen palmiye ağacının sterilize üç yapraklarının rolü.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Mezar taşı, Onar Mezarlığı, Sembolizm, Dekoratif motifler

ABSTRACT

Tombstones have great importance in belief and artistic areas due to its close connection with human beliefs. In addition to the apparent use of any tombstone, it has cultural function and contains

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symbolic information, both religious and non-religious. Meshkinshahr's city was selected as the studied area due to its location at a particular geography and its proximity to the Safavid religious capital, as well as its richness in terms of Islamic gravestones and lack of adequate studies in this field. Among the cemeteries of this city, cemetery of Onar was investigated as a main sample of graves. The purpose of this cemetery was to identify, typology, record the gravestones, examine, and analyze the used symbolic designs or signs, chronology the gravestones, as well as to show the importance of the gravestones of Onar to represent the civilization and culture of the region as a concrete heritage and to prevent the destruction of these tombstones. This research has been conducted through field surveys and library studies based on the descriptive-analytical approach. So studies have shown that most graves or tombs are related to the Safavid era in terms of chronology, and the used motifs has been used in religious area. Date for a number of simple graves were not set due to the lack of motifs or signs of guidance. Some of the characteristics attributed to Safavid period in Onar's gravestones include human motifs with a special cap of the Safavid period, and using the great Salavat pray is one of prays that was common upon gravestones from entering of Safavids. The role of sterilized three-leaves of palm tree symbolizing the Imam Hussein's coffin that was common in Safavid period.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Tombstone, Cemetery of Ounar, Symbolism, Decorative motifs.

1. Introduction

Although beautiful category and showing beauty of art works has been considered as an important feature of the art of Islamic Iran, decorative motifs has gone beyond the status of apparent beauty in Iranian-Islamic art. The appearance of many artistic designs has been the beginning of inner and internal meaning in Iranian-Islamic art. So, the main purpose of the artist was not to design such roles only because of his beautiful works of art and these motifs contained symbolic concepts in their appearance (Khazae, 2007: 24). Among the works of Iranian-Islamic art, the gravestone along with symbolic motifs carved on the graves has a special status as a permanent monument in Iranian culture and due to the widespread support of the Muslims (Shayestehfar, 2009: 74-80). Symbolic motifs carved on Iranian gravestones show the appearance of sensational phenomena and the events of the foreign world. In general, these symbols include any speech and image that, in addition to its obvious and explicit meaning, they also had hidden allegorical



meanings in themselves (Jamshidi, 2013: 8-9). Gravestones, due to their particular connection with humans, represent a suitable platform for displaying ideas and thoughts from people in different regions, and the main reason for referring of artists to encoding and symbolism is the fact that the decoding has been an instrument, the oldest, and the most basic expression of concepts (Shayestehar, 2010: 94).

We seem as a species to be driven by a desire to make meanings. Distinctively, we make meanings through our creation and interpretation of 'signs'. Indeed, according to Peirce, 'we think only in signs' (Peirce 1931-58, 2.302). Anything can be a sign as long as someone interprets it as 'signifying' something - referring to or standing for something other than itself. We interpret things as signs largely unconsciously by relating them to familiar systems of conventions. It is this meaningful use of signs which is at the heart of the concerns of semiotics. (Emami Far, 2009: 5).

In fact, the study of some phenomena in terms of semiotics is as paying attention to the way in which they create their meaning. In other words, it is a method by which phenomena can induce signification or interpretation.). Nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign and it induces a tacit behavior in the minds of the individual or those who receive it, (Pahlavan, 2006: 14).

2. Semiotics

A symbol or sign is the “best possible description, or formula of a relatively unknown fact which cannot conceivably, therefore, be more clear or characteristically represented.” (DelaSho, 1985, 9). "The symbol explains everything and directs the person to a concept which is too inconceivable. It has a preconceived ambiguity and no word in any of the common languages can fully express it." (Chevalier, 1999: 34).

Symbols are not specific to a particular product or form in human life, but the symbol may be the concept, color, rituals, important time, historical location, number, slogan, code, utterance, flag or slogan. Today, symbols are often referred to



as meaningful images and forms, and this usage is due to the high use of images and forms in symbolism (Foladi and Hassanpoor, 2015: 142).

The best way to recognize symbol is understanding how traditional civilizations deal with symbol and concepts. In these societies, symbol or sign is not the only concise word, but it is also the relations between the signifier and the signified of human and God. The rituals of symbols are related to the self-knowledge of humans. Symbol is one of the tools of knowledge, the oldest and the most basic form of expression. A tool reveals concepts that cannot be expressed otherwise (Cooper, 2000: 1). Understanding the symbols of a culture, on one hand, helps to better understand beliefs in that culture, and on the other hand, it shows how people are treated and expressed in different ways (Khalili, 2010: 32).

3. Geography of research

The Ounar village is located at a rough area on the northern side of Sabalan mountain with a longitude of 47 degrees and 52 minute and a latitude of 38 degrees and 29 minutes. This village is located 26 km from Meshkinshahr city of Ardabil province (of Iran) and 8 km from the city of Lahrud. The village is surrounded by the villages of Babian, Al-Dara, Lanjabad, and Dashkasan on the south side , Fakhrabad city on the north side, Lahrud city on the west side, and the villages of Qozlou, Ali Abad, and Kovich on the east side (Pooriman, 2001: 168).

In the center of the village of Ounar, there is an Islamic cemetery surrounded by rural houses. The cemetery consists of two pieces, the northern piece with approximate dimensions (60x70) meters and a southern piece with approximate dimensions (70x40) meters. These two pieces are divided by a rural road . In the southern part of the cemetery, there are three monuments (standing stones) with 12 gravestones having altar-shaped motifs in upper view and epigraphic decoration in an environment with approximate size (4.7 × 3.5) meter. The Cultural Heritage Organization have been fenced off this area to protect it against abusive individuals. This Islamic cemetery is somehow alive and burial of the dead has been common



until now. This cemetery consists of Islamic Safavid tombstones and new era graves. In this cemetery, 71 monuments were identified on which this research is based.

4. The Name and Historical Background of Ounar

Ounar consists of two words namely "Oun" and "ar" (arkh). "Oun" means ten (10) in Turkish language and "arkh" means a river and a stream. The reason for this naming is due the fact that there are ten rivers or streams flowing down the slopes of the Sabalan Mountains during the spring, joining together in the village of Onar, and forming the Ounar river.

In another narrative, "Ounar" means the place of flouring. Because in the old days, there were 18 water mills in this village, so wheat of the surrounding areas including Moghan and Arshaq were floured in this village (Nobakhti Xiyavi, 2001: 83).

5. The motifs used in the tombstones of the cemetery of Ounar

The motifs or designs used in the Cemetery of Onar are divided into six groups: 1- inscription 2- vegetal or plant 3- animals 4- human-5 war instruments 6- Geometric. In the meantime, geometric patterns or motifs themselves are divided into several types, which will be discussed later. One of the most important motifs used in decoration of tombstones is inscription.

5.1. Inscription (Quranic verses and prayers on the tombstones of Ounar):

The use of inscription is one of the most common decorations in the cemetery of Ounar. The theme of the inscriptions contains prayers, Qur'anic verses, and the holy name of Imam Ali (as) in the form of chalipa. Among Qur'anic verses used in the tombstones of Ounar, Al-karsi verse can be mentioned, which was used in one case. Among prayers, the prayer of the great Salavat repeated in three cases of tombstones can be mentioned, all of which are silvered in the four views of tombstones. Al-karsi and its position is as follows: Abu al-Fath Razi writes Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) narrates from Imam Ali (as) that the Qur'ān is Seyyed of words, the Surah al-Baqarah is Seyyed of the Qur'an, and the verse of Al-karsi is Seyyed of the Surah al-B.

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Baqarah (Sadr Hajj Seyyed Javadi et al., 2004: 250; Sheriff and Ayatollah, 2014: 10).

5.2. Vegetal or plant motifs

Tree plays a special role in Iranian art as a decorative plant design. This plant has long been regarded by human beings and has a sacred place in his/her mind, and its static and strong form is a symbol or sign of life and resistance (Widengren, 1998: 70). Showing various life situations and life cycles can be found in plant or vegetal symbols including flowers. Plant or vegetal symbols are generally signs of death and revival (Khalili, 2010: 107). Flower is the sign of vegetal stage of life and is also the example of life's instability. The goal is both time and eternity. It is Life and death as well. Flowers are a symbol of paradise and an illustrator of the instability and transitory of life. The flower is the epitome of eternal life and the eternal spring of the resurrection in the sense of communicating with the funeral ceremony. Flowers or herbs repel evil and help the dead. Therefore, the use of flowers in funeral ceremony can be considered as deriving from the same tradition (Khalili, 2010: 107). The four-leaf, six-leaf, seven- leaf, and eight-leaf flowers are used in the cemetery of Ounar (image. 1). In all cases, the flowers are located on the two ending sides of the altar design and only in one case, the four-leaf flower has been designed in the bottom and initial part of the tombstone. It seems that the four-leaf flower had been a symbol of chance for the grave owner.

5.2.1. Eight-leaf flower

Many scholars and researchers have considered eight-leaf flower as water lily (lotus). Water lily is a famous symbols of Mehr and Anahita growing on the surface of water. On one side, lily (Niloofer) is associated with the water (Anahita), and on the other side, with the Sun (Mehr). In ancient Iranian mythology, lily has been considered as Anahid. "Venus" was the main imagination of the essence of existence in the ancient religious narratives of Iran. In the ancient narratives of Iran, the flower of water lily (Lotus) was considered as the preservation of seed or the Zartosht's far, which was kept in water. Hence, lily is closely associated with the ritual of



Mithraism (Yahaghi, 1996: 429). The eight-leaf flower has been the epitome of sun from the first historical periods (Afroq, 2014: 138).

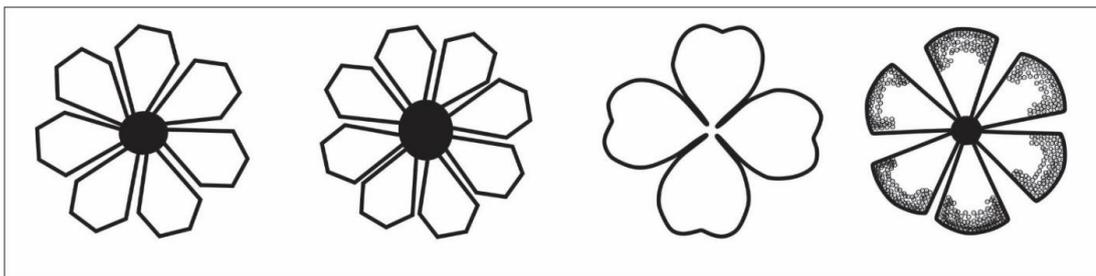


Image 1. The design of the flowers used in the cemetery of Ounar (writers)

5.2.2. The row of three-leaf palms or Nakhls

Nakhl means the palm tree in dictionary and is figure of every decorative tree. Nakhl is symbolic representation of Imam Hussein's coffin and the martyrs of Karbala in the public culture. This design is seen as sterilized, simple, and three leaves in the tombstones of Safavid period in Ounar and in shahidgah *Ardabil*, which is repeated in a row in the lower part of the four views of this design. (image. 2). Also, the design in Sheikh Safi al-Din Ardebili's Tomb is a symbol of this incident that has put the body of Imam Hussein (AS) on the palm leaves and buried it. This Shia symbol has been popular since the Safavid era and has even been celebrated as *palm-carrying* (Nakhl Gardani) since that time.



Image 2. The row of three-leaf palms or Nakhls

5.3. Animal motifs or designs

In the history of human civilization, and during their evolution, human beings have always been influenced by the mystery of the world of animals, and sometimes by their beauty and power. The accompanying animals had been considered one of the most important sources of visual artwork as an integral part of the countless manifestations of nature. (Khalili, 2010: 121). Whether used animals as a source of



food obtained through hunting, whenever they succeeded to force different animals accompanying them and domesticated them, they always create imagining picture in their mind and thought. The impacts of these thoughts, both on the prehistoric caves and on today's monuments on gravestones, have always been a symbol of the power and majesty of those animals, and by illustrating them, they want show us something. Thus, this imaging was not purposeless and in vain. In the Cemetery of Ounar, there is only one design of horse in a single case. Unfortunately the grave is broken down from the middle part and the other part is also destroyed. The full design of this tombstone has been designed and reconstructed from an old image, and while the tomb was still healthy (Fig. 3). In this tomb, two human beings were designed on the two sides, one of whom pulled the horse's horse toward himself in one side, and on the other side, the opposite person pulled the animal that seems to be a goat. About this design, it can only be stated that it is a scene of exchange and the sign of a rural life, but the reason for its closing on the grave is unknown.

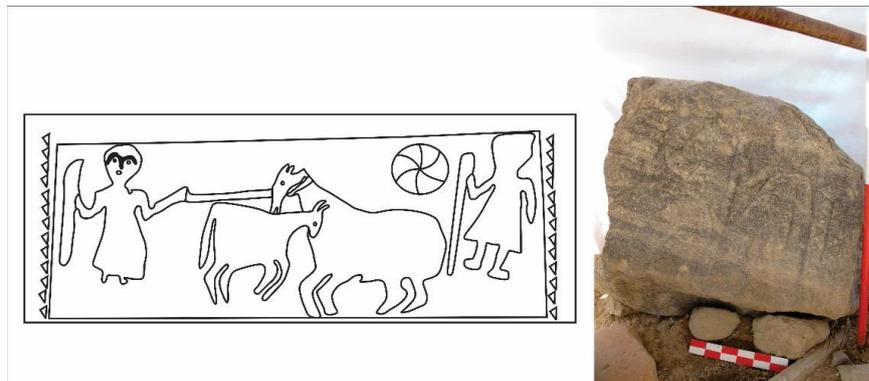


Image 3 - animal motifs on the tombstone, Cemetery of Ounar (writers' references).

5.4. Human motifs or designs

In the cemetery of Ounar, human motifs are only designed or painted in two tombstones. One of them is exchanging horse and goat. In this tombstone, the design of human is clearly designed in a very primitive and simple way, and the design of the face is not clear or it has eroded or destroyed due to erosion and fracture. On both sides, two person with a stick and an interconnected uniform clothing that has been prevalent in the past induce a manner of rural life. Another tombstone shows



the design of two persons, both sitting together on four knees (image. 3). One of the designs has been represented slightly larger and higher. Since the designed shape and image of the human and its hat looks like the hats of the Safavid era, it seems to be related to this era. In this design, it seems that the image of the person who is larger in its size is lecturing or teaching something to the opposite person, and this subject is deduced from the way of sitting of both persons and the opposite person who puts his hands on his feet as a sign of respect looking at the opposite side.

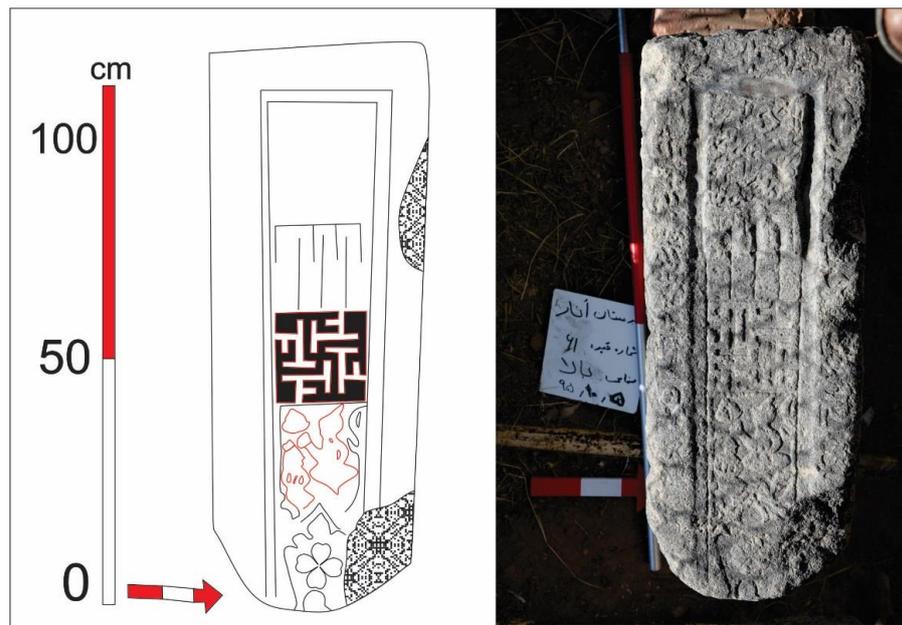


Image 4. The design of human on the tombstone (writers' references).

5.5. War instruments

With respect to the growth and development of the economy, raising of the cultural level of human societies, and the transformation in the domain of religion, the ceremony of putting instruments and gifts inside the tombstones has undergone a major transformations and changes. This tradition has been abolished in a way that other people were forbidden by the divine religions to put gifts into the grave. But artists of this area, with a certain cleverness and abundance of intelligence, engraved the image of gifts on tombstone instead of actually presenting the gifts in real tombs, and thus this tradition continued in a different way. Although, in the old days, the goal of putting gifts was to help the dead soul reaching healthy to the world of the



dead and use them to survive in other worlds, this engraving tradition is now only used to identify the dead's job during his lifetime. Sword is the symbol of power, ability, and justice, and a sign of the gods, heroes, and martyrs of Jesus; and since their number is countless, their identification is difficult. The weapon that was taken from the defeated enemy, had been considered as the symbol of unconquerable power and strength in the hands of the conqueror.

Among the instruments used in graves of the cemetery of Ounar can be pointed to a dagger or sword and bow, which has been used limited. The design of arc has been only used in one case painted at an elementary level, but the design of sword and shield has been used in two cases on the tombstones (image. 5).

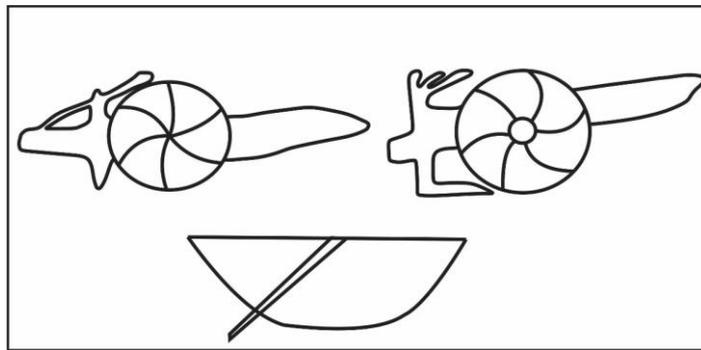


Image 5 - The design of bow, two sword and dagger on the tombstones of Ounar
(Writer)

5.6. Geometric designs or patterns

5.6.1. Mihrab (altar)

Mihrab is possibly derived from the verb *ḥariba* ("to fight", from the root H-R-B), so it would mean "battlefield" or "place of fight with Satan and passion", and it follows qibla direction (Tafazoli, 1999: 66). Thus, the wall in which a mihrab appears is the "qibla wall". In the term of wayfarers or mystics, every desire and purpose that attracts or captures the hearts of people is called mihrab (Sajjadi, 1996: 705). In fact, mihrab is a semicircular niche in the wall of a mosque which is separated from other parts of the building in different ways such as frame-making and distinguishing it by color and materials, and it is an indication for determining



the direction of the qiblah (Khalili, 2010: 209). In the 4th and 5th centuries AH, when artists' attention was turned back to carving after several centuries, building of stony altars and also altar-shaped tombstones became prevalent (Sajjadi, 1993: 140). Mihrab can be considered as the symbolic gate of paradise, in which all thoughts come to the creator and all eyes stream in one direction. It is undeniable that mihrab had been designed on tombstones. It is mirab by which human communicates with the other world and approaches God. As the livings are connected to the Malakot world by praying in front of mihrab in mosques, the dead also take their souls to the Malakot world; this is the symbol shows every place has a door and mihrab exists in paradise. In the cemetery of Ounar, there are various mihrab or alters on tombstones indicating the religious beliefs of burial people.

5.6.2. Triangle

The equilateral triangle expresses divinity, harmony, and proportionality; this symbol refers to the number three and is completely incomprehensible without communicating with other geometric shapes. In fact, In fact, all forms can be divided into triangles by drawing lines from the center to their angles. Triangle forms the base of the pyramid. As any birth is done by division, mankind is also comparable to an equilateral triangle that has been divided into two right angled triangles. Plato, in the Timaeus book, considers it as the sign of the earth. The triangle has different concepts in different positions and designs; the upward triangle is the symbol of fire and the male gender and the downward triangle is the symbol of water and female gender. The triangle associated with the sun and wheat is a symbol of fertility. Of course, the design of the BC triangle was a sacred design, and this kind of instrument was used to summon the soul and spirit (Motavali, 2013: 124).

Triangle is sharp. It is a sign of burning, vitality, and liveliness. It is the sign of water and an inspiration to the history of countless religions around the world. Hence it is also the sign of rising of evolution. Each of the different forms of the triangle is a symbol of a concept, but they are not so different in their totality (Motavali, 2013: 125). Among the designs of the tombstones of Ounar, the design of triangle has been used twice for decorating and framing.



5.6.3. Tasht (wash tub)

“Tasht” (wash tub) is a topic for craved designs or motifs on ancient graves, often was created as small or large ponds in various geometric shapes. Tasht, as show its names, is the place of accumulation of water (the element of life and light), ornamental and meaningful elements of graves that are carved into the heart of tombstones.

Tashts are not only related to Iran and the Islamic world, but those resulted from a common global thinking and attitude in various civilizations, especially in the East, so that these types of motifs exists besides the plenty and abundance of steel throne in the Armenian tomb of Isfahan, Jews, and even the Far East. Tashts have elements of work and semantic features that have gradually been identified with beautiful concepts. Although they sometimes seem simple in appearance and form, these mysterious forms are associated with a sacred and eternal dimension. Tashts, which had a special place in some of the ancient tombs, were dug into tombstones, and were presented in beautiful and diverse geometric forms with elements such as fish and angels, but they also had a close connection with water stones, ponds, and Sagha-Khaneh. Basically, tasht should be carved and designed in such a way as to contain a large volume of water, and so the shapes that were accidentally carved or designed with other applications on the tombstones should not be considered the same with tasht of water. The abundance of water is a sign of abundance of blessings and fertility (Rismanchian et al., 2005: 4).

In the Holy Quran, the importance of water is so great that the word "ma'a" is repeated 63 times, and it is referred to as symbol of goodness, blessing and purity. Meanwhile, the words such as "Kowsar" are another evidences of holiness of the spring, the stream, and the water in general. In Iranian mysticism and wisdom, water has a profound conceptual layer.

In the cemetery of the Ounar, tasht of water has been carved in a very simple and primitive manner in the middle of the tomb or in the right side.

5.6.4. Muqarnas



Muqarnas can be seen as the manifestation of multiplicity toward unity and unity toward multiplicity. This ornamented element, while composed of a plural sets of motifs and spacing, is understood as a unique element.

Using Muqarnas in the tombstones can also be like mihrab as a symbol of the window and gateway to the paradise. Muqarnas is the place of light, and the purpose of carving it on the tombstone is probably shining light as a manifestation of God. In the tombstones of Ounar, the Muqarnas working consists of two altar-shaped shapes that are carved on the upper edges of the tombstones on each of its four sides. These cornices are performed on a row of three-leaf flowers and plant stems. (image. 6). This type of motifs has been carved with the same style on the body of the tombstones in the cemetery of shahidgah Ardabil. Regarding the type of designs and uniformity of motifs used in the tombstones of Ounar and shahidgah , it seems that these two cemeteries are related to the same period of time. Since the cemetery of shahidgah belongs to the cemetery of the Safavid era, thus, according to the available evidence, the tombstones decorated with these types of motifs can be attributed to the Safavid era.

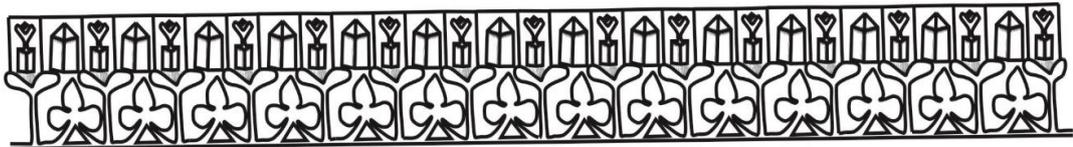


Image. 6. The Mogharnas motifs carved in the cemetery of Ounar (Writers).

Conclusion

After death, humans usually take their beliefs and attitudes of their lifetime into life after death through burial in graves such as customs and prehistoric rituals and use them in the other world, or like today, engrave it on tombstones according to the religious teachings that prohibits the burial of any object with the dead. These motifs can be based on the individual's job or Quranic verses and various prayers during his lifetime for forgiveness in the afterlife.



There are a variety of decorative motifs including sword, shield, and archer in the tombstones of Ounar, which represents the occupation of the individual in this world. Warrior people have always been fighting and deserving respect. They like to leave behind their deaths some works reflecting their courage and valor in this world. Therefore, carvers try to depict person's life and his job in this world by carving designs on tombs. These designs or motifs, in addition to showing the deceased's job, can reflect other aspects of the individual's life including his beliefs and attitudes. Using the design of three-leaf palm trees in a simple and primitive form, which is a symbol of the coffin of Imam Hossein (AS), reflects the Shiite beliefs of buried people.



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IMAGE RESOURCES

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