

History and Architecture of the Tomb of Pir A'saat at the Makli Hill

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Abstract

The necropolis at the Makli Hill, Thatta in lower Sindh, stands unique in the development of cemetery buildings, which are the combination of local style with Muslim architecture, introduced in South Asia at the advent of Islam. Initiated by the Samma rulers of Sindh (AD 1337-1520), the Chaukhandi-type of tomb architecture at Makli Hill became so popular that it continued to flourish in the subsequent periods of the Tarkhans (AD 1555-1613) and the Mughals (AD 1613 to the 18th century). One of this type tombs is that of Pir A'saat that remained unidentified until the present work.

Introduction

Several scholars have documented and recorded various monuments such as graves, tombs, mosques, *chaukhandis*, etc., at the Makli Hill. Although recorded, many *chaukhandi*-type tombs are unidentified owing to the absence of epigraphic evidences. One such type tomb of Pir A'Saat also presented difficulty in identifying and dating it due to lack of literary sources. Luckily, the present researchers found an authentic reference in the *Makli Namo* of Mir Ali Sher Qani. It tells us about the exact location and the person buried inside this *chaukhandi*-type tomb. Moreover, an attempt is made here to investigate the architectural genesis and the date of its construction.

The subject tomb is situated to the northwest of the As'habi Baba's tomb complex at Makli Hill. Even some renowned scholars who studied the tomb could not come across any reference to identify it (Dani 1982: 128; Masum 2002; Nisyani 1964; Beglari 1980). Other contemporary historians were also unable to give any satisfactory information about the buried person and the tomb as well (Cousens 1982; Khan 1959; Shafi 1974; Brohi

1983; Ghafur 1968; Hasan 1996 and Hastenrath 2003). Ihsan-ul-Haq Nadiem has assigned it to a certain "Qazi Ahmad al-Mulk", but without referring to any source (1998: 36). However, an authentic reference in the *Makli Namo*, translated by Pir Hasamuddin Rashdi in Sindhi, assigns this *chaukhandi* tomb to Pir A'saat Makhdum Arabi, who was the follower of Miran Muhammad Jaunpuri. He further mentions that the meaning of "A'saat" is not known, yet, he was the "Qazi" (justice) of his time and died in AH 990/ AD 1581-82. He was buried inside a *chaukhandi* tomb, located to the west of Abdullah Shah As'habi Baba tomb (Qani 1994: 193-94). Thus, on the basis of the above stated authentic reference, the tomb belongs to Pir A'saat Makhdum Arabi, alias the Qazi al-Mulk. Stylistically, the construction of this funerary structure is dated between AD 1580 and 1600.

Plan and Construction

The *chaukhandi* represents a new style at the Makli Hill. Externally it is square and internally octagonal in plan (Pl. 1). This type

of plan has been used earlier in the construction of *madrasah* (school) pavilion of Sheikh Hamad Jamali (AD 1392), but in funerary buildings it was used here for the first time. Later on, it became a popular style in the Tarkhan period. *Chaukhandis* in the Samma as well as Arghun periods were supported by eight or six pillars, while in our example, it is resting rather on twelve pillars.

This monumental *chaukhandi* type tomb is constructed on a square platform, measuring 07.04x07.04m, which is 01.25m high from the ground level and is built from dressed yellow sandstones. Above this platform, there is a second one, which is 20cm in height and measuring 04.90x04.90m. Its floor is paved with slabs of the same yellow sandstone.

This *chaukhandi* is resting on twelve pillars; four are provided at the four corners, whereas two are provided on each side. The bases of the corner pillars are raised up to 37cm from the floor level of the second platform. All the pillars, including their bases and shafts, are monolithic and made of the same kind of sandstone. The average height of the shafts is 01.70m with a diameter of 01.66m.

The shafts surmounted by capitals support brackets, which are unique in style. At the upper corners of the *chaukhandi* there are monolithic lintels laid diagonally that have internally converted the square plan of the *chaukhandi* into an octagon to provide phase of transition for the base of the dome. Apart from the corner pillars that are chamfered on the inner side, the remaining ones are rectangular in plan. The brackets are carved with stalactite pattern on their front, whereas their remaining sides are engraved with zigzag motif (Pl. 1).

Supported by the lintels, there are eight arched-squinces bordered by rectangular frames (Pl. 3). They are surmounted by a zone of transition, wrought with intersecting recessed arches rising from them to support the domical structure. Appeared here for the first time, this kind of zone of transition is subsequently continued in the unidentified *chaukhandi* tomb, located to the north of Jani Beg Tarkhan and in the pavilion tomb of Mirza Tughrel Beg.

The zone of transition is crowned by the springing level or the circular base of the dome. This true domical ceiling effected in corbelliug system appears for the first time in this *chaukhandi* type tomb (Pl. 4). The apex of the ceiling is executed with sunflower disc.

The 36cm high parapet of the tomb is square in plan and is excellently decorated with carved leafy merlons.

The dome resting on a circular drum is 48cm high from the floor of the roof. It is almost round and raises 2.80m above the drum. It is worth mentioning that once the outer surface of the dome was lime plastered, which has 6cm thick patches, still survive.

Comparison and Conclusion

Apart from architectural details and history of the *chaukhandi* tomb, two main issues are discussed here, i.e., the identification and the beginning of this style, which is different from the earlier examples at Makli Hill. During the Samma rule, two different plans, octagonal and hexagonal, were adopted for the construction of pavilion tombs. The Tarkhans (AD 1555-1613) continued the octagonal pavilions during their rule over Thatta. The Samma rulers also introduced construction of *chaukhandi*-type tombs at Makli Hill. As

mentioned above, the canopy tomb under discussion resting on twelve pillars is square in plan externally. However, due to the diagonally laid lintels internally at the corners, it is converted into an octagon. Due to this new arrangement the dome is properly placed as compared to the previous examples at Makli Hill.

In fact, at Makli Hill the *chakukhandi* plan was initiated by the Samma rulers with construction of the Madrasah pavilion of Sheikh Hamad Jamali (Fig. 1) in AD 1392 (Dani 1982: 35; Lari 1997: 96, fig. 78; Qazi 2010b: 114; 2010a: 83-84). However, the earliest *chakukhandi* type tomb was erected during the Tarkhan domain. Now we have to address questions like who introduced this kind of plan and when this style was initiated. Some scholars in the light of the history of architecture have proclaimed that this pavilion type plan can be observed in the Jaina and Hindu temples (Ferguson 1910: 164-69, Havel 1927: 64, Cousens 1982: 41; Roland 1953: 178; Harle 1986: 173-75; Qazi 2010a: 83-84 & 2010: 27-28b; 2012: 129). The other question is that when and where this particular style was initiated? In this connection, the Lad Khan Hindu temple at Aihole dated to the 6th or early 7th century AD is the earliest example (Harle 1986: 172, fig. 130) that yields close affinity to this type of tomb. The temple is resting on twelve pillars, which are provided with four armed brackets. Whereas, pillars at the corners are supporting diagonally laid architraves are crowned by five armed brackets. This temple also denotes the earliest instance of true domical vault. This building style of the Hindu and Jaina temples became an important tradition during the succeeding centuries.

The Adhinatha Temple at Ranakpur dated to the 9th or 10th century AD and the temple at Sejakpur dated to the 11th century AD were also constructed on the same plan (Harle 1986: figs. 181-82, 222; Cousens 1982: 41, fig. 340, 1931: 57-59; Pl. LXII). Similarly this style of architecture was also adopted in the constructions of temples at Nagarparkar. FA Khan on stylistic grounds dated the Gori Temple to the 12th or 13th century AD (Khan 1969: 49). Whereas, IH Nadiem dated both the Gori and Virwah temples to the 13th or 14th century AD (Nadiem 2004: 69).

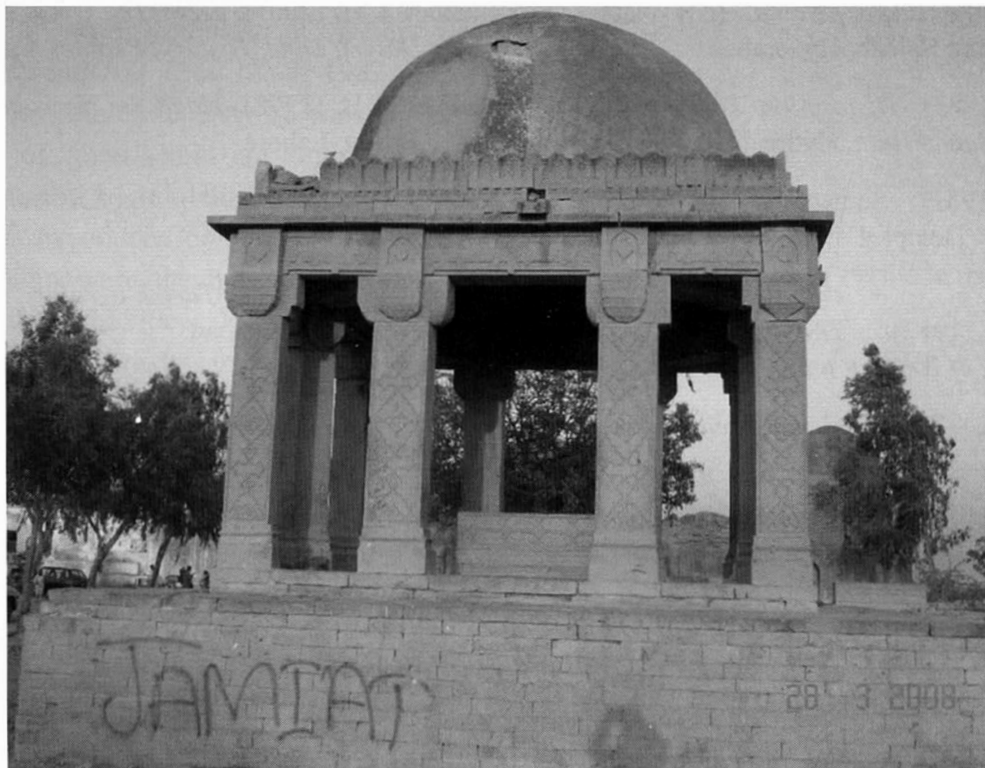
In the light of these discussions, it appears that the under debate style was started during the 6th or early 7th century AD and very successfully continued in more developed form during the 13th and 14th centuries AD. However, question arises that in which particular Muslim building in the whole of sub-Continent this style was adopted? The region of Somnatha Patan is located in Kathiawar, which remained one of the significant centers of Hindu and Jaina temple architecture. It has close links on one hand with Gujrat and Ahmadabad, and on the other hand through Kutch it is linked with the Sindh Valley (Qazi 2010a: 83-84; 2010b: 27-28). Thus due to the bilateral interactions the early Muslim buildings erected in these regions were heavily influenced by the neighbouring traditions. In this sequence, during the early part of the 14th and in the later part of the 14th century AD mosques constructed at Somnatha Patan were provided bays in the above cited pattern. In this regard, the Mongrol and Rawali mosques are representing the continuation of the early Hindu and Jaina temples architectural traditions (Cousens 1931: 64-69).

Chaukhandi type tombs near Hauz-e-Khas located to the northeast of Feroz Shah Tughlaq's tomb complex at Delhi were erected during AD 1360 (Nath 1982: 62, Pl. LVI). They, therefore, may be considered the earliest of their kind in Indo-Pak sub-Continent. At Makli Hill, it seems that this style was introduced by the Samma Jams of Thatta, who were the natives of Kutch and belonged to the local Rajput clan. In this connection, the madrasah pavilion of Sheikh Hamad Jamali AD 1388-92 (Dani 1982: 35; Lari 1997: 96, fig. 78) is the earliest specimen at Makli Hill. However, the Tarkhans were the first rulers of Thatta who adopted this style for tomb construction as seen in the tomb of Pir Asa'at al Makhdum Arabi, better known Qazi Ahmad al Mulk. Later on, this style was continued under the Mughals in Thatta, as evident from the tomb of Mirza Tughrel Beg AD 1649 and an unknown *chaukhandi* located to the north of Jani Beg Tarkhan's tomb.

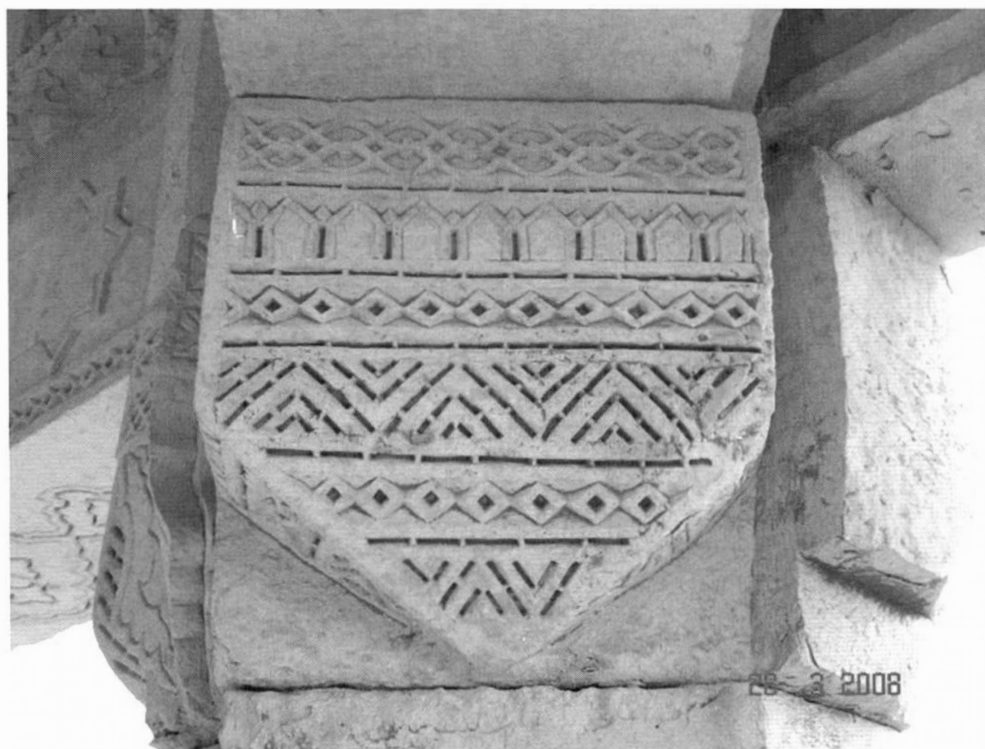
It appears, as discussed above, that this style was started in the Hindu and Jaina Temples dated back to the 9th and 10th century AD, however, due to cultural interaction this vernacular style influenced architecture of the subsequent centuries.

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Pl. 1. Makli Hill, Chaukhandi tomb of Qazi Ahmad, eastern side



Pl. 2. Makli Hill, Chaukhandi tomb of Qazi Ahmad, view of the inner side bracket



Pl. 3. Makli Hill, Chaukhandi tomb of Qazi Ahmad, detail of the squinch



Pl. 4. Makli Hill, Chaukhandi tomb of Qazi Ahmad, domical ceiling

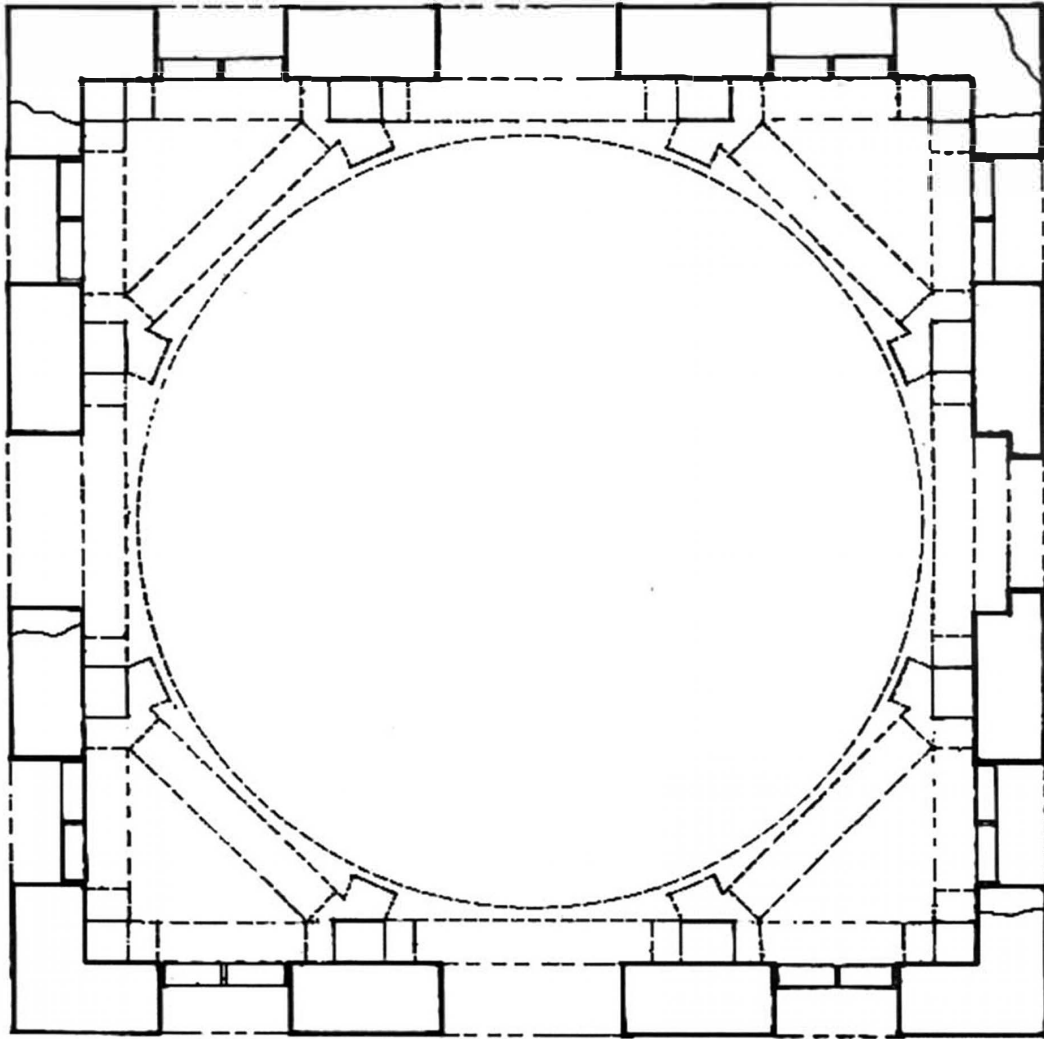


Fig. 1. Ground plan of Sheikh Hamad Jamali's Khanqah at Makli Hill (Lari 1997: 98)