

Funerary Symbolism and Sufi Iconography at the Shakhanda Cemetery (Shamakhi, Azerbaijan): An Archaeological and Epigraphic Study

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ENG Abstract. This study presents the first comprehensive archaeological, iconographic, and epigraphic analysis of the Islamic-period funerary monuments in the *Shakhanda* (*Şaxəndan*) cemetery in Shamakhi, Azerbaijan, with particular emphasis on the mausoleum (*türbe*) and the surrounding Sufi graves. The *Shakhanda* cemetery was closely associated with the Sufi orders in the late Middle Ages and is currently the prestigious central city cemetery of Shamakhi. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in 2025, the research documents the architectural features, symbolic programs, and tombstone inscriptions concentrated around an octagonal mausoleum (*türbe*) and graves in the southern sector of the necropolis. Using GPS-based spatial recording, high-resolution photography, petrographic tests to distinguish sandstone from limestone, and transliteration of Arabic, Persian, and Turkic inscriptions, the research establishes a detailed typology of monuments. Also, we examine the cultural, religious, and doctrinal meanings embedded in their decorative motifs. The *türbe* contains two burials with markedly non-qibla orientations, suggesting historically shifting ritual norms or pre-existing burial layouts. Their stelae display complex iconographic compositions that integrate pre-Islamic solar imagery, concentric wheel-like rosettes, cypress motifs, lotus (*nilüfar*) crowns, book-and-rehal symbols, drop-and-cup forms, and *abdān*-type niches. These elements are interpreted as a coherent Sufi symbolic program referring to divine light (*nūr*), spiritual ascent, *dīkr* (*zikr*) cycles, mystical knowledge, and the metaphysical status of the deceased. Comparative analysis indicates an affiliation with the Sufi traditions in Shirvan, where cosmological, vegetal, and geometric motifs historically played central roles in the funerary visual language. Outside the *türbe*, additional stelae exhibit solar beams, stylised *mihhrabs*, *nilüfar* motifs, Seljuk chain ornamentation, and child burials, reflecting a stratified ritual landscape that likely developed around the tomb of a revered Sufi *şayy*. Epigraphic data from the southern section, spanning the late eighteenth to early twentieth centuries, attests to the continued use of the cemetery and to its shifting devotional patterns. Over time, Sufi graves gradually become diluted and replaced by graves of people not associated with Sufis but with the same tomb-style features, with a tendency towards gradual simplification. Our investigation reveals that Sufi burial traditions have been declining gradually in recent times. Sufi mystical symbols transform into ordinary elements of décor in Soviet grave tombs. The study argues that the *Shakhanda* cemetery preserves a multilayered sacred heritage in which architectural form, ornament, and text collectively articulate Sufi cosmology, communal memory, and regional variations of Islamic funerary practice.

Keywords: *Shakhanda* Cemetery; Islamic funerary architecture; Sufi graves; Tombstone epigraphy; Islamic iconography; Naqshbandi tradition; Shirvan cultural heritage.

ES Simbolismo funerario e iconografía sufí en el cementerio de Shakhanda (Shamakhi, Azerbaiyán): un estudio arqueológico y epigráfico

Resumen. Este estudio presenta el primer análisis integral arqueológico, iconográfico y epigráfico de los monumentos funerarios del período islámico en el cementerio de *Shakhanda* (*Şaxəndan*), en Shamakhi (Azerbaiyán), con especial énfasis en el mausoleo *türbe* y en las tumbas sufíes circundantes. El cementerio de *Shakhanda* estuvo estrechamente asociado a las órdenes sufíes en la Baja Edad Media y, en la actualidad, es el prestigioso cementerio central de la ciudad de Shamakhi. Con base en trabajos de campo realizados en 2025, la investigación documenta las características arquitectónicas, los programas simbólicos y las inscripciones de las lápidas concentradas en torno a

un mausoleo octogonal *türbe*, así como las de las tumbas situadas en el sector meridional de la necrópolis. Mediante registro espacial basado en GPS, fotografía de alta resolución, análisis petrográfico para distinguir areniscas de calizas y la transliteración de inscripciones en árabe, persa y turco, la investigación establece una tipología detallada de los monumentos. Asimismo, se examinan los significados culturales, religiosos y doctrinales presentes en sus motivos decorativos. El *türbe* contiene dos enterramientos con orientaciones marcadamente no alineadas con la *qibla*, lo que sugiere normas rituales históricamente cambiantes o disposiciones funerarias preexistentes. Sus estelas presentan complejas composiciones iconográficas que integran imaginería solar preislámica, rosetas concéntricas de tipo radial, motivos de ciprés, coronas de loto *nilūfar*, símbolos de libro y *rahl*, formas de gota y copa, así como nichos de tipo *abdān*. Estos elementos se interpretan como un programa simbólico sufí coherente que remite a la luz divina *nur*, a la ascensión espiritual, a los ciclos de *dīkr*, al conocimiento místico y al estatus metafísico del difunto. El análisis comparativo indica una afiliación a las tradiciones sufíes de *Shirvān*, donde los motivos cosmológicos, vegetales y geométricos desempeñaron históricamente un papel central en el lenguaje visual funerario. Fuera del *türbe*, otras estelas presentan rayos solares, mihrabs estilizados, motivos de *nilūfar*, ornamentación de cadena *silūqí* y enterramientos infantiles, lo que refleja un paisaje ritual estratificado que probablemente se desarrolló en torno a la tumba de un *šayj* sufí venerado. Los datos epigráficos del sector meridional, que abarcan desde finales del siglo dieciocho hasta comienzos del siglo veinte, atestiguan el uso continuado del cementerio y la transformación de sus patrones devocionales. Con el tiempo, las tumbas sufíes se diluyen y son reemplazadas por enterramientos de individuos no asociados al sufismo, aunque conservan las mismas características tipológicas, con una tendencia a la simplificación gradual. Nuestra investigación muestra que las tradiciones funerarias sufíes han disminuido progresivamente en tiempos recientes. Los símbolos místicos sufíes se transforman en elementos decorativos comunes en las tumbas del período soviético. El estudio sostiene que el cementerio de *Shakhanda*n conserva un patrimonio sagrado estratificado en el que la forma arquitectónica, la ornamentación y el texto articulan conjuntamente la cosmología sufí, la memoria colectiva y las variaciones regionales de las prácticas funerarias islámicas.

Palabras clave: cementerio de *Shakhanda*n; arquitectura funeraria islámica; tumbas sufíes; epigrafía funeraria; iconografía islámica; tradición *naqshbandí*; patrimonio cultural de *Shirvān*.

Summary: 1. Introduction. 2. Materials and Methods. 2.1. Statistical analysis. 3. Results. 3.1. Description of the grave located to the right of the entrance to the *türbe*. 3.2. Description of the grave located to the left of the entrance to the *türbe*. 3.3. Description of the graves located around the *türbe*. 3.4. Southern site. 3.5. Epigraphic inscriptions on tombstones in the southern section. 3.6. Dimensional Characteristics of the Funerary Monuments. 3.7. Architectural and Typological Characteristics of the Burials. 3.8. Chronological Parameters and Historical Context of the Burials. 4. Discussion on Symbolism. 4.1. Symbols outside *Türbe*. 4.1.1. *Mihrab*. 4.1.2. Seljuk Chain. 4.1.3. *Nār* (Pomegranate). 4.2. Symbols inside *Türbe*. 4.2.1. *Nilūfar* (Lily). 4.2.2. "The Wheel". 4.2.3. *Şandūqa* (The Chest). 4.2.4. *Rehal* (Bookstand). 4.2.5. *Sarv-e Khuraman* (Cypress). 4.2.6. Drop and Cup. 4.2.7. Eight-Pointed Star. 4.2.8. *Abdān* -Type Niches. 4.2.9. *Qeychi* (Scissors). 5. Conclusion. 5.1. The Issue with the Cemetery's Name. Acknowledgements. Bibliography.

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1. Introduction¹

Funeral traditions occupy a special place in human society. They reflect with remarkable clarity the development of abstract thinking, attitudes toward death, and forms of collective memory.² The path leading to the modern cemetery, as a necropolis (a "city of the dead"), was long and complex.

Although intentional burials date back to the Late Pleistocene,³ the emergence of organised cemeteries as structured burial spaces is a later development. In the Bronze and Iron Ages (3rd–1st millennia BCE), cemetery traditions acquired recognisable social and spatial organisation. In the Caucasus and Iran, structured necropoleis emerged, incorporating architectural elements in which burial arrangements reflected social stratification.⁴

Elements of pagan burial traditions and symbols of belief do not become a thing of the past with the arrival of Islam in this region; on the contrary, they become part of the already Islamic tradition. Thus, by the time Islamic societies were emerging to shape (7th–8th centuries CE), the tradition of communal necropolis already had a multi-millennial history. In the Islamic world, cemeteries became an integral component of both urban and spiritual infrastructure; a culture of erecting gravestones developed, and *waqf* cemeteries, protected by religious institutions, began to

¹ We use the transcription method of the Spanish school of Arabists, typical of the journal *Anaquel de Estudios Árabes*, when the words are easily identifiable as Arabic. For Turkish-Azerbaijani or Persian words or phrases, we use the most internationally recognised transcription system for these languages (sh for š; kh for j; etc.).

² Bertrand A. Mary, *Le cimetière pour tous: Histoire d'une conquête* (Paris: Éditions IMAGO, 2023), 7–17.

³ Paul Pettitt, *The Palaeolithic Origins of Human Burial* (London: Routledge, 2010), 41–56.

⁴ H. Naseri Someeh, A. Hejebri Nobari, and K. Niknami, "Perspectives on the Structural Typology of the Late Bronze–Iron Age Graves in Iranian Azerbaijan," *TÜBA-AR Türkiye Bilimler Akademisi Arkeoloji Dergisi* 29 (2021): 95–110; L. A. Huseynova, "The Late Bronze–Early Iron Age monument in the high mountain area of the Little Caucasus: Chovdar necropolis," *Global Journal of Archaeology & Anthropology* 13, no. 1 (2023): 555852.

appear.⁵ The *Shakhanda*n necropolis in Shamakhi (Azerbaijan) belongs to this cultural tradition and represents an important source for the study of Islamic funerary architecture in Azerbaijan. Shamakhi is one of the oldest cities in the Caucasus.⁶ From the 8th to the 16th centuries, Shamakhi was the capital of the Shirvanshahs state and one of the most important political, commercial, and cultural centres of the Caucasus. In 2019, the Heydar Aliyev Foundation carried out landscaping and improvement works around the *türbe* at the *Shakhanda*n cemetery.⁷

During construction work in the city in 1970–1971, numerous graves were discovered in the western part of Shamakhi, where an old bazaar had once stood. Judging from the Kufic inscriptions on the gravestones, researchers concluded that these burials date to the 11th–12th centuries. At one time, this cemetery extended to *Shakhanda*n. According to Huseyn Jiddi (1981), this early cemetery formed the basis for the development of the *Shakhanda*n cemetery, which became the principal burial ground of Shamakhi in the late medieval period. However, as the city expanded, the cemeteries of *Yeddi Günbez* and *Lalezar* eventually gained greater prominence.⁸

Given the facts outlined above, we decided to conduct a detailed study of the Islamic-period tomb monuments in the *Shakhanda*n cemetery.

For this study, the funerary monuments of the *Shakhanda*n cemetery can be broadly grouped into several categories. The most prominent are chest-type tombstones (*şandūqa*), consisting of a rectangular stone body, often accompanied by a stele. A second group includes grave slabs, typically flatter constructions with more limited vertical development. In addition, several graves interpreted as associated with Sufi contexts display reduced or hybrid forms that combine slab and stele elements. Finally, child burials represent a distinct category, often characterised by smaller dimensions and simplified or integrated forms. These categories are used here as descriptive groupings rather than as a rigid typological system.

2. Materials and Methods

Our research was conducted during the summer and autumn of 2025 at the *Shakhanda*n (*Şaxəndan*, *Şāḥəndan*) Cemetery in Shamakhi (Fig. 1). As model sites for the study of gravestones, we selected the area surrounding the centre of the necropolis: the octagonal mausoleum (*türbe*) and the sector lying to the southeast, characterised by a dense concentration of old burials.

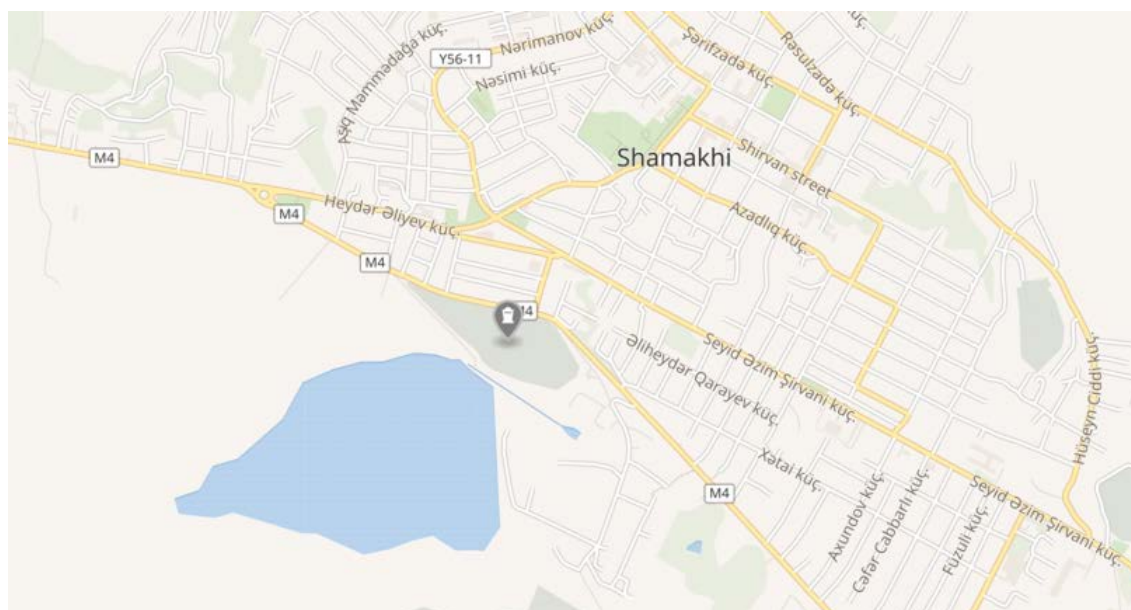


Figure 1. Shakhanda Cemetery in Shamakhi city.

The coordinates of the cemetery and individual tombstones were determined using OsmAnd 5.1.9 on a smartphone. At the same time, the orientation of the graves was established with a Sunroad FR510 GPS tracker. General survey aerial photos were taken with a DJI Mini 3 Pro drone. Images of the tombstones, details of decorative elements, and epigraphic inscriptions were captured with a Canon EOS 5D Mark II camera, a Canon EF 35mm f/2 lens, and a Sigma 50mm f/2.8 EX DG macro lens.

⁵ Elissa Bullion et al., "Community Practice and Religion at an Early Islamic Cemetery in Highland Central Asia," *Antiquity* 96, no. 387 (2022): 628–645; M. Kazempour and S. Shokrpour, "A Symbolic Analysis of Islamic Period Gravestones in the Ahar Museum," *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 25 (2021): 1065–1086.

⁶ Vladimir Minorsky, *A History of Sharvan and Darband in the 10th–11th centuries* (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons Ltd., 1958), 18.

⁷ President of the Republic of Azerbaijan. "Ilham Aliyev and First Lady Mehriban Aliyeva viewed landscaping work carried out around Shakhanda tomb in Shamakhi," 6 December 2019, <https://president.az/en/articles/view/35125>.

⁸ Huseyn A. Jiddi, *Средневековый город Шемаха (IX–XVII века): Историко-археологическое исследование* (Baku: Elm, 1981), 105–106.

To determine the type of stone used in the construction of the funerary monuments, an acid test was applied. A drop of diluted hydrochloric acid (and occasionally acetic acid) was placed on the surface of the stone. Sandstone, composed predominantly of quartz (SiO_2), does not react with acid, whereas limestone, whose main component is calcite (CaCO_3), produces a characteristic effervescence. A visual inspection was also conducted. Limestone typically has a fine-grained structure, may be dense or porous, and often contains shell fragments or other fossils. Some varieties may contain impurities of dolomite, clay, or siliceous material, whereas the presence of feldspars and mica is more characteristic of sandstones than of limestones.⁹

The epigraphic inscriptions successfully read were transliterated in accordance with the journal guidelines and translated into English. Turkic words and expressions were transliterated according to the ISO 9:1995. An ellipsis indicates omitted words and expressions.

2.1. Statistical analysis

Metric parameters of funerary monuments (height, width, and thickness of stelae; length, width, and height of *şandūqa*-type tombstones) were analysed statistically.¹⁰ Measurements were recorded in centimetres. Child graves were excluded from the dataset to eliminate age-related dimensional bias and ensure comparability within the adult burial assemblage.

For each metric variable, descriptive statistics were calculated, including the arithmetic mean ($\bar{x}$), sample standard deviation (SD), minimum and maximum values, and quartiles where appropriate. The arithmetic mean was calculated according to the standard formula:

$$\bar{x} = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n x_i$$

where x_i represents individual measurements and n is the number of observations.

The dispersion of values was assessed using the sample standard deviation, calculated with Bessel's correction:

$$SD = s = \sqrt{\frac{1}{n-1} \sum_{i=1}^n (x_i - \bar{x})^2}$$

The use of the $n - 1$ divisor is justified because the analysed series represent incomplete archaeological samples rather than entire statistical populations, as is typical of anthropological and taphonomic datasets.

To evaluate the distributional properties of the metric variables, the Shapiro-Wilk test was applied. This test was selected for its robustness and suitability for small- to medium-sized samples commonly encountered in archaeological research. The test statistic W is defined as:

$$W = \frac{(\sum_{i=1}^n a_i x_i)^2}{\sum_{i=1}^n (x_i - \bar{x})^2}$$

where $x_{(i)}$ the ordered sample values and a_i the constants are derived from the expected values of order statistics of a normally distributed sample.

For variables where the null hypothesis of normality was not rejected ($p > 0.05$), the distribution was considered approximately normal, and parametric descriptive statistics (mean $\pm$ SD) were used. In cases where normality was rejected ($p \leq 0.05$), additional non-parametric measures of central tendency and dispersion (specifically the median and interquartile range, IQR) were employed:

$$IQR = Q_3 - Q_1$$

During interpretation, special attention was paid to taphonomic factors, including foundation subsidence, erosion, secondary reuse of monuments, and incomplete preservation, all of which may affect metric variability.

⁹ Harvey Blatt and Robert J. Tracy, *Petrology: Igneous, sedimentary, and metamorphic*, 2nd ed. (New York: W. H. Freeman, 1996), 34–35, 241, 243–246, 295–301; M. E. Tucker, *Sedimentary Petrology: An Introduction to the Origin of Sedimentary Rocks*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Science, 2001), 3–7, 111–164, 313–381.

¹⁰ Asghar Ghasemi and Saleh Zahediasl, "Normality Tests for Statistical Analysis: A Guide for Non-Statisticians," *International Journal of Endocrinology and Metabolism* 10, no. 2 (2012): 486–489; Nornadiah Mohd Razali and Yap Bee Wah, "Power Comparisons of the Shapiro-Wilk, Kolmogorov-Smirnov, Lilliefors, and Anderson-Darling Tests," *Journal of Statistical Modelling and Analytics* 2, no. 1 (2011): 21–33; R. Lee Lyman, *Vertebrate Taphonomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 404–416; Robert D. Drennan, *Statistics for Archaeologists: A Commonsense Approach*, 2nd ed. (New York: Springer, 2020), 104, 115–118, 126–128; Rand R. Wilcox, *Introduction to Robust Estimation and Hypothesis Testing*, 5th ed. (Amsterdam: Academic Press, 2022), 23–29.

Consequently, statistical results were interpreted in conjunction with typological and contextual analyses rather than as isolated quantitative indicators.

3. Results

The central object of this study is the *türbe* situated in the *Shakhandan* cemetery (Fig. 2: A, B). It is situated at 40.629° N, 48.632° E. The structure is octagonal, constructed of finely cut ashlar blocks, and exhibits a regular and well-proportioned geometry. The superstructure is crowned by a hemispherical dome composed of concentric stone courses that terminate in a small central element.

The transition from the octagonal base (with an overall span of approximately 5 m) to the circular dome is achieved through a system of squinches visible in the interior. These are articulated as concave, stepped elements that gradually transform the polygonal plan into a circular base supporting the dome.

The entrance is framed by a slightly pointed arched opening, set within a recessed rectangular field. The façade is otherwise largely unadorned, emphasising the structure's volumetric clarity rather than surface decoration.

A rhythmic articulation of the wall characterises the interior surfaces through shallow blind arches or recessed niches, which provide a subtle decorative effect despite the monument's general austerity. The masonry is laid in regular horizontal courses, contributing to the visual coherence of both the exterior and interior.

Above the entrance to the *türbe*, located below ground level, there was originally a stone slab with an epigraphic inscription, now lost or displaced. The vault of the *türbe* is decorated with stylised images of sunbeams (Fig. 2: B, C). Inside the mausoleum are two graves, each with a ledge stone and a high stela. The graves are oriented to the north-north-west (NNW), with an azimuth difference of approximately 133.6°, indicating a deviation of roughly 134° from the direction toward Mecca.

Overall, the architectural composition reflects a restrained funerary aesthetic, where geometric clarity, proportional balance, and controlled surface articulation take precedence over elaborate ornamentation.



Figure 2. Octagonal *türbe* in the *Shakhandan* cemetery

3.1. Description of the grave located to the right of the entrance to the *türbe*

The gravestone is an early *şandūqa* (Arab. صندوقه, from Pers. صندوق *şandūq*, “chest”) type with a tall stela (Figure 3A). The ledger stone is split near the foot (Figure 5A). The gravestone's dimensions are as follows. The stela dimensions are 175 cm (height) x 44 cm (width) x 18.5 cm (thickness). The total length of the ledge stone is 175 cm, the width at the base is 70 cm, at the top is 33 cm, and the height is 43 cm. The end face of the stela is decorated with carpet-style ornamentation (Fig. 3E). On the front side of the stela, there is a carved image of sun rays and a heavily damaged text within a decorative cartouche, the contents of which we were unable to decipher (Fig. 3B). The reverse side of the stela (Fig. 4A) is topped by a solar emblem (a sector of a circle with descending rays. Fig. 4B: 1); in the corners, two miniature ‘suns’ with three rays each are visible (Fig. 4B: 2). Directly beneath them are two chests (*şandūqa*) (Fig. 4C: 3), and on either side of these chests appears a circular motif resembling a wheel-shaped rosette composed of

two concentric circles with a row of dots between them. There are three or four such ‘wheels’ in total: two in the middle section (on either side of the pillars) and another two (?) at the bottom, near the book stand (Fig. 4B: 4). The recurring circular motifs and the multiple solar/wheel signs may indicate a Sufi symbolic program in which light, the wheel, or the circle is interpreted as a symbol of divine illumination and the cyclicity of existence.¹¹ In the local context, these signs are often interpreted either as remnants of pre-Islamic solar beliefs (the sun chariot/wheel) or as general symbols of cyclicity and eternity that were later integrated into the Islamic visual lexicon.¹²



Figure 3. The various elements of the burial tombs in the *türbe*.

¹¹ Michael T. Duggan, "Veil of Light," *Mediterranean Journal of Humanities* IV, no. 1 (2014): 129–157.

¹² Ayten Salimova, "Солярная символика в орнаментальном искусстве Азербайджана," *Azərbaycan Xalqları* 3, no. 8 (2013): 78–87.

At the centre of the composition is a large vegetal motif — the cypress (Pers. سرو خرامان, *sarv-e khurāmān*, lit. “graceful cypress”) (Fig. 4C: 5), which in the Islamic tradition, within the Turko-Iranian cultural sphere, has become a metaphor for immortality, paradise, and elevated spiritual status.¹³

On both sides of the cypress are a drop-shaped symbol (6) and a figure resembling a cup (Fig. 4C: 7). In the lower part of the composition, a book stand (a carved frame / رهل, *rahl*; Fig. 4: 8) and a book lying on it are visible — a traditional marker of religious scholarship, a connection to the Qur’an, or the funerary book tradition.¹⁴

The tombstone slab is decorated with inscriptions, the reading of which we provide below, and with a carved depiction of an eight-pointed star (Fig. 3F). The slab features an *abdān*-type (Pers. آبدان, *abdān*, lit. “water vessel/reservoir”) niche.

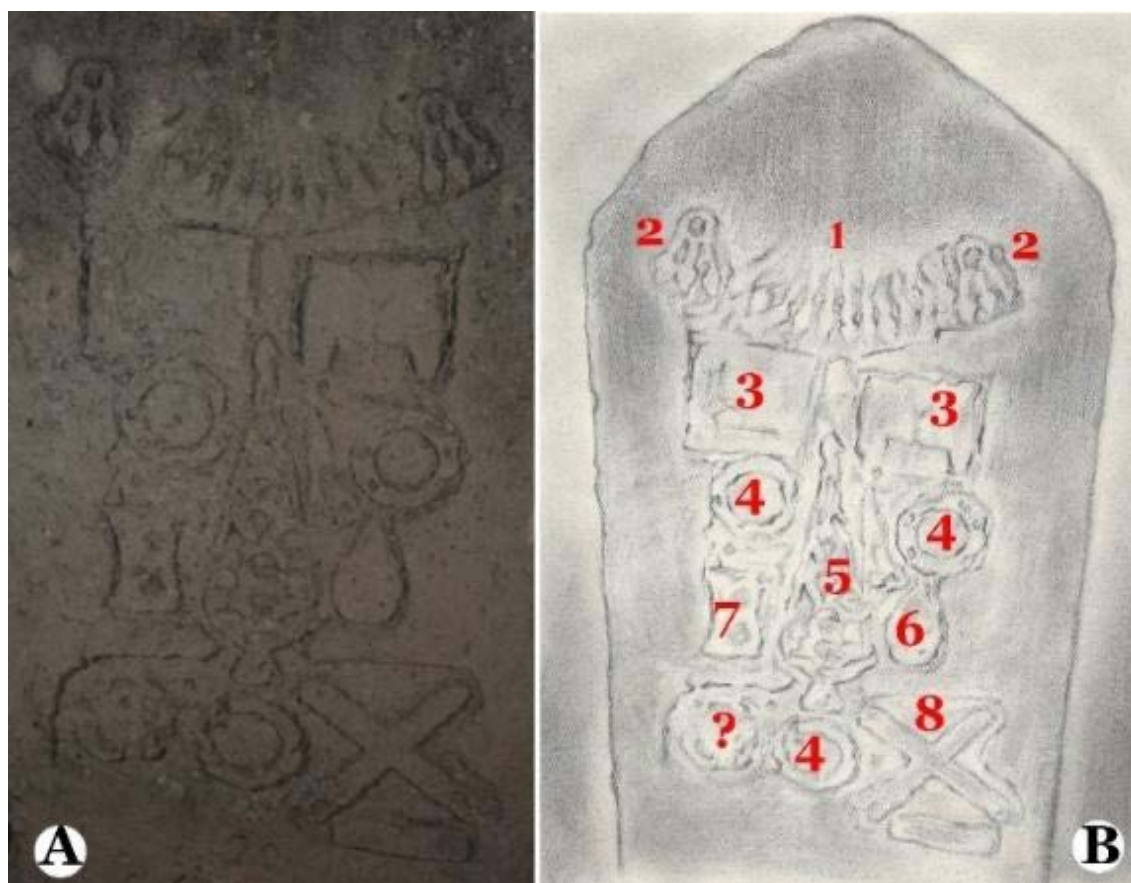


Figure 4. The reverse side of the stele.

3.2. Description of the grave located to the left of the entrance to the *türbe*

The gravestone is the same type as the one on the right. The gravestone is also split (Fig. 5A). The gravestone’s dimensions are as follows: the stele measures 172 cm (height) × 50 cm (width) × 18 cm (thickness). The dimensions of the ledge stone are 143 cm (total length) × 72 cm (width at the base) × 34 cm (width at the top) × 37 cm (height). The upper part of the headstone is shaped like a *nilūfar* (Pers. نیلوفر, *nilūfar*, lit. “water lily”) (Fig. 3H, Fig. 5B), an ancient Eastern symbol of life.¹⁵ Below, an epigraphic inscription is framed by a decorative cartouche (Fig. 3D). The reverse side of the headstone bears no symbols. The tombstone slab is richly decorated. Its sides are carved with a vegetal pattern, and the lower section features stylised representations of the *nilūfar*. On the upper part of the slab, closer to its foot end, an eight-pointed star is carved. The slab features an *abdān*-type niche. On the stele of the left grave (Fig. 3G), the year can be discerned (1271 AH / 1854–1855 CE).

¹³ Amots Dafni et al., “Ritual Plants of Muslim Graveyards in Northern Israel,” *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine* 2, no. 38 (2006): 2–12; Abibullayeva, E. E., and Sh. A. Emrullayev, “Символика надгробных камней: сравнительный анализ материалов мусульманских кладбищ Бахчисарая и Турции XVII–XIX вв.,” *Ученые записки Крымского федерального университета имени В. И. Вернадского. Исторические науки* 25 (64), no. 2 (2012): 3–11; Alebrahim S. Dehkordi, “Studying the Role and Symbolic Meanings of Cypress Tree (Sarv) in Miniatures of ‘Tahmasbi Shahnameh,’” *The Monthly Scientific Journal of Bagh-e Nazar* 13, no. 45 (2017): 105–114; Naela Aamir, N., and A. Pervaiz, “The Symbolic Significance of Sarv Motif in Islamic Art: An Inquiry into Its Mystical Underpinnings,” *Majallat al-Tahqiq* 39, no. 112 (2018): 3–18; Weick, C. W., N. Aamir, and J. Reichart, “The Ethnobotanical Evolution of the Mediterranean Cypress (*Cupressus sempervirens*),” *Economic Botany* 77 (2023): 203–221.

¹⁴ Kazempour and Shokrpour, “A Symbolic Analysis of Islamic Period Gravestones in the Ahar Museum.”

¹⁵ Sadat Dehghan, F., and M. Hemmati, “The Role of Lily in Persian Culture and Poetry,” *Journal of Art and Civilisation of the Orient* 5, no. 16 (2017): 3–14; Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 108–110.

In addition, an epigraphic inscription is preserved on the right side of the tombstone (Fig. 6A). It appears to be executed in a simplified *Nasj* script, adapted for stone carving, with stylistic influence from *Nasta'liq* (نستعلیق), characteristic of regional funerary monuments of the Qajar period.¹⁶ The origin of the *Nasta'liq* script in the epigraphic scripts of the *Shakhandan* cemetery is of particular interest. *Ta'liq* (تعلیق) script emerged in Iran in the fourteenth century as a result of transformations in the *Tawqī'* (توقیع) script and was used primarily for official correspondence. Due to *Ta'liq* incorporating features of *Nasj*, the *Nasj-ta'liq* new script was developed. Owing to easier pronunciation, this came to be called *Nastaliq*.¹⁷

قال الله تعالى: (قُلْ يَا عِبَادِيَ الَّذِينَ أَسْرَفُوا عَلَىٰ أَنفُسِهِمْ لَا تَقْنَطُوا مِن رَّحْمَةِ اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَغْفِرُ الذُّنُوبَ جَمِيعًا إِنَّهُ هُوَ الْغَفُورُ الرَّحِيمُ)

Allah Almighty said: "Say, 'O Prophet, that Allah says,' O My servants who have exceeded the limits against their souls! Do not lose hope in Allah's mercy, for Allah certainly forgives all sins. He is indeed the All-Forgiving, Most Merciful." (Az-Zumar, 39:53)

Left side of the tombstone (Fig. 6B):

اللَّهُمَّ صَلِّ عَلَى النَّبِيِّ الْأُمِّيِّ الْعَرَبِيِّ الْهَاشِمِيِّ الْأَبْطَحِيِّ الْمَكِّيِّ الْمَدَنِيِّ

"O Allah! May blessings be upon the Prophet, the Ummi, the Arab, the Hashimi, the Abdahli, the Meccan and the Medinan!"¹⁸

¹⁶ Majidreza Moghanipour, Mohsen Golarayesh, and Mohammad Sadeq Mirza Abolghasemi, "Characteristics of Nastaliq Script among Calligraphers of Shiraz in the Qajar Period" [شاه آباد غرب (شاه آباد سابق)] *Culture & History* 52, no. 1 (2020): 199–221.

¹⁷ U. Derman, "Calligraphy" ["Hat/الخط"], in *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, vol. 16 (Istanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 1997), 427–437.

¹⁸ This form of *salawāt* is a prayer recited with love and respect for the Prophet Muḥammad in the Islamic world, especially in Sufi mystical literature. The meaning of the names in the translation is as follows: "Nabī" — Here, the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ is meant. "Ummī" — One who cannot read or write but has divine knowledge. The Quran also identifies him as such (*al-A'rāf*, 157). "Arabi" — One who is from the Arab nation (emphasised because the Koran was revealed in Arabic). "Hāšimī" — From the tribe of Banū Hāšim, indicates the lineage of the Prophet. Hāšim is the great-grandfather of the Prophet. "Abṭaḥī" — From the "Abṭaḥī Valley" (an area located in Mecca, the environment where the Prophet was born). "Makkī" — Born in Mecca and proclaimed the beginning of Islam there. "Madanī" — Established the Islamic state in Medina and was buried there.

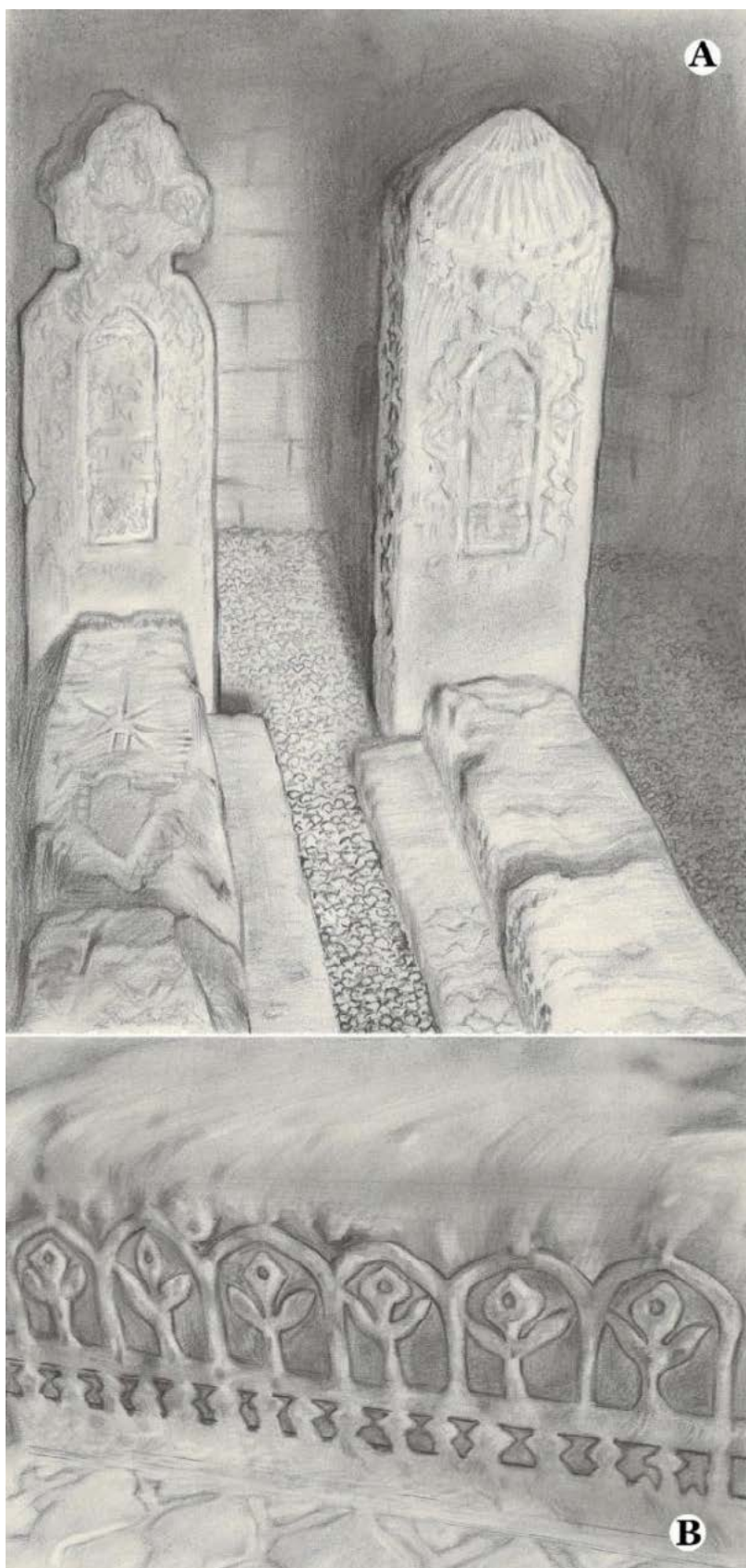


Figure 5. Drawing of gravestones and a Lily-patterned motif in the *türbe*.

This inscription represents a form of *salawat* (invocation of blessings upon the Prophet), a widely attested devotional formula in Islamic tradition. Such invocations are highly variable and may include extended sequences of epithets, particularly in Sufi and pietistic contexts, rather than following a fixed canonical wording.

A stone lying on the floor (Fig. 6C):

- 1/ هذا قبر المر ←
 2/ حوم السعيد
 3/ الشهيد
 4/ امير جانيك
 5/ [...] كم

- 1/ This is the grave of the decea →
 2/ sed, the content
 3/ the martyr
 4/ Amir Ğanibak
 5/ [...]



Figure 6. Epigraphic inscription inside the *türbe*.

3.3. Description of the graves located around the *türbe*

Around the *türbe*, there are graves of various types. Four of them are small; their headstones are decorated with sun rays (often with two additional sources of light) and a stylised mihrab (Fig. 7A, B). In the same area, there are also massive *şandūqa*-type graves dating to the late nineteenth – early twentieth century, which lack inscriptions, as well as children's graves (Fig. 7D, Table 1). Apparently, the small graves belonged to the *murids* of the *şuyūj* buried in the tomb, and only with the expansion of the cemetery did people not belonging to the Sufi order begin to be buried there (Fig. 7C).

The orientation of the graves corresponds to that of the burials inside the *türbe*.



Figure 7. Tombstones around the *türbe*.

Table 1. Description of the graves near the *türbe**

Type	Stele		Ledge stone				Date (Hijri)	Notes
	Height	Width	Thickness	Length	Thickness	Height		
Grave slab with stele (Sufi)	107	46	18	108	41	34	1308	Solar beams at the top of the stele
Grave slab with stele (Sufi) (?)	—	—	—	62	46	30	—	The stela is either absent or lost. Sun rays are depicted in the corners, and 2 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are present.
Grave slab with stele (Sufi)	98	44	17	—	—	—	1187	The grave slab is missing, and a solar circle is located in the upper part of the stela; sun rays or flames are also depicted on its reverse side.
Grave slab with stele (Sufi)	94	50	18	—	—	—	—	The grave slab is missing, with an image of <i>sarv-e khuraman</i> in the centre; on the reverse side, sun rays are depicted in the upper part.
Grave slab with stele (Sufi)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	Only the stela has survived, partially sunken into the ground; rays of the sun are depicted in the upper part on both the front and reverse sides, and a mihrab is shown in the lower part.

Type	Stele		Ledge stone				Date (Hijri)	Notes
	Height	Width	Thickness	Length	Thickness	Height		
Miniature <i>şandūqa</i> (?)	—	—	—	152	40	58	—	The grave is located at a distance; there are no inscriptions, and 2 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are present.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	173	45	74	—	The grave has tilted, the foundation has subsided, and 4 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are present.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	172	48	47	—	The inscriptions are worn, and 3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are present.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	153	40	54	—	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	118	32	26	1216	2 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	—	—	—	1261	6 <i>abdān</i> -type niches with a complicated form are presented.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches arranged in a row; 2 eight-pointed stars; ornamentation — a carpet-style border of the “Seljuk chain” type (Neymat, 1991).
Grave slab	—	—	—	174	45	28	1244	13 <i>abdān</i> -type niches; three eight-rayed stars; worn text in a cartouche.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	124	38	36	—	The inscription is worn, and 2 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are present.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	126	36	42	1316	A <i>şandūqa</i> of complex form with a broad projecting base, a recessed panel for an inscription, and 2 <i>abdān</i> -type niches.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	164	43	48	13...	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	143	55	30	—	2 <i>abdān</i> -type niches.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	175	38	30	—	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches.
Miniature grave (child)	25	26	16	76	76	12	—	2 <i>abdān</i> -type niches with a geometric pattern between them.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	151	39	47	1299	The inscription cannot be read.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	143	46	60	—	Stepped base, with two <i>abdān</i> -type niches.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	137	35	32	—	The inscription has not survived; stepped base; 3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	140	36	—	—	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	160	34	—	—	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	135	76	30	1308	Inscription and 3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches.
Miniature grave (child)	33	25	14	60	24	19	1300	The inscription is illegible.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	122	37	43	1301	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	167	42	22	—	“Seljuk chain” border, of irregular form, with 4 <i>abdān</i> -type niches.

Type	Stele		Ledge stone				Date (Hijri)	Notes
	Height	Width	Thickness	Length	Thickness	Height		
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	155	37	18		3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches.

***Notes:** Certain categories (e.g., “Sufi” and “child”) do not represent formal typological classes but refer to functional or demographic characteristics. These graves exhibit hybrid or reduced morphological features (e.g., small or integrated stelae), which makes their strict classification within standard typologies problematic. For this reason, a combined descriptive approach has been adopted. All dimensions are given in centimetres.

3.4. Southern site

Another object of our close study was the area south of the *türbe* (Fig. 8A), which contained numerous graves from the Modern and Contemporary periods (Fig. 8C). The orientation of the graves in this area corresponded to that of the graves in the *türbe*.



Figure 8. Aerial drone photos of the southern section of the *Shakhandan* cemetery.

Table 2. *Description of the graves at the Southern site**

Type	Stele			Ledge stone			Date (Hijri)	Notes
	Height	Width	Thickness	Length	Thickness	Height		
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	142	50	30	—	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented; 8 fragmented and 1 full solar symbol.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	174	39	42	—	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
Miniature grave (child)	65	24	19	89	24	38	—	1 <i>abdān</i> -type niche is presented, with enigmatic décor on the side slab.
Grave slab	—	—	—	155	56	36	1239	1 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented, with carpet-like décor.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	203	46	76	—	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented. The grave tomb is mounted on 2 stone plates.
Grave slab	—	—	—	74	39	30	132(2)	1 <i>abdān</i> -type niche is presented.
Grave slab	—	—	—	46	38	30	—	—
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	176	43	67	—	—
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	179	51	54	1301	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	157	42	52	13...	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	165	38	54	—	4 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	165	40	58	1307	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented. The grave tomb is mounted on 3 stone plates.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	175	46	40	—	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	164	48	68	1312	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	198	50	78	1308	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented. The grave tomb is mounted on 1 stone plate.
Grave slab	—	—	—	100	49	30	—	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented with décor, including solar symbols on the side slabs.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	143	49	36	—	Azimuth to WN. 2 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
Grave slab	—	—	—	141	45	28	—	Azimuth to WN. 2 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented. Niches are afunctional.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	150	42	53	1301	2 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	162	40	24	13...	5 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	132	53	28	—	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented, without any inscriptions.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	196	46	76	1306	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	168	56	34	1317	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented. The grave tomb is mounted on 3 stone plates.

Type	Stele			Ledge stone			Date (Hijri)	Notes
	Height	Width	Thickness	Length	Thickness	Height		
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	193	43	54	1293	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	198	49	72	1304	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	153	46	58	—	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	172	44	54	1301	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	164	46	38	—	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
Miniature <i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	118	34	36	13...	1 <i>abdān</i> -type niche is presented, with carpet-like décor on the side slab.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	148	42	54	—	2 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented. The grave tomb is mounted on 2 stone plates.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	126	49	18	—	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	150	38	56	—	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	170	45	54	1288	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	196	52	44	1288	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	172	45	64	1287	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	153	50	38	—	3 <i>abdān</i> -type (1 ornamental) niches are presented. 1 décor. Solar symbols, 4 in periphery, 6 in centre.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	168	44	53	1288	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	190	52	46	—	4 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	174	44	40	—	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	178	48	42	1284	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented. The headboard finial is decorated with a <i>nilüfer</i> motif. The front face below features a carpet-like ornament. The rear face shows, at the centre, a pomegranate with three fruits, one of which is split open, accompanied by vegetal decoration.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	168	42	44	1281	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
Miniature grave (child)	64	22	22	100	22	28	—	1 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	107	44	52	—	2 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	170	46	65	—	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
Grave slab	—	—	—	120	62	27	1316	2 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
Grave slab	—	—	—	120	62	25	1319	—

Type	Stele			Ledge stone			Date (Hijri)	Notes
	Height	Width	Thickness	Length	Thickness	Height		
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	172	44	48	—	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	165	38	56	1305	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	186	41	44	—	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented. Along the edges, a carpet-style ornament is present, consisting of an eight-pointed star with a four-rayed motif at its centre. The sarcophagus is broken into two halves.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	170	38	40	1270	2 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented. On the left side of the grave's head section, a pattern identical to that of the preceding <i>şandūqa</i> is present.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	141	38	32	—	1 <i>abdān</i> -type niche with unusual form is presented.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	160	37	43	—	—
Grave slab	—	—	—	104	33	34	—	—
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	148	47	46	1304	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented. Tombstone is mounted in 3 stone plates.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	204	48	73	1308	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	173	38	21	1243	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	123	35	34	—	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented. A pattern of lozenges containing inscribed four-rayed motifs.
Grave slab with stele (Sufi)	146	47	22	—	—	—	—	On the inner side of the stele's head section, a carved sun is depicted; below it, an <i>eyvan</i> (Pers. ایوان, <i>eyvan</i> , a vaulted hall open on one side) with muqarnas (Arab. مقرنس, <i>muqarnas</i> , a stalactite-like architectural ornament composed of small niche elements) is shown. Further down, a <i>sarv-e khuraman</i> motif is placed within a niche. On the inner side, the slab has sunk into the ground.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	160	42	58	13...	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	200	46	74	—	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	174	40	40	1262	4 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	194	48	58	13...	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented. 4 fragmentary solar symbols are arranged along the edges, and 6 complete ones are positioned at the centre.

Type	Stele			Ledge stone			Date (Hijri)	Notes
	Height	Width	Thickness	Length	Thickness	Height		
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	166	44	64	1298	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	164	40	45	—	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	163	42	43	—	3 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented. The end face features, at the centre, a book stand (<i>rehal</i>), with a <i>qalamdān</i> to the left and scissors (<i>qeychi</i>) to the right; a reed pen (<i>qalam</i>) is shown above.
<i>Şandūqa</i>	—	—	—	148	37	52	1258	2 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented.
Miniature grave (child)	30	22	16	62	8	22		2 <i>abdān</i> -type niches are presented. The funerary monument is carved from a single stone block. A cypress (<i>sarv-e khuraman</i>) is carved on both sides of the stele. A carpet-style ornament is applied to the slab. Part of the monument has sunk into the ground; measurements were taken of the portions remaining above ground.
Miniature grave (child)	37	23	17	—	—	—	—	—

*Note: dimensions are given in centimetres.

Most of the grave monuments in this section are the chest-type, but more massive. The construction of this type of *şandūqa* differs: due to increased ground loads, these grave monuments often rest on wide sandstone slabs, unlike earlier *şandūqa*, which were supported by broader bases (Fig. 9A, B). This gives the entire structure a stepped appearance (Fig. 9C).



Figure 9. *Şandūqa* in the lower section.

At the same time, there are interesting graves with specific symbols, demonstrating the persistence of Sufi traditions at the *Shakhandan* cemetery in the Modern and even Contemporary periods. An example is grave No. 7350 (Fig. 10A). In this grave monument, a *sarv-e khuraman* is visible in the *mihrab*, above which the rays of the Sun are depicted.



Figure 10. The grave monument stele with a *sarv-e khuraman* in the *mihrab*.

Another interesting monument is grave No. 7245, featuring depictions of a *nilūfar* and a pomegranate (Fig. 11A, B). At the top of the tall stele of this grave is a stylised image of the *nilūfar* (Fig. 11C, G). Below it is an inscription set in a recessed panel, surrounded by a geometric pattern. On the reverse side of the stele, a pomegranate (Arab. الرمان, *al-rummān*, “pomegranate”; Pers. انار *anār*, “pomegranate”; locally *nār*) tree is depicted in a *mihrab*-shaped niche, with three fruits, one of which is open; a separate fruit appears further below. The pomegranate tree in the *mihrab* evokes the impression of a paradisiacal tree standing behind a hidden door to another world. The *ṣandūqa*-type grave slab has three *abdān*-type niches and a Seljuk chain around them (Fig. 11D, E).



Figure. 11. Grave monument with a pomegranate and a *nilüfar*.

Of particular interest are also the graves decorated with the Seljuk chain (Fig. 12G) and carpet-style patterns (Fig. 12A–F, H, I). Some of these patterns precisely replicate designs found in Azerbaijani carpets (Fig. 12B–F, I), thereby possibly continuing the tradition of indicating the deceased's profession.



Figure 12. Grave monuments decorated with the Seljuk chain and carpet-style patterns.

Nevertheless, in this section of the cemetery, as well as in the area adjacent to the road (Fig. 8A), where graves erected in the Contemporary period are located, one can observe a gradual fading of tradition, the loss of the profound symbolism of funerary and Sufi imagery, and their replacement with simple decorative elements.

In this regard, grave No. 7053 is of particular interest, where the small “luminaries,” which in the right-hand Sufi graves in the *türbe* carry deep mystical meaning, were used merely as simple decoration (Fig. 13A, B). Another example is the child’s grave No. 7389, where a *sarv-e khuraman* positioned at the head end is clearly employed only as a simple decorative element, automatically repeating the symbol found in “adult” graves, where this paradisiacal tree represents the “straight path” (الصراط المستقيم, *al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*) in life; for the young child who did not live to experience it, it evidently carries no meaning (Fig. 13C, D).

In several graves, the significance of carving *abdān*-type niches is lost (Fig. 13E, F), as they acquire all the typical decorative features and become devoid of meaning, even when carved on horizontal surfaces.



Figure 13. The consistent degradation of symbolic meaning in graves from the Contemporary (Soviet) period.

3.5. Epigraphic inscriptions on tombstones in the southern section

Tombstone No. 6969-71 (Fig. 14A, B):

1/ محمد
2/ غفر الله
3/ سنة ١٣٢٨

1/ Muhammad
2/ may God have mercy on him
3/ year 1328/1910
Tombstone No. 7007 (Fig. 14C):

1/ هذا

2/ مرقد المرحوم

3/ [...]

4/ [...]

5/ ١٣١٩

1/ This is

2/ the grave of the deceased

3/ [...]

4/ [...]

5/ 1319/1901

Tombstone No. 7009-7011 (Fig. 14D, E):

1/ هذا

2/ مرقد المرحوم المغفور

3/ حاجي واهب [هكذا] بن اقان

4/ ١٣٢٠

1/ This is

2/ the grave of the late and blessed

3/ Hāyî Wāhab [sic] bin Aqā (Haji Vahab bin Aghan)

4/ 1320 /1902

Tombstone No. 7048-7049 (Fig. 14F):

1/ هذا

2/ مرقد المرحوم

3/ المغفور [...]

4/ أيوب

5/ ١٢٠٨

1/ This

2/ The tomb of the late (deceased)

3/ The forgiven [...]

4/ Ayyub

5/ 1208



Figure 14. Inscriptions in the South site of the cemetery.

3.6. Dimensional Characteristics of the Funerary Monuments

The metric analysis of the funerary monuments reveals a clear differentiation by typological categories and spatial zones within the necropolis. *Şandūqa*-type tombstones, child burials, and grave slabs exhibit consistently distinct ranges of dimensions that overlap only minimally and together form a hierarchically structured system of monuments.

Şandūqa-type tombstones located around the *türbe* are characterised by high-dimensional variability. Their length ranges from 62 to 175 cm, with a mean value of 141.9 ± 26.5 cm ($n = 21$). Width ranges from 32 to 76 cm, with a mean of 42.1 ± 9.5 cm ($n = 21$). Height ranges from 18 to 74 cm, with a mean value of 40.1 ± 14.5 cm ($n = 19$). The dispersion of values is considerable across all parameters and reflects the assemblage's internal heterogeneity, particularly in the horizontal dimension. Height values are relatively more stable, although their overall range remains wide.

Şandūqa-type tombstones from the southern site exhibit more stable metric parameters. Their length ranges from 107 to 204 cm, with a mean of 166.0 ± 21.7 cm ($n = 55$). Width varies from 34 to 56 cm, with a mean of 44.1 ± 4.9 cm ($n = 55$). Height ranges between 18 and 78 cm, with a mean value of 49.5 ± 14.4 cm ($n = 55$). Compared to the area around the *türbe*, the dimensional ranges at the southern site are more compact, particularly in width, indicating a higher degree of standardisation.

Child burials constitute an independent dimensional group clearly separated from *şandūqa*-type tombstones. The length of child burial monuments ranges from 60 to 100 cm, with a mean value of 77.4 ± 16.5 cm ($n = 5$). Width ranges from 8 to 24 cm, with a mean of 18.4 ± 8.7 cm ($n = 5$). Height ranges from 12 to 38 cm, with a mean value of 23.8 ± 9.8 cm ($n = 5$). Child stelae have a height of 25–65 cm (mean 45.0 ± 16.6 cm; $n = 6$) and a width of 22–26 cm (mean 23.7 ± 1.6 cm; $n = 6$). None of these parameters reaches the values characteristic of *şandūqa*-type tombstones, indicating a deliberate reduction in dimensions rather than random variation.

Grave slabs constitute the most compact group in terms of dimensions. Due to their morphological specificity, thickness is the only comparable parameter. Thickness varies from 12 to 22 cm, with a mean value of 17.5 ± 4.3 cm ($n = 4$). Other dimensions are either fragmentary or do not form a comparable series and are therefore excluded from quantitative analysis.

3.7. Architectural and Typological Characteristics of the Burials

The integration of metric data with descriptive characteristics clarifies the structural distinctions between monument types and different areas of the necropolis. *Şandūqa*-type tombstones around the *türbe* form a morphologically heterogeneous assemblage. These monuments display varying degrees of preservation, evidence of foundation subsidence, tilting, and partial loss of structural elements. Against this background, architectural features do not constitute a stable or uniform set. *Abdān*-type niches occur infrequently and irregularly; in documented cases, there are usually only two niches per monument. Their presence is not normative and does not characterise the assemblage as a whole.

At the southern site, *şandūqa*-type tombstones display a more coherent architectural typology. Most monuments are set on one or several stone slabs, providing greater structural stability. In this context, *abdān*-type niches are recorded systematically and occur in quantities of one, two, or three niches within a single monument. Their regular presence and quantitative variability indicate a reproducible architectural tradition specific to this area. Importantly, the presence of *abdān*-type niches is not directly dependent on monument size but represents an independent structural feature.

Child burials, regardless of location, follow a fundamentally different architectural logic. They lack *abdān*-type niches entirely and do not replicate the architectural elements of *şandūqa*-type tombstones in reduced form, aside from general shape. The absence of *abdān*-type niches is consistent across all cases and independent of date, indicating their deliberate exclusion from the architectural repertoire of child burials.

Grave slabs may also contain *abdān*-type niches; however, unlike *şandūqa*-type tombstones, these niches are usually single and do not form an extended architectural programme. Flat or only slightly elevated construction of the grave slabs, minimal thickness, and absence of volumetric elements underscore their functional and typological separation.

3.8. Chronological Parameters and Historical Context of the Burials

The dates in Tables 1 and 2 are expressed in the lunar Hijri calendar and show no correlation with monument type. Accordingly, the chronological analysis is conducted exclusively at the site sector level.

For the area surrounding the *türbe*, the chronological limits range from 1187 to 1316 AH. The earliest dated monument from this area corresponds to 1187 AH and belongs to the early Qajar period. The latest monument is dated to 1316 AH, corresponding to the early twentieth century and already within the Soviet period. Thus, the area around the *türbe* was used over an extended period encompassing the early Qajar phase, the entire Qajar period under Tsarist administration (1827–1917), and the subsequent Soviet phase. Importantly, no reliably dated pre-Qajar burials, that is, earlier than the reign of Agha Mohammad Shah Qajar (1742 – 1797), are recorded at this site.

Significantly narrower chronological limits characterise the southern site. Its dates fall within the range of 1239–1319 AH. The earliest monument is dated 1239 AH and belongs to the Qajar period, following the establishment of the Tsarist administration. The latest monument, dated to 1319 AH, corresponds to the end of the Qajar period and the beginning of the twentieth century. Burials confidently attributed to the Soviet period are absent at the southern site or occur only sporadically, forming no distinct chronological horizon. Pre-Qajar monuments are likewise absent.

Comparison of the chronological parameters demonstrates that the differences between the two areas are determined not by monument typology but by the duration and intensity of site use. The area around the *türbe* represents a long-term, multi-phase burial zone with broad chronological limits, as reflected in its high metric and architectural heterogeneity. By contrast, the southern site constitutes a chronologically compact zone, facilitating dimensional standardisation of *şandūqa*-type tombstones and the development of a stable architectural programme, including the regular use of *abdān*-type niches.

The spatial relationship between the *türbe* and the surrounding burials suggests that the mausoleum may have functioned as a focal point within the cemetery. In Islamic funerary landscapes, particularly in Sufi contexts, the tombs of revered figures (*şuyūj*, pl. de *şayj*, or *pirs*) frequently become centres of attraction, generating clustered burial patterns structured around proximity to sanctity (*baraka*).¹⁹ Such configurations are commonly associated with visitation practices (*ziyāra*) and the continued social and ritual significance of the deceased.²⁰

At the same time, the available archaeological and epigraphic evidence does not allow for a definitive attribution of the cemetery to a single Sufi *tariqa* or to a strictly organised brotherhood structure. Rather, the observed spatial organisation is best understood as the result of overlapping religious, social, and memorial dynamics. In this framework, the *türbe* likely functioned not only as an architectural landmark, but also as a symbolic and possibly ritual centre that structured the surrounding funerary landscape over time.

4. Discussion on Symbolism

In light of the facts discussed above, we propose an interpretation of the symbols found in the *türbe* and on the tombstones of the Shahandan cemetery. For clarity, we suggest examining each symbol individually, given the gradual

¹⁹ Andrew Petersen, "The Archaeology of Death and Burial in the Islamic World," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of Death and Burial*, edited by Liv Nilsson Stutz and Sarah Tarlow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 241–258; Leor Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave: Death Rites and the Making of Islamic Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 146–149.

²⁰ Christopher S. Taylor, *In the Vicinity of the Righteous: Ziyāra and the Veneration of Muslim Saints in Late Medieval Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 195–218.

degradation of symbolism and the fading of Sufi tradition, followed by an attempt to assess these symbols as a cohesive ensemble of sacred motifs.

4.1. Symbols outside *Türbe*

4.1.1. *Mihrab*

The symbolic complex (the combination of a carved *mihrab* and sun rays on the grave stela), which we described on one of the Sufi funerary monuments at the *Shakhanda* cemetery (Table 1), may carry profound sacred meaning. Traditionally, the *mihrab* serves in mosques as an indicator of the *qibla* direction and as a focal point for prayer. In funerary contexts across the Islamic world, the arch-shaped niche is frequently reinterpreted as a symbolic structure. Comparable examples of *mihrab*-like forms on tombstones are attested in the *Mašriq* as early as the 10th century, while in *Ifriqiya* and al-Andalus similar motifs appear from the 11th century onward, including the Andalusian tombstone preserved in Pisa and dated to 486/1094.²¹

In the context of a Sufi grave monument, the *mihrab* acquires metaphorical significance: it becomes not merely a spatial marker but a symbol of the connection between the earthly (الدنيا فاني, *fānī al-dunyā*) and the afterlife (الدنيا والآخرة, *al-ajira wa al-dunyā*) realms. Some scholars directly interpret such “niches” on tombstones as “symbolic doors to Paradise,” as “gates through which the soul of the deceased is guided to God” after death.²² This interpretation is consistent with broader patterns in Islamic funerary art, where architectural forms are frequently reinterpreted in eschatological terms.

In general, the symbolism of light (especially “sun rays” or a “radiant halo”) holds special significance in the Islamic, and particularly the Sufi, symbolic world. Light (نور, *nūr*) is associated with the Divine, with enlightenment, spiritual illumination, and the presence of Allah. In architecture, compositions in which rays emanate from a niche (sometimes described as “radiant *mihrabs*”) are attested in various regions of the Islamic world and serve to visualise the “light of God” within a sacred spatial framework.²³

In light of the combination of these two symbols, the following interpretation may be proposed for the Sufi grave described. The *mihrab* on the stela symbolises a sacred door through which the deceased’s soul must pass on its journey to the afterlife. In the grave, it designates not merely the direction of prayer, but a kind of “transcendent gateway” through which the soul of the Sufi would reach the Light of Creation. In the Sufi tradition, this is particularly significant, as Sufism seeks a direct connection with the Light of Creation. Such “niches” on tombs could indicate that the deceased was a deeply revered individual.

Such compositions, while not standardised, are consistent with broader patterns in Islamic funerary art, where architectural and cosmological symbols are integrated to express the transition from the temporal world to the divine realm.

4.1.2. Seljuk Chain

The “Seljuk chain” is typically described in the scholarly literature as an interlaced geometric motif — often referred to as a “knot,” “chain,” or “interlace” pattern. Such a pattern is widespread in the ornamental practice of the Seljuk and post-Seljuk periods, as seen on architectural and funerary monuments.²⁴ Comparable interlaced motifs are widely attested across the Islamic world, particularly in Seljuk and post-Seljuk architectural decoration, as well as in manuscript illumination and stone carving. In studies of Islamic ornament and architecture, this motif is treated as a standard decorative formula (including variants of chain, knot, and interlace patterns), often incorporated into frames, borders, and cartouches; it also appears on stelae, inscription panels, and in stone carving.²⁵

There is no strict “universal” interpretation applicable to all variations. However, in art-historical discourse, such interlaced motifs are generally associated with ideas of eternity, continuity, and the infinite nature of creation. They are often understood to serve an apotropaic function. These interpretations are supported by N. Gaber’s study of tombstone decoration (2024), where interlaced motifs serve both aesthetic and semantic (protective-memorial) purposes.²⁶ This dual aesthetic and symbolic function is consistent with broader patterns in Islamic decorative art, where geometric interlace serves both ornamental and metaphysical purposes.

²¹ Carmen Barceló, “L’epitafi del rei mallorquí Ibn Aglab conservat a Pisa,” *Bolletí de la Societat Arqueològica Lul·liana: Revista d’Estudis Històrics* 69 (2010): 279–298; Virgilio Martínez Enamorado, “Morir en Qurtuba: Reflexiones sobre la epigrafía funeraria de la Córdoba andalusí,” in *La muerte en Córdoba: creencias, ritos y cementerios* (2). *Entre musulmanes, mozárabes y judíos* (Córdoba: Real Academia de Ciencias, Bellas Letras y Nobles Artes de Córdoba, 2021), 65–115; Virgilio Martínez Enamorado, *Al-Ándalus desde la periferia. La formación de una sociedad musulmana en tierras malagueñas (siglos VIII–X)* (Málaga: CEDMA, 2003), 114–116; M. Forcada, “Granada safarī e higo dunniqāl. La transmisión de nombres y especies en al-Ándalus,” *Panace@: Revista de Medicina, Lenguaje y Traducción* 20, no. 50 (2019): 42–55.

²² Samad Parvin, Behruz Afkhami, and Elkhani Hendiani, “Investigating and Analyzing the Motifs of the Tombstones of the Ounar Cemetery,” *Brief Communications of the Institute of Archaeology* 259 (2020): 398–410.

²³ Faiqa Khilat, Yasira Naeem Pasha, and Munazzah Akhtar, “Origin and Semantics of Mihrab in Islamic Funerary Architecture,” *TANAZUR* 5, no. 1 (2024): 106–123.

²⁴ Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, *The Art and Architecture of Islam, 1250–1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 5–16, 132–146.

²⁵ Nicole Kançal-Ferrari, “Transcultural Ornament and Heraldic Symbols: An Investigation into the Aesthetic Language of Early Modern Crimea and the Northern Black Sea Shore (Thirteenth–Sixteenth Centuries),” edited by Alina Payne, in *The Land between Two Seas: Art on the Move in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea 1300–1700*, 152–176 (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 164–165.

²⁶ N. Gaber, “The Knot Decoration in the Islamic Arts of Khorasan Province from the 10th to the 13th Centuries,” *Egyptian Journal of Archaeological and Restoration Studies (EJARS)* 14, no. 1 (2024): 129–141, esp. 130–131.

4.1.3. *Nār* (Pomegranate)

In Achaemenid Iran, pomegranates symbolised fertility, while their flowers may have played a ceremonial role during Nowruz celebrations.²⁷ More broadly, in Iranian Mazdeism, the pomegranate was regarded as a heavenly plant. Its branches and flowers were used in Zoroastrian rituals. During the Sasanian period, the pomegranate was considered a sacred fruit, and its numerous seeds symbolised the fecundity of the Iranian goddess Anahita.²⁸ This symbolism is well attested in the Iranian cultural sphere, where the pomegranate functions as a polyvalent symbol of fertility, renewal, and divine blessing.

Islam, too, accords the pomegranate a significant symbolic status. In the Koran, the pomegranate (*al-ruḡmān*, الرُّمَّان) is mentioned in *Sūrat al-Raḥmān* (سورة الرحمن) as a beautiful plant of Paradise (55:68). This continuity reflects the integration of earlier Iranian symbolic traditions into the Islamic cultural and religious framework. Its symbolic and cultural significance is also reflected in the Western Islamic world, particularly in al-Andalus, where the pomegranate appears in literary, agricultural, and artistic contexts.²⁹

Thus, the depiction of the pomegranate tree on funerary monuments, including its fruits and leaves, may be interpreted as symbolising eternal life and the hope for bliss in the gardens of Paradise. Such interpretations are consistent with broader patterns in Islamic funerary art, where vegetal motifs often function as metaphors for paradise, renewal, and divine reward.

4.2. Symbols inside *Türbe*

We should note the presence of *abdān*-type niches, the lotus, the book-and-stand, the cypress, the eight-pointed star, and scissors on the tombstones throughout the old cemetery. Therefore, we describe these symbols below.

4.2.1. *Nilūfar* (Lily)

The stela's top on the graves and the depictions of the lotus/water lily (نیلوفر, *nilūfar*; see what a famous 11th-century Sevillian botanist said about this plant³⁰) above the Sufi grave in *Shakhandan* can be interpreted as a multilayered symbol woven into the Persian and Turkish Islamic poetic and mystical tradition. It reflects the ideas of purity and spiritual rebirth — the image of a “flower” that blossoms out of murky water yet remains pure. Such an image is frequently used in Sufi metaphorical language to signify the soul rising above the worldly realm and aspiring toward God. Comparable symbolic uses of the lotus or water lily are attested in Persian and Central Asian literary and artistic traditions, where the motif conveys purity emerging from impurity and the transcendence of the material world. In addition, in Persian and Central Asian traditions, the *nilūfar* is frequently associated with the Beloved. The lily's connection with water is also highly significant, especially in regions where water is a central symbol of purification and life. Thus, the motif placed on the tomb of a Sufi *ṣayy* may be interpreted as referring to both spiritual purity and rebirth through mystical knowledge.³¹

Finally, the use of floral motifs on tombstones aligns with the decorative language common in the Turko-Iranian cultural sphere, where flora serves as a vehicle for expressing invisible yet divine beauty, order, and cosmic harmony.³² In the context of the *Shakhandan* cemetery, such a symbol reinforces the notion that the deceased possesses a special, sacred status within the local Sufi community.

4.2.2. “The Wheel”

The two concentric circles, filled with dots and placed between them (repeated three times on the Sufi *ṣayy*'s stela and incorporated into the overall composition described above), may be interpreted as conveying a complex, multi-layered meaning that combines cosmology, eternity, and the metaphor of mystical knowledge.

Comparable symbolic uses of circular and rosette motifs are attested in the Islamic world, including in Fatimid art of *Ifriqiya* (Tunisia) in the 10th century.³³ Specifically, in Islamic and Irano-Turkic ornamental language, concentric circles and rosettes traditionally symbolise the cosmos and celestial order. Such motifs are widely employed in Islamic decorative art to represent the structure and harmony of the universe. This motif can be interpreted as a miniature depiction of the “heavenly vault,” and therefore appropriate for tombstones, where funerary architecture was conceived as a “microcosm” of the grave.³⁴

The dots positioned between the circles may be understood either as stellar or astral signs (i.e., markers of the sky and its multitude of luminaries) or as stylised “beads” — an image reminiscent of prayer beads or counting beads (تسبیح, *tasbīḥ*). In a Sufi context, this resonates with the practice of repetitive remembrance and the idea of spiritual

²⁷ Guilia Caneva, Alessandro Lazzara, and Zohreh Hosseini. “Plants as Symbols of Power in the Achaemenid Iconography of Ancient Persian Monuments,” *Plants* 12, no. 23 (2023): 3991, esp. 10–11.

²⁸ F. Spagnoli, R. Shirazi, Z. Shirazi, S. Saeidi Ghavi Andam, and M. Djamali. “Archaeology, History and Symbolism.” In A. Sarkhosh et al. (eds.), *The Pomegranate: Botany, Production and Uses*, 2–3 (Wallingford: CAB International, 2021): 2-3.

²⁹ Virgilio Martínez Enamorado, *Al-Ándalus desde la periferia. La formación de una sociedad musulmana en tierras malagueñas (siglos VIII–X)* (Málaga: CEDMA, 2003), 114–116; M. Forcada, “Granada safarī e higo dunniqāl. La transmisión de nombres y especies en al-Ándalus,” *Panace@: Revista de Medicina, Lenguaje y Traducción* 20, no. 50 (2019): 42–55.

³⁰ Abū l-Khayr al-Iṣṭīlī, *Kitāb ‘Umdat al-ṭabīb fī ma’rifat al-nabāt li-kull labīb*, ed. Joaquín Bustamante, Federico Corriente, and Mohamed Tilmatine (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2004–2007), entries 3136–3137.

³¹ Dehghan and Hemmati, “The Role of Lily,” 12.

³² J. Badiie, “The Image of the Mystic Flower: Exploring the Lotus Symbolism in the Bahá’í House of Worship,” *The Journal of Bahá’í Studies* 10, nos. 1–2 (2000): 11–26.

³³ Irene A. Bierman, *Writing Signs: The Fatimid Public Text* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 24–27, 40–45.

³⁴ Critchlow, K. *Islamic Patterns: An Analytical and Cosmological Approach* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1976).

counting or inner reckoning. The association between counting beads and devotional repetition is well documented in Islamic ritual practice, where the use of prayer beads structures acts of remembrance (*dikr*). In both cases, the combination of the circle (wholeness, eternity) and the multitude of dots (many souls, levels of being, or stars) forms a metaphor for the path and the source of light.³⁵

Such interpretations are consistent with broader patterns in Islamic visual culture, where circular and repetitive forms serve to express cosmological order, continuity, and the cyclical nature of existence.

4.2.3. *Şandūqa* (The Chest)

In Sufi tradition, the chest (صندوقة, *şandūqa*) may be associated with several symbolic meanings. It appears in both literary sources and material culture.

The first sacred meaning of *şandūqa* is the sign of the “repository of the heart” (*del*, دل). In Sufi anthropology, the heart is the primary organ of inner knowledge.³⁶ It is described as a treasury (*jazīna*, جزيئة) in which the “secret” (*sirr*, سر) and “gnosis” (*ma'rifa*, معرفة) are stored. In this context, the symbolism of the chest is that of the heart as the vessel of divine light (*nūr*, نور), the container in which spiritual knowledge is “kept,” a symbol of the hidden (*bāṭin*, باطن) as opposed to the outward (*ẓāhir*, ظاهر).³⁷

The second meaning of *şandūqa* is the image of spiritual heritage. In the Turko-Iranian cultural sphere, the tombs of *şuyūj* were often fashioned as stone chests (*şandūq-tāsh*, *şandūq-e sangī*). Comparable funerary forms are widely attested in the Iranian and Central Asian regions, where chest-shaped tombstones function as both architectural and symbolic markers. They symbolised the bearer of the chain of transmission (*silsila*, سلسله) and his legacy.³⁸ In some Sufi orders, the chest represents a concealed secret (*sirr*), a supreme knowledge inaccessible to the uninitiated. This motif appears in Persian poetry, where the chest conceals a precious gem — the proper knowledge, the “gem of truth”.³⁹

Finally, a third possible meaning of this symbol is connected with the coffin (*tābūt*, تابوت).⁴⁰ In some Sufi texts, the chest is interpreted as a boundary between this world and the spiritual one, a transitional space, the sign of the “state of dying” (*fanā*, فنا).⁴¹ In particular, within the Naqshbandiyya tradition, symbols associated with concealment (*ḥifẓ*, حفظ), inner silence, and the preservation of a hidden “seed” (*nuqta*, نقطة — *darra*, دره) are characteristic. In such a context, the chest may symbolise restraint and the inner guarding of knowledge (Pers. خوش در دم, *khush dar dam*), the hidden work of the heart, the inward path inaccessible to outward eyes.⁴²

Such interpretations are consistent with broader patterns in Sufi symbolism, in which containers, enclosures, and vessels serve as metaphors for the believer’s inner life and the preservation of esoteric knowledge.

4.2.4. *Rehal* (Bookstand)

The image of a book on a stand (*rehal*, رحل/bookstand) on Islamic tombstones is typically interpreted as an emphasis on the deceased’s religious scholarship, their connection to the Koran, or the *murīds*’ desire to highlight the deceased’s link to theological heritage. Comparable representations of books and bookstands are attested in Islamic funerary art, where they function as markers of literacy, scholarship, and religious authority. Studies of funerary ornamentation in Iranian Azerbaijan indicate that, in funerary iconography, a book on a *rehal* or placed beside it often signifies a “scholarly/religious” status.⁴³

Such iconographic elements are consistent with broader patterns in Islamic funerary art, where objects associated with knowledge serve as visual indicators of intellectual and spiritual authority.

4.2.5. *Sarv-e Khuraman* (Cypress)

The interpretation of the *سرو خرامان*, *Sarv-e Khuraman* (cypress) as a sign of immortality and an image of paradise is based on a broad and well-established tradition in Turko-Iranian/Persian and Islamic decorative culture, where the cypress functions as the “tree of eternity” and as a marker of the honourable or spiritual status of the deceased.⁴⁴

In the Sufi context, the presence of a cypress as a central symbol, along with recurring solar-circular motifs and objects of worship (a bowl, a book), is not uncommon in the graves of *pīrs* (Sufi saints). *Pīrs* and local *şuyūj* were often venerated as intermediaries between the earthly world and the realm of divine light. In the literature on local Sunni/

³⁵ Sheila Blair and Christopher Bloom. “Ornament and Islamic Art.” In S. S. Blair and J. M. Bloom (eds.), *Cosmophilia: Islamic Art from the David Collection, Copenhagen*, (Copenhagen: David Collection, 2006), 9–30.

³⁶ In Persian, the concept of “heart” is conveyed by two words — “قلب” (*qalb*) and “دل” (*dil > del*), derived from Arabic. The former refers to the heart as a physiological organ, while the latter denotes the heart as the seat of emotions, intuition, and the soul (Rūmī, *Maṣnavī-yi Ma’navī*, Book I, vv. 1914–1915; al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, Book 21: *Kitāb Sarḥ ‘Aḡā’ib al-Qalb*).

³⁷ Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*.

³⁸ Blair and Bloom. *The Art and Architecture of Islam*.

³⁹ L. Lewisohn, L. *The Philosophy of Ecstasy: Rumi and the Sufi Tradition* (Spiritual Masters: East & West, 2014), 127–145, 199–229.

⁴⁰ This is connected to the well-known Naqshbandi formula: “die before death” (موتوا قبل أن تموتوا), a maxim recorded in early and classical Sufi literature (e.g. al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, Book 40; Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, ed. ‘Afīfī, p. 192).

⁴¹ Algar, H. “The Naqshbandī Order: A Preliminary Survey of Its History and Significance,” *Studia Islamica* 44 (1976): 123–152.

⁴² Weismann, I. *The Naqshbandiyya: Orthodoxy and Activism in a Worldwide Sufi Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2007).

⁴³ Kazempour, M., and S. Shokrpour. “A Symbolic Analysis of Islamic Period Gravestones in the Ahar Museum,” *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 25 (2021): 1065–1086.

⁴⁴ Grabar, O. *The Formation of Islamic Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987); Golombek, L., and D. N. Wilber. *The Timurid Architecture of Iran and Turan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988); Blair, S. S., and J. M. Bloom. *The Art and Architecture of Islam, 1250–1800* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994).

Shi'i and Sufi practices of memorial veneration, special symbolic complexes and cultic objects in the necropolises of southeastern Azerbaijan and neighbouring regions are noted.⁴⁵

4.2.6. Drop and Cup

In Sufi thought, "light" (*nūr*) is a central metaphysical image.⁴⁶ In Suhrawardī and the subsequent Iranian mystical tradition, it is interpreted as a descent, the manifestation of the Divine in the human soul. Henry Corbin (1978) emphasises the image of "small flashes/drops of light" to depict the descent of divine presence. This provides a basis for reading a "drop" on a tombstone as a symbol of divine *nūr* or bestowed grace.

Moreover, in Sufi metaphysics, the "point" (نقطه, *nuqta*) holds the status of a primordial seed-reality — the "source of the letter, the origin of the universe." A master stone carver might stylise the *nuqta* as an elongated "drop" rather than a simple dot to visually emphasise the dynamic of descent, where the drop represents a point in motion. This is documented in studies on Sufi symbolism and the Islamic iconography of light.⁴⁷

In classical Sufi poetry, the "cup" serves as a metaphor for the heart receiving knowledge and divine love. Drinking from the cup symbolises the experience of *fana* (the state of annihilation)—dissolution in God.⁴⁸ Thus, the depiction of a cup on a *šayy*'s grave can reasonably be interpreted as an indication of his realised spiritual experience.

Research on funerary ornamentation in the Caucasus and Azerbaijan shows a blending of Iranian-Islamic and local (Turkic, Caucasian) symbols on tombstones. Artisans often used abstract forms (points, drops, cups) to convey religious meaning.⁴⁹ Therefore, a similar semantic layer on the grave of a Naqshbandi *šayy* in Shemakha is entirely expected.

4.2.7. Eight-Pointed Star

The depiction of a star on a Sufi grave may symbolise divine light (نور, *nūr*) and mystical enlightenment. In the Sufi tradition, the star is associated with the Light of God, "illuminating the heart" of the deceased, reflecting the idea of the soul's proximity to the Divine. Comparable associations between light and geometric motifs are widely attested in Islamic art, where star-shaped forms often function as visual expressions of divine illumination.⁵⁰

In addition, a multi-rayed star can function as a sign of cosmic order and eternity, signifying the cyclicity of existence and the harmony between the earthly and heavenly realms. In Islamic geometric art, star patterns are frequently used to express the structured harmony of the cosmos and the underlying unity of creation.⁵¹ Some five- or six-pointed stars in Islamic engraving and ornamentation are considered symbols of creation, order, and transcendence.

It is also possible that the star symbol reflects the deceased's esoteric affiliation: in certain mystical Sufi orders, geometric figures resembling stars may represent spiritual stages, meditative states, or the inner path (Arab. سلوك, *sulūk*) of the deceased.

Finally, in a local (regional) context, this symbol may also be interpreted as echoing earlier associations with solar imagery and natural cycles, interpreted as a vestige of solar beliefs transformed into the Islamic visual language and iconography.⁵²

Such interpretations are consistent with broader patterns in Islamic visual culture, where star-shaped and radiating motifs serve as symbolic expressions of light, order, and the relationship between the material and the divine.

4.2.8. *Abdān* -Type Niches

In the folk practices of the South Caucasus and Iran, there are indeed recorded instances of water and food being left at graves. This could be done intentionally or unintentionally (rainwater collecting in an *abdān*) — and birds coming to the water or crumbs were perceived as intermediaries between worlds (in folklore referred to as *ruh* or *fereshhte*). In Azerbaijani (Turkish) folk tradition, the belief "*quş ruh gətirər*" / "*quş dua aparar*" (the bird brings the soul/the bird carries a prayer) persisted up to the 20th century.⁵³ Farid Ahmadzadeh (2018) mentions this practice in a study of nomadic necropolises in western Iran.⁵⁴ Cup-shaped depressions are also reported on tomb monuments from Luristan (Iran).⁵⁵

⁴⁵ Azimi, D. "Azərbaycanın Cənub-Şərq bölgəsində şeyx Zəhid ənənəsinin bəzi davamçıları." In *Proceedings of the International Symposium Sheikh Zahid Gilani in the 800th Year of His Birth*, 191–230 (Lankaran, 13–15 December 2018), 2023.

⁴⁶ Khemir, S. *Nur: Light in the Art and Science of the Islamic World* (Seville: Focus–Abengoa Foundation, 2014).

⁴⁷ Corbin, H. *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1978).

⁴⁸ Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*.

⁴⁹ T. Ibrahimov, "Origins and Symbolism of Horse-Shaped Tombstones in Azerbaijan," *Problems of Arts and Culture* 18, no. 2 (2024): 80–87.

⁵⁰ Blair and Bloom, *The Art and Architecture of Islam*.

⁵¹ K. Critchlow, *Islamic Patterns: An Analytical and Cosmological Approach* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1976), 8–15, 22–35.

⁵² Kazempour and Shokrpour, "A Symbolic Analysis of Islamic Period Gravestones in the Ahar Museum".

⁵³ A. H. Huseynova, "Simurgh in Azerbaijani Folklore," in *Persian & Sanskrit as Shared Heritage and Cross-Cultural & Historical Connection between India, Iran, Afghanistan & Central Asia* (Royal Publishers & Distributors, 2017), 54–64. Tuğba Bayrakdarlar, "Türkmen ve Azərbaycan Masallarında Mitolojik Kuş Motifi: Simurg / Zümrüd," *Söylem Filoloji Dergisi* (2022): 534–536. İrada Nizam Afsharova, *Bird Images and Ancestral Cult in Azerbaijani Mythology* (PhD diss., Ministry of Science and Education of Azerbaijan, 2023), 3–7, 9–11.

⁵⁴ F. Ahmadzadeh, S. H. Hosayni, and H. Nnorasi. "A Research on the Recognition of Implication & Motifs of Gooran Tribal Gravestones in West Islamabad (Ex-Shah Abad) City," *Theoretical Principles of Visual Arts* 3, no. 1 (2018): 72–92.

⁵⁵ İ. Mortensen, "Nomad Iconography on Tombstones from Luristan, Iran," *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 16 (1996): 219–227.

However, vertical niches (whether decorative or intended for epitaphs) cannot serve as drinking places for purely physical reasons, as our study of the *Shakhandan* cemetery demonstrated.

Nonetheless, some of the depressions (*abdān*-type niches) could have been used by people as bird feeders or as places for water/food. This aligns with our main argument. The original function of such niches was architectural-decorative or epigraphic, later supplemented by a folkloric layer of practices.

4.2.9. *Qeychi* (Scissors)

Scissors (قیچی, *qeychi* in Farsi/Azerbaijani Turkish; مقاص, *miqāṣ* in Arabic) as a visual representation of the process of spiritual purification (تزکیه, *tazkiya*) are supported by general studies of Sufi symbolism and the doctrines of “purifying the soul.” In her classic survey of Sufi symbolic language, Annemarie Schimmel (1975) provides a detailed analysis of the metaphors of “light,” “the lifting of veils,” and the stages of mystical ascent, which together offer a methodological basis for interpreting scissors as an “instrument that cuts away” impurity.⁵⁶

Without doubt, the scissors depicted on the stele do not indicate an everyday occupation; instead, they point to the role of the *ṣayy* as a “master who cuts the knots.” In Inge Demant Mortensen’s study of the gravestones of Luristan (Iran) and the surrounding regions, cases are recorded in which tools of various crafts (including scissors) are carved on stelae as markers of the deceased’s identity, status, or symbolic function.⁵⁷

5. Conclusion

Thus, the symbols on the stele form a complete, coherent Sufi composition. This is a Sufi memorial stele (میشان, *mišān*) with a programmed iconography of the path of purification and spiritual elevation. The composition deliberately has a vertical structure, symbolising the ascent from gnosis (عرفان, *irfān*) to the Light of Creation.⁵⁸

Let us attempt a detailed analysis of the composition. The sun with its descending rays at the top of the composition represents the Divine Light (نور, *nūr*), the source of wisdom for the Perfect Human (الإنسان الكامل, *al-insān al-kāmil*). This is not an astronomical “sun” but rather *Nūr al-haqq* (نور الحق) — The Divine Light of the Real (God).

The two miniature “suns” in the corners we interpreted as the two pillars of the mystical path (شريعة, *ṣarīʿa* — and طریقه, *ṭarīqa*) or as the two dimensions of the path (outer discipline and inner truth). In other words, according to this composition, the Sufi’s path is dual: both visible and esoteric.

The two chests presumably symbolise the two meanings mentioned above (the repository of the heart and spiritual heritage).

The three to four identical small circles with dots in this composition represent *dikr*/prayer beads / the repetition of the Name of God. Each dotted circle symbolises a segment of a strand of beads, and the number of such circles corresponds to the number of repetitive cycles of prayer. This is a triple *dikr*, meaning *dikr* performed with the tongue, the heart, and the essence.⁵⁹

The central prominent symbol, the *sarv-e khuraman*, represents the “Perfect Human” (*al-insān al-kāmil*). It is upright, stable, impervious to the winds of the world, and grows upward toward the Divine Light. In Islamic poetics, particularly in Iran and Azerbaijan, the cypress symbolises the beloved of God and the heights attained by the spirit.

The scissors placed to the right of the cypress symbolise the Sufi’s resolve to “cut away” worldly temptations in pursuit of the Divine Light. The symbolism of the right side (يمين, *yamīn*) in Islamic and Sufi tradition is profound, and placing scissors “to the right of the cypress” on a *ṣayy*’s grave is likely intentional. In Islamic tradition, the right side often symbolises piety, righteousness, and blessing. In the Qur’an, the righteous are called “the people of the right hand” (أصحاب اليمين, *aṣḥāb al-yamīn*), in contrast to “the people of the left hand,” symbolically reflecting their fate on the Day of Judgment (69:19–20; 56:7–10; 90:10–12). Furthermore, in Islamic symbolism, the “right” is associated not only with actions but also with covenant, trust, and power (in Arabic, *yamīn* means not only “right hand” but also “oath” or “covenant”). This is corroborated by the widespread use of *yumn* as eulogy in the epigraphy of the Muslim West and East. Thus, the scissors on the right may be read as a “covenant of purification,” a reminder of the deceased’s spiritual role: he “cut the knots,” purified the soul, and acted as a spiritual teacher; his right side symbolises this covenant, his spiritual power, and righteousness.

The teardrop symbol on one side usually represents a “drop of the soul” or a tear of longing for God. In Sufi poetics, a tear marks the beginning of inner purification.

The cup symbolises drinking from the chalice of divine intoxication and the rapture of love for God — a widespread motif in Persian and Azerbaijani mystical poetics. Thus, the composition is to be read strictly from bottom to top:

Book → *Dikr* → Path → Perseverance → Light of the Soul → Light of God

The presence of three schematic “wheels” on the head of a Sufi tombstone from the Islamic period in Azerbaijan, depicting two concentric circles with a row of small dots between them, primarily indicates the symbolism of the mystical *dikr* circle in Turkic and Sufi traditions. Such signs are interpreted not as representations of real wheels but as abstract schemas of rotation — ritual movement employed in brotherhoods practising collective *dikr* (particularly the Khalwatiyya, Nabatiyya, and some local branches of the Naqshbandiyya). The dots between the circles signify the gathered community, or *maǧlis* (مجلس). In contrast, the inner circle represents the heart as the centre of God’s

⁵⁶ Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*.

⁵⁷ Mortensen, “Nomad Iconography on Tombstones from Luristan, Iran.”

⁵⁸ Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*; Mortensen, “Nomad Iconography on Tombstones from Luristan, Iran”; Kazempour and Shokrpour, “A Symbolic Analysis of Islamic Period Gravestones in the Ahar Museum.”

⁵⁹ Abu Hanieh, H. *Sufism and Sufi Orders: God’s Spiritual Paths* (Amman: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Economic Printing Press, 2011), 83–88.

knowledge (*del*), and the outer circle symbolises the world (*dunyā*, دنیا) and the path (*ṭarīq*, طريق) in Sufism. Repetition of the motif three times on a single gravestone may signify the completed stages of discipleship, three levels of the path: *ṣarī'a*, *ṭarīqa* and *ḥaqīqa*. Such triple repetition is primarily found on the graves of *ṣuyūj* (pl. *ṣayj*) or individuals with the status of spiritual guides (*muršidīn*, pl. *muršid*). Thus, this tombstone most likely belonged to a member of a Sufi brotherhood, not merely a follower, but someone with authority and a certain spiritual rank.

The symbolism of rotation and the circle is especially characteristic of the Šāfi'i-Sufi milieu of Shirvan and Dagestan from the 13th to the 18th centuries, where *dīkr* was practised in the form of collective *dīkr*, often with rhythmic movement. For this reason, such signs appear in the funerary art of regions where tekkes, khanqahs, and dervish lodges operated. They are not a reminiscence of ancient solar cults — although this element was discussed in 19th–20th-century art history, modern research convincingly shows that in Islamic monuments, such motifs have an independent Sufi meaning rather than a direct continuation of pre-Islamic tradition.

Metric data reveal a stable hierarchy of monument sizes. *Ṣandūqa*-type tombstones display the most significant dimensional variability, particularly in the area surrounding the *tūrbe*. In contrast, *ṣandūqa*-s from the southern site are more standardised, especially in width, reflecting more uniform construction practices. Child burials form a separate dimensional group characterised by systematic size reduction, while grave slabs occupy the lowest position in the dimensional spectrum, with minimal thickness. These differences are consistent and do not result solely from random variation or preservation bias. Thus, the composition is to be read strictly from bottom to top:

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Architectural features reinforce this differentiation. *Abdān*-type niches are documented across all monument categories; however, their frequency, number per monument, and degree of architectural integration vary substantially. *Ṣandūqa*-type tombstones (particularly from the southern site) most consistently incorporate *abdān*-type niches, often in numbers ranging from one to three per monument. In the area surrounding the *tūrbe*, such niches occur less regularly and do not form a standardised compositional element. Grave slabs may also include *abdān*-type niches, but these are typically isolated and embedded in flat or weakly elevated surfaces, rather than becoming an architecturally dominant feature. Child burials, by contrast, are almost entirely devoid of *abdān* niches, with only a single documented exception. The almost complete absence of *abdān*-type niches in child burials appears to be a patterned phenomenon rather than a result of preservation bias. Several cautious interpretations may be advanced.

First, *abdān*-type niches may have served a ritual or symbolic function associated explicitly with adult funerary commemoration. If such niches were intended to accommodate objects, offerings, or symbolic acts associated with social maturity, lineage, or posthumous representation, their omission from child burials would reflect age-dependent differentiation within the funerary system rather than architectural simplification alone.

Second, the construction of child burials consistently emphasises dimensional reduction and architectural restraint. Within this logic, the exclusion of *abdān*-type niches may reflect a deliberate avoidance of architectural elaboration rather than a technical limitation. The single documented exception underscores that the absence of niches is normative rather than absolute, allowing for occasional deviation without undermining the overall pattern.

Third, the rarity of *abdān*-type niches in child burials may point to differences in commemorative temporality. While *ṣandūqa*-type tombstones often appear to be designed for long-term visibility and repeated interaction, child burials may have been conceived as less architecturally performative, with reduced emphasis on elements that facilitate ongoing ritual engagement.

Chronological analysis based on lunar Hijri dates further clarifies these patterns. The area around the *tūrbe* spans 1187–1316 AH, from the early Qajar period through the Qajar era under Tsarist administration (1827–1917) and into the Soviet period. The southern site is chronologically more compact, with dates confined to 1239–1319

AH, corresponding mainly to the Qajar period. No pre-Qajar burials were identified at either site. Significantly, the distribution of *abdān*-type niches does not correlate directly with date ranges but instead reflects differing regimes of site use and architectural practice.

These observations indicate that *abdān*-type niches should not be interpreted as a universal or structurally equivalent feature across monument categories. Instead, they represent an architectural element whose significance depends on monument type, spatial context, and the degree of formalisation within a given funerary zone. The southern site, characterised by chronological compactness and architectural stability, exhibits the most systematic use of *abdān*-type niches. In contrast, the area around the *türbe* reflects a more extended, more heterogeneous history of use, resulting in greater variability in both metric and architectural traits.

The combined symbolic, metric, architectural, and chronological analysis demonstrates that the funerary assemblage represents a structurally differentiated necropolis shaped primarily by spatial and temporal factors rather than by monument typology alone. *Şandūqa*-type tombstones, child burials, and grave slabs constitute three clearly distinguishable categories, each characterised by specific dimensional ranges, architectural features, and modes of use.

5.1. The Issue with the Cemetery's Name

According to residents, the cemetery was named in honour of Shahid-e Handan ("The Smiling Witness," شاهد خاندان), the brother of the poet Imadeddin Nasimi (XIV-XV centuries). Huseyn Jiddi (1981) described the ruins of an octagonal mausoleum in *Shakhandan*. According to his account, inside the mausoleum are two graves, one of which has a tombstone slightly recessed into the ground. Due to exposure to atmospheric conditions, the inscriptions on it have been completely erased. On the reverse side of the recessed tombstone, there is an image characteristic of Azerbaijani gravestones of the 14th–15th centuries.

If this is correct, then, according to Jiddi, the urban cemeteries in the 14th–15th centuries were located precisely in this area. This version is partially corroborated by other 15th–16th-century graves located there. Many of the cemetery's ancient tombstones have been lost, while some remain buried.

Meanwhile, in our view, a popular etymology of the cemetery is entirely possible. It cannot be ruled out that, in a later period, when the population of Shamakhi was predominantly Chiite, the cemetery was named the "Family of (Holy) Martyrs" (*Shahid-e Khanedan*, شهيد خاندان). Such a name correlates well with traditions among other peoples. For example, the Cemetery of the Innocents (*Cimetière des Innocents*), once one of the oldest and most famous cemeteries in Paris, demonstrates a similar transformation. Its name is derived from the nearby Church of the Holy Innocents (*L'église des Saints-Innocents*), which was consecrated in memory of the infants killed by order of King Herod in Bethlehem. Paradoxically, this name first spread to the cemetery itself and later to a nearby urban water source, the so-called "Fountain of the Innocents" (*Fontaine des Innocents*).⁶⁰

Thus, it is impossible to draw definitive conclusions about the ownership of the right-hand grave being precisely the brother of Imadeddin Nasimi. The tomb located to the left of the *türbe*'s entrance displays all the characteristic features of Qajar-period aesthetics, including the lotus-shaped finial of the stele and the lotus motifs carved on the tomb slab. Comparable funerary monuments from the Qajar period in Iran and the South Caucasus demonstrate similar combinations of symbolic and ornamental elements, including vegetal motifs, geometric compositions, and emphasised stelae, which are often associated with individuals of elevated religious or social status.⁶¹ Such parallels suggest that the complexity of the *Shakhandan* composition may reflect a comparable level of significance. The question of dating is conclusively resolved by the year inscribed in the cartouche, 1271 AH, corresponding to the second half of the nineteenth century. Moreover, it seems unusual that among the four Sufi graves surrounding the *türbe*, one bears the date 1187 AH (1773–1774 CE), while another is dated as late as 1308 AH (1890–1891 CE). Some of the earlier burials may lie in deeper stratigraphic layers. This is supported by the fact that, prior to restoration, a cultural layer more than one meter thick had accumulated around the *türbe*. Therefore, more extensive and detailed investigations are required. Such conclusions could only be made after a thorough deciphering of the epigraphic inscription on the stele. In any case, the complexity of the composition on the stele allows for a cautious conclusion that the *türbe* houses the burial of an authoritative and respected *şayḡ* of one of the Sufi orders. Therefore, more extensive and detailed investigations are required.

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⁶⁰ H. Couzy, "L'église des Saints-Innocents à Paris," *Bulletin Monumental* 130, no. 4 (1972): 279–302.

⁶¹ Kazempour and Shokrpour, "A Symbolic Analysis of Islamic Period Gravestones in the Ahar Museum."; Mortensen, "Nomad Iconography on Tombstones from Luristan, Iran."; Parvin, Afkhami, and Hendiani, "Investigating and Analyzing the Motifs of the Tombstones of the Ounar Cemetery."

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