

# Societal Dynamics and Their Impact on the Morphological and Functional Changes of Tower Tombs: A Case Study of the Jovein and Joghatay Plains

Azita Mirzaye  

PhD in Archaeology, Iranian Center for Archaeological Research, Research Institute of Cultural Heritage and Tourism, Tehran, Iran.

## Keywords:

Tower tombs  
Morphological and Functional changes  
Ilkhanid  
Timurid  
Jovein and Joghatay

Received: April 10, 2024  
Accepted: May 25, 2024  
Published: June 20, 2024

© 2024 The Author(s). This is an Open Access article distributed under [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).  
Reuse and distribution are permitted with proper citation.  
Published by Heritage of Southwest Asia Journal.

**Abstract:** The tower tombs of Jovein and Joghatay counties in Razavi Khorasan Province, as notable examples of Islamic commemorative architecture, are comprehensively identified, documented, and analyzed for the first time in this study. This study aims to introduce these monuments, examine their architectural features, establish a relative chronology, and explore the social, religious, and cultural contexts of their emergence. The research method is based on an interdisciplinary approach, incorporating archaeological data, field surveys, architectural documentation, and comparative analysis with historical and religious texts from the Seljuk, Ilkhanid, and Timurid periods. The findings reveal that the examined tombs are predominantly octagonal in plan, feature double-shell domes, and display decorative niches, with their architectural characteristics indicating construction between the mid-Ilkhanid and early Timurid periods. Furthermore, the functional transformation of some of these monuments into Imamzadehs, along with multiple structural interventions, reflects both the enduring socio-religious role of these structures and the region's cultural transformations. Ultimately, this study underscores the importance of preserving these monuments as valuable cultural heritage and highlights the necessity of further archaeological excavations and interdisciplinary studies to achieve a deeper understanding of the region's social structure and religious beliefs.

<https://doi.org/10.22034/hsaj.2025.547790.1000>

## 1. Introduction

Tower tombs in the Islamic world are not merely funerary structures but complex reflections of social organization, religious beliefs, and cultural transformations of their respective periods. Over time, these monuments have undergone morphological and functional changes shaped by political, religious, and social dynamics. In Islamic architecture, two principal typologies can be identified: square tombs with domed coverings—exemplified by the Mausoleum of Amir Isma'il Samanid—and cylindrical or polygonal towers, such as the Gonbad-e Qabus. The Seljuk era marked the zenith of this architectural form, while the Ilkhanid period witnessed its formal stabilization, and the Timurid period witnessed its continuation, albeit with diminished prevalence. The Jovein and Joghatay regions, historically part of the Nishapur province, maintained profound political and religious connections with Nishapur throughout the Islamic period. The predominance of the Shafi'i school and the region's association with the Nizamiyya madrasas, combined with its strategic location along the Bustam–Nishapur caravan route, fostered a significant cultural vitality. Nevertheless, the Mongol invasions and subsequent political instability, particularly during the Timurid era, led to a gradual decline in the region's political and cultural prominence.

Despite the architectural and historical significance of tower tombs in this area, scholarly research remains scarce. This study is the first systematic interdisciplinary study aimed at identifying, documenting, and analyzing these monuments in their architectural, functional, and social dimensions. The methodology integrates field surveys—including architectural documentation and structural analysis—with historical and religious sources. Through a comparative framework, this study situates these examples within broader regional developments and examines the transformation of certain tombs into Imamzadeh shrines as a socio-religious phenomenon. This approach elucidates the interrelationship between memorial form, social structure, and cultural dynamics within the region's Islamic architectural heritage.

## 2. Literature Review

Research on tower tombs in Islamic architecture has primarily focused on their historical development and stylistic typology. Robert Hillenbrand (2004) was among the first to systematically classify Islamic funerary monuments, identifying tower tombs as a distinct architectural type and tracing their evolution across different Islamic periods. This line of inquiry was further pursued by scholars such as Gholam Ali Hatam (2000) and Donald Wilber (1986), who examined in greater detail the structural and formal characteristics of Seljuk and Ilkhanid mausolea. Likewise, Pope (2008) and Pirnia (2004) offered comprehensive stylistic analyses of Islamic architecture, providing valuable theoretical frameworks for comparative studies. More recent scholarship, including that of Heydari Delgarm et al. (2016), has revisited the symbolic and spatial significance of funerary architecture in the broader context of Islamic art. Nevertheless, previous studies have paid limited attention to regional examples, particularly the Jovein and Joghatay tower tombs. Fieldwork initiatives such as those led by Fayeq Tohidi (1977), Labaf-Khaniki (1989), and, more recently, Azita Mirzaye (2020) have provided important groundwork, although only the latter offers systematic documentation of these monuments. Written sources, including works by Abdollahzadeh Abdollahzadeh Sani and Javidbakht (2005) and the article by Balayi and Parvaz (2017), remain largely descriptive and lack sociocultural analysis. Accordingly, the present study adopts a socio-historical approach to bridge this research gap by exploring the interplay between social structures, religious beliefs, and cultural transformations in shaping the tower tombs of the Jovein–Joghatay region.

The Jovein and Joghatay districts, located in the northwestern part of Razavi Khorasan Province, form a continuous east–west geographical and cultural landscape that has been historically identified as “Jovein” or “Goyan” in Islamic geographical sources (Maqdisi, 1982). Medieval accounts describe the region as a fertile plain between two mountain ranges, rich in orchards and grain fields, with Azadvar as its main urban center and a strategic link on the Bustam–Nishapur caravan route (Yaqut al-Hamawi, 1982). Archaeological and textual evidence confirm a dense pattern of settlements in the northern part of the plain and irrigated lands sustained by qanats.

Following the Mongol invasion, major administrative and social transformations occurred: Hamdullah Mostowfi reclassified Jovein as part of Firumad, while Azadvar declined from a city to a rural settlement, reflecting the broader political and economic disruptions. Despite its long-standing cultural and strategic significance, historical records provide limited analysis of Jovein and Joghatay architectural heritage, particularly their tower tombs. The region's adherence to the Shafi'i school and its cultural ties to the Nizamiyya of Nishapur played a key role in shaping its religious and social identity, providing a fertile context for studying funerary monuments as markers of local beliefs and community structures.

Within this area, ten funerary monuments have been identified, seven of which display the typological characteristics of tower tombs, including the Haft Tan, Imamzadeh Esma'il, Imamzadeh Qasem, Mo'in al-Din Joveini, Rivadeh, and Rah-e Chaman mausolea. Many have undergone structural alterations or functional transformations, with some evolving from khanqahs or schools into shrines, reflecting broader cultural adaptation. These case studies reveal how architectural change embodies the region's historical, social and religious dynamics.

### 3. Tower Tombs of Jovein and Joghatay

#### 3.1. Haft Tan Mausoleum (Imamzadeh Haft Ma'soum)

Located northeast of Koruzdeh village, this octagonal tower tomb represents one of the most refined funerary monuments in the Jovein–Joghatay region. The structure consists of a domed chamber with a low northern entrance adorned by stucco muqarnas. Field studies identified two successive phases of architectural additions: first, a shallow porch ( $\approx 1$  m deep) that disrupted the geometric harmony of the original octagon; and second, a deeper iwan ( $\approx 4$  m) constructed subsequently. Historical photographs also show the side chambers that were later demolished. Modern alterations, such as a new arched doorway, added blind arches, and reduced decorative precision, reflect the monument's adaptation to evolving cultural and functional needs.

#### 3.2. Imamzadeh Esma'il

Situated within the cemetery of Kalateh Mimreh, this octagonal structure has largely retained its original tower-like form. Additions, probably from the Qajar period, included an iwan with flanking rooms, short minarets, and buttressed walls. Later interventions, such as full exterior coverage with bitumen and partial reduction of entrance height, have obscured its authentic architectural identity.

#### 3.3. Imamzadeh Qasem

Located near the Sirghan village, the monument exhibits advanced decay but retains evidence of its original octagonal form, which was later altered to a square plan. The addition of a southern iwan and the blocking of three original entrances demonstrate structural and functional transformations, possibly reflecting shifts in ritual or social use.

#### 3.4. Rivadeh, Rah-e Chaman, and Mo' in al-Din Joveini Tombs

These later examples show similar octagonal layouts and varying degrees of reconstructions. Especially notable is the complete rebuilding of the Joveini mausoleum, whose documented form reveals strong typological parallels with other tower tombs in the region.

#### 3.5. Chronological and Comparative Analysis of Tower Tombs in Jovein and Joghatay

A comparative study of six tower tombs in the Jovein–Joghatay region, based on five analytical indicators—dome typology, entrance evolution, decorative evidence, historical context, and identity of the deceased—reveals a coherent chronological framework extending from the late Ilkhanid to the Timurid period (14th–15th centuries CE).

All monuments share common structural traits such as slender verticality, octagonal plans, and light double-shell domes. These features typify the Razi style of the Ilkhanid era (the first phase of the Azari school). The use of pointed kalil arches in Haft Tan and Imamzadeh Qasem further supports an Ilkhanid origin, as this form emerged in the 8th century AH.

Decorative and textual evidence refines the chronology: the presence of a griv (drum) and wall paintings in Haft Tan, along with a dedicatory inscription, indicates a Timurid attribution. Similarly, the mausoleum of Mo' in al-Din Joveini, who died at the dawn of the Timurid age, belongs to the same phase. In contrast, the simpler and undecorated structures of Imamzadeh Esma'il, Qasem, Rivadeh, and Rah-e Chaman, lacking griv or inscriptions, correspond to mid–late Ilkhanid prototypes.

This architectural continuity reflects cultural resilience amid Mongol and post-Mongolian devastation. The subsequent redefinition of many anonymous tombs as Imamzadehs during the Safavid period illustrates an ideological reinterpretation of earlier funerary monuments within the framework of Twelver Shi'ism, ensuring their renewed religious and social significance.

## 4. Conclusion

This study examined six tower-shaped mausoleums in the Jovein and Joghatay regions through field identification, documentation, and architectural analyses. The results reveal that, despite minor variations, these monuments share a coherent architectural character, typically featuring octagonal plans and double-shell domes. Stylistic and constructional evidence associates them with the Ilkhanid and Timurid periods, suggesting a relative chronology within these eras. Their spatial distribution along the Jovein Plain may indicate a regional religious–cultural network. In later centuries, several monuments were reinterpreted as Imamzadehs, a process that preserved their physical structure but altered their architectural authenticity through extensive modifications. Given the lack of prior systematic research, further archaeological investigations and interdisciplinary studies are essential to clarify the historical identities and cultural significance of these monuments.

## Acknowledgments

The tombs discussed in this article were studied within the framework of the Archaeological Survey Project of Jovein and Joghatay Counties. This project was conducted by the author in 2020 with the support of the Research Institute of Cultural Heritage and Tourism (RICHT) and the Khorasan Razavi Provincial Office of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts.

## Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the authorship or publication of this article.

## References

- Abdollahzadeh Sani, M., & Javidbakht, M. (2005). *Historical geography of Joveyn*. Sabzevar: Omidmehr. [in Persian]
- Atta-ol-Molk Juaini, Ala al-Din ibn Baha al-Din Muhammad ibn Shams al-Din Muhammad. (1988). *History of Jangosha-ye Juvaini* (Vol. 2). Tehran: Bamdad and Arghavan. [in Persian]
- Bakhtiari, S. (2007). Nishapur and its scientific role from the perspective of Yaqut al-Hamawi: A case study of the 4th to 6th centuries AH. *Quarterly Journal of Islamic History*, 8(31), 5–26. [https://hiq.bou.ac.ir/article\\_5497.html](https://hiq.bou.ac.ir/article_5497.html) [in Persian]
- Balayi Harris, H., & Parvaz, O. (2017). Study of the tomb attributed to Khwaja Najm al-Din Kubra in Joveyn. *Asar*, 38(76), 19–36. <https://journal.richt.ir/athar/article-1-697-fa.html&sw=> [in Persian]
- Basani, A. (2002). Religion in the Mongol era. In J. A. Boyle (Ed.), *The Cambridge history of Iran: From the arrival of the Seljuks to the fall of the Ilkhanate* (Vol. 5, H. Anousheh, Trans., pp. 271–288). Tehran: Amir Kabir. [in Persian]
- Belazeri, Ahmad ibn Yahya. (1985). *Futuh al-Buldan* (Azartash Azarnoush, Trans). Tehran: Soroush. [in Persian]
- Bozorgmehri, Z. (1987). Arches in Islamic architecture. In Mohammad Yusef Kiani (Ed.), *Iranian architecture (Islamic period)* (pp. 380–396). Tehran: Ershad Islami. [in Persian]
- Crassard, R., Guy, H., Schiettecatte, J., & Hitgen, H. (2010). Reuse of tombs or cultural continuity? The case of tower-tombs in Shabwa governorate (Yemen). In L. Weeks (Ed.), *Death and burial in Arabia and beyond: Multidisciplinary perspectives* (Society for Arabian Studies Monographs No. 10, pp. 173–177).
- Encyclopedia of Historical Buildings of Iran in the Islamic Period: Mausoleum Buildings. (1999). M. M. Oghabi (Ed). Tehran: Hozeh Honari. [in Persian]
- Geographic Organization of Armed Forces. (2004). *Geographic dictionary of villages: Khorasan Razavi Province, Sabzevar County*. Tehran: Geographic Organization, Ministry of Defense. [in Persian]
- Gheyoumi Bidehndi, M., & Soltani, S. (2014). Lost architecture: Khanqah in Khorasan in the 5th century AH. *Iranian Architectural Studies*, 3(6), 65–85. [https://jias.kashanu.ac.ir/article\\_111732.html](https://jias.kashanu.ac.ir/article_111732.html) [in Persian]
- Golombek, L., & Wilber, D. (1995). *Timurid architecture in Iran and Turan* (Keramatollah Afsar & Mohammad Yusef Kiani, Trans.). Tehran: Cultural Heritage Organization. [in Persian]
- Hakem Neyshapuri, Abu Abdullah. *History of Nishapur* (Mohammad ibn Hossein Khalifeh Nishapuri, Trans.; Mohammad Reza Shafiei Kadkani, Ed. & Annot.). Tehran: Ageh. [in Persian]
- Hamawi, Yaqut. (1982). *Mu'jam al-Buldan* (1st ed.). Beirut: Dar Sadir.
- Hatam, Gholam Ali. (2000). *Islamic architecture of Iran during the Seljuk period*. Tehran: Jahad Daneshgahi. [in Persian]

- Henning, A. (2013). The tower tombs of Palmyra: Chronology, architecture and decoration. *Studia Palmyrenskie 12: Fifty Years of Polish Excavations in Palmyra 1959–2009* (International Conference, Warsaw, 6–8 December 2010), 159–176.
- Heydari Delgarm, M., Bemanian, M. R., & Ansari, M. (2021). Mohammad Karim Pirnia and Donald Wilber, differences in the purposes and elements of stylistic narrative. *Iranian Architectural Studies*, 5(10), 31–48. [https://jias.kashanu.ac.ir/article\\_111768.html](https://jias.kashanu.ac.ir/article_111768.html) [in Persian]
- Hillenbrand, R. (1987). *Iranian architecture of the Islamic period* (Mohammad Yusef Kiani, Comp.; Keramatollah Afsar, Trans.). Tehran: Ershad Islami. [in Persian]
- Hillenbrand, R. (2004). *Islamic architecture: Form, function, and meaning* (Iraj Etesam, Trans.). Tehran: Urban Planning and Programming Company. [in Persian]
- Labaf-Khaniki, R. A. (1989). Survey in Ilkhanid city Aq Qala. Center for Documentation, Cultural Heritage Research Institute [Unpublished]. [in Persian]
- Maqdisi, Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn Ahmad. (1982). *Ahsan al-Taqaṣim fi Ma'rifat al-Aqalim* (Alinaghi Vaziri, Trans.; Vol. 2). Tehran: Authors and Translators of Iran. [in Persian]
- Memarian, G. H. (2005). *Survey of theoretical foundations of architecture*. Tehran: Soroush Danesh. [in Persian]
- Mirmiran, S. H. (2006). Shahid Motahari (Sepahsalar) School: A look at Qajar period architecture. *Architecture and Building*, 3(10), 102–104. <https://www.magiran.com/volume/33892> [in Persian]
- Mirzaye, A. (2020). Archaeological survey report of two counties: Joveyn and Joghatai. Center for Documentation, Archaeological Research Institute [Unpublished]. [in Persian]
- Mostowfi Qazvini, Hamdullah Ibn Abi Bakr. (2002). *Nuzhat al-Qulub* (Seyyed Mohammad Dabir Sayaghi, Ed.). Qazvin: Hadis Emrooz. [in Persian]
- Petroshfsky, A. B. (2002). Socioeconomic conditions of Iran during the Ilkhanid period. In J. A. Boyle (Ed.), *The Cambridge history of Iran: From the arrival of the Seljuks to the fall of the Ilkhanate* (Vol. 5, H. Anousheh, Trans., pp. 455–509). Tehran: Amir Kabir. [in Persian]
- Pirnia, M. K., & Bozorgmehri, Z. (1991). The dome in Iranian architecture. *Asar*, 12(20), 5–139. <https://journal.richt.ir/athar/article-1-392-fa.html> [in Persian]
- Pirnia, M. K. (2004). *Stylistics of Iranian architecture* (Gholam Hossein Memarian, Comp.). Tehran: Memar. [in Persian]
- Pope, A. U. (2008). *A survey of Iranian art from prehistoric times to the present* (Vol. 3; Ayatollah Baqerzadeh Shirazi, Trans.). Tehran: Elmi va Farhangi. [in Persian]
- Roymer, H. R. (2003). Al-Jalayer, Al-Muzaffar, Sarbadaran. In Y. Azand (Comp. & Trans.), *History of Iran in the Timurid period* (pp. 11–26). Tehran: Diba. [in Persian]
- Salari, A. A. (2020). *Art and architecture from the Safavid to the contemporary period*. Tehran: Ravian-e Miras-e Kohan Publishing. [in Persian]
- Sanaei, H. R. (2016). Social and economic status of followers of religions in Nishapur and its effect on the establishment of schools in the 4th–6th century AH. *History of Islamic Culture and Civilization*, 7(25), 117–144. <https://tarikh.maaref.ac.ir/article-1-75-fa.html> [in Persian]
- Servat, M. (1983). *A new edition of the history of Jangosha-ye Ata al-Molk Joveyn*. Tehran: Amir Kabir. [in Persian]
- Shahidi, Nazanin, & Gheyoun Bidehndi, Mehrdad. (2013). Cultural history approach and its possibilities and benefits in Iranian architectural studies. *Journal of Iranian History Association*, 5(17), 87–107. <https://ensani.ir/fa/article/324964/> [in Persian]
- Silvera, M., Tromba, M., Silverc, K., Okkonend, J., & Nuñeze, M. (2015). The possible use of ancient tower tombs as watchtowers in Syro-Mesopotamia. *ISPRS Annals of the Photogrammetry, Remote Sensing and Spatial Information Sciences*, II-5/W3, 287–293.
- Steimer-Herbet, T. (2001). Results of the excavation in Jabal Jidran, February 1999. *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*, 31, 221–226.
- The Ilkhanid State. (n.d.). Vol. 5. Hasan Anousheh, Trans. Tehran: Amir Kabir, pp. 271–288. [in Persian]
- Tohidi, F. (1977). Study and identification of Khorasan Sabzevar: Joghatai. Center for Documentation, Cultural Heritage Research Institute [Unpublished]. [in Persian]
- Vosoughzadeh, V, Hasani Panah, M., & Alikhani, B. (2016). The wisdom of number eight in Islamic art and architecture. *Javidan Kherad*, 13(30), 175–192. [https://www.javidankherad.ir/article\\_44369.html](https://www.javidankherad.ir/article_44369.html) [in Persian]
- Wilber, D. (1986). *Islamic architecture of Iran during the Ilkhanid period* (Abdullah Faryar, Trans.). Tehran: Elmi va Farhangi. [in Persian]
- Yaqoblo, M., & Nejad Ebrahimi, A. (2019). An introduction to the influence of Sufism on Iranian architecture with a cultural history approach. *Architectural Studies*, 2(12), 1–8. <https://memarishenasi.ir/fa/archive.php?pid=212&rid=13> [in Persian]