

A Survey on the Origin and Causes of the Seljuk Towers Expansion

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ABSTRACT

Research Problem:

The commemorative towers of the Seljuk era (11th–12th centuries CE) in Iran are not only magnificent symbols of Middle Islamic architecture, but also key markers of the political, cultural, and artistic identity of the Seljuk period. These primarily cylindrical or polygonal brick structures most of which functioned as tombs represent a remarkably significant architectural phenomenon. Understanding their origins, the factors behind their quantitative and qualitative proliferation, and the distinctive features of their design requires a deep and multifaceted inquiry. This study goes beyond surface-level description to pursue an analytical understanding of why such towers emerged and flourished so dramatically during the Seljuk era.

Research Question:

Did the Seljuks of Turkic nomadic background originate this architectural form, or does it have roots in earlier Iranian traditions? How did they contribute to its development? What political, social, religious, and artistic forces spurred the widespread construction of these towers across the Seljuk realm? How did the formal, structural, and decorative elements of these towers evolve in comparison with earlier periods, and what forces shaped those changes?

Research Method:

Adopting a qualitative methodology, this study combines interpretive-historical and descriptive-analytical approaches to investigate Seljuk commemorative towers. First, it contextualizes these monuments by examining the nature of Seljuk rule, their political-administrative structures, and the broader socio-cultural milieu in which they emerged; these factors collectively formed the foundation for architectural patronage. Second, it undertakes a close architectural analysis of key Seljuk towers, tracing their evolution from simple circular plans to more complex polygonal layouts, the development of two-tiered structures, and a pronounced emphasis on verticality. Third, these towers are compared with pre-Seljuk prototypes most prominently the Gonbad-e Qabus (the Qabus Dome) of the Ziyarid period, which represents the earliest monumental example of this typology in brick construction. Finally, the research surveys and categorizes competing scholarly theories regarding the origins and motivations behind Seljuk commemorative towers. These range from models emphasizing Turkic-steppe roots and Iranian architectural continuity to interpretations portraying the towers as martyriums in border regions or as expressions of Byzantine-Christian influence. Each perspective is subjected to critical evaluation in light of the historical and architectural evidence presented throughout the study.

The Most Important Results and Conclusion:

The Seljuks were not the original inventors of the tall, brick commemorative tower. The Gonbad-e Qabus, built during the Ziyarid dynasty, clearly predates Seljuk constructions and served as a singular architectural precedent. The Seljuks' achievement lay in the unprecedented expansion, refinement, and transformation of this form into a widespread and enduring symbol of dynastic power and identity. They adopted the architectural legacy of earlier Iranian dynasties especially the Buyids and Ziyarids and elevated it with striking creativity. Monumental towers, with their commanding height and volume, were commissioned by sultans, governors, and viziers as visual embodiments of Seljuk authority, permanence, and grandeur. Intense competition among Seljuk princes, military elites, local rulers, and even bureaucrats spurred a race to erect taller, more elaborate, and more lavishly decorated towers as a display of rank and prestige. Construction was not limited to the courtly elite. Prominent scholars, local rulers, and even non-aristocratic patrons engaged in building or endowing such structures as a means of preserving their legacy. This diversity of patrons reflects the complex social fabric of the Seljuk period. The presence of highly skilled Iranian architects and artisans, drawing from a deep reservoir of prior knowledge, along with substantial financial backing from the court and wealthy patrons, created the ideal conditions for dramatic advances in bricklaying, dome engineering, and ornamentation advances that, in turn, encouraged the construction of larger and more sophisticated monuments. Initially seen in the Gonbad-e Qabus, this configuration became standardized and refined during the Seljuk period. The lower level typically served as a crypt, while the upper level functioned as a symbolic, commemorative space possibly used for rituals or memorial gatherings. The double-shell dome was a hallmark of Seljuk engineering. The tall and elegant outer shell often conical or pyramidal rested atop the main body of the tower, not only amplifying its height but also creating a striking silhouette that embodied the Seljuks' ambition and majesty. While circular plans remained common, more intricate polygonal layouts gained popularity, offering greater opportunities for elaborate external ornamentation and architectural expression. In total, Seljuk commemorative towers represent a sophisticated synthesis of creative innovation and enduring Iranian architectural traditions. Recognizing the symbolic and political value of this form rooted in the legacy of earlier dynasties such as the Ziyarids and Buyids the Seljuks adopted and dramatically expanded it. They refined its technical execution and elevated its aesthetic dimension, transforming it into a hallmark of their rule. Their architectural language defined by height, dual-shell domes, and intricate brick ornamentation not only met functional and aesthetic demands, but also served as a medium for asserting political dominance and reflecting the aspirations of emerging social groups. While firmly grounded in indigenous materials and traditions (particularly brick), these towers vividly embody the Seljuk era's centralized yet competitive political structure, its ambitious spirit, and its socio-cultural complexity. They remain enduring monuments to a time when Turkic rulers, through a discerning embrace of Iranian cultural heritage, opened a brilliant new chapter in the architectural history of the Islamic world.

KEY WORDS

Tower, Seljuks, Architecture, tomb tower