



Decorative Motifs of the Gravestones in the Islamic Cemetery of Shabsavar, Izeh, Khuzestan

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Abstract

The Islamic cemetery of Shabsavar in Izeh, located in northern Khuzestan Province, with 632 gravestones and remarkable diversity in types and decorative motifs, is one of the most significant burial grounds of the Late Islamic period within the Bakhtiari cultural domain. This research adopts a fundamental and historical approach based on library studies and fieldwork. Using a hypothetical–deductive framework, typological data and motif analyses are examined within the perspectives of ethnoarchaeology, symbolic analysis, and historical interpretation. The findings reveal an exceptional variety of gravestone types, including lion-shaped stones (Shir-e Sangi), crenellated stepped types, mihrab-shaped forms, and anthropomorphic forms, each carrying distinct social and symbolic functions. The carved motifs are classified into five main groups: human, animal, vegetal, military implements, and objects. Statistical analysis indicates the dominance of Qajar-period military motifs, reflecting not only the continuation of warrior traditions among the Bakhtiari people but also the discourse of nationalism and the revival of ancient Iranian epic concepts during that era. Animal motifs such as lions, ibexes, and horses convey mythological meanings, power symbolism, and ethnic identity. Human motifs, mostly rendered in abstract forms, reflect occupational status and social standing. A rare example known as the “Mirza” motif represents teachers and Qur'an/Shahnameh reciters, highlighting the educational and cultural prestige of such individuals in Bakhtiari society. Motifs related to carpet weaving, combs, and shoes are interpreted as indicators of gender and profession. The results demonstrate that the Shabsavar gravestones serve a function beyond ritual commemoration, acting as carriers of Bakhtiari social, cultural, and identity narratives. Their study contributes to understanding the continuity and integration of Iranian-Islamic traditions in the Late Islamic period.

Keywords: Islamic Cemetery, Shabsavar Izeh, Decorative Motifs, Iranian–Islamic Traditions.

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Introduction

Cemeteries are integral elements of Islamic society, and gravestones, in their diverse forms, constitute prominent artistic features of these spaces. Gravestones are components of funerary rituals and serve as instruments for expressing identity and commemorating the deceased. Simultaneously, they reflect historical, literary, artistic, and cultural conditions of various Iranian regions and play a distinctive role in transmitting folklore concepts rooted in deep religious and cultural beliefs of Iranian-Islamic society.

The diverse forms and motifs of Islamic gravestones reflect cultural, artistic, and religious responses to the phenomenon of death. Studying their typology and motifs provides valuable archaeological insights into different Iranian ethnic groups.

The region of Izeh in northern Khuzestan is particularly suitable for examining this cultural phenomenon. Field surveys have identified 20 Islamic cemeteries in the region, containing more than 2,000 gravestones of various forms. All belong to Bakhtiari tribes, dating from the 10th century AH through the Qajar period and into the contemporary era.

Among them, Shahsavari Cemetery is especially significant due to its 632 graves and comprehensive typological diversity. All known gravestone types of the Izeh region are represented here.

This research is fundamental in purpose and historical in method. Data collection was conducted through documentary research and field surveys (typology, GPS recording, photography, and drawing). Interpretation employed both historical approaches (using written documents) and ethnoarchaeological approaches (using local oral knowledge).

Research Methodology

The study follows the hypothetical–deductive approach, characteristic of processual archaeology influenced by critical rationalism. Research begins with clearly formulated questions expressed as scientific hypotheses, followed by the systematic collection of relevant data to test them.

This approach prevents researchers from being overwhelmed by excessive raw data and instead focuses on evidence relevant to hypothesis evaluation.

The research integrates:

1. Historical Approach – Use of written documents to interpret silent archaeological remains.
2. Ethnoarchaeological Approach – Use of local oral traditions to clarify meanings of motifs.
3. Symbolic Analysis – Identification of social classes and status through symbolic representations.

Fieldwork included typological documentation, motif classification, photographic recording, and statistical analysis.

Discussion

1. Typological Diversity and Cultural Stratification

The Shahsavari Islamic cemetery in Izeh represents one of the most typologically diverse burial grounds of the Late Islamic period in the Bakhtiari region. The presence of lion-shaped stones (Shir-e Sangi), crenellated stepped gravestones, mihrab-type forms, and anthropomorphic markers reflects not merely artistic variety but a structured social hierarchy embedded in funerary expression. Gravestone form itself functions as a visual indicator of social status. The lion-shaped type, in particular, is associated with prominent tribal warriors and influential male figures, while simpler forms likely belonged to individuals of lower social standing. Thus, morphology and decoration together construct a semiotic system through which tribal stratification is encoded in stone.

2. Military Motifs and the Discourse of Valor

Statistical evidence demonstrates that military implements constitute the most dominant category of decorative motifs, particularly during the Qajar period. Motifs such as long crescent swords, daggers, spears, shields, maces, rifles, pistols, powder flasks, whips, and decorative scabbards appear frequently—especially on lion-shaped gravestones.

These motifs operate on multiple interpretive levels. At a practical level, they reflect the occupational and social identity of the deceased as warriors, hunters, or skilled horsemen—roles central to Bakhtiari tribal life. At a symbolic level, they evoke epic traditions deeply rooted in Iranian cultural memory, particularly narratives associated with heroic masculinity and martial virtue. The Qajar period witnessed a resurgence of national consciousness and a revival of pre-Islamic Iranian themes within art and material culture. The

persistence of martial iconography in Shahsavar gravestones reflects this broader ideological current while simultaneously reinforcing tribal ideals of bravery, honor, and leadership.

The concentration of such motifs on lion-shaped stones further strengthens the association between the lion—an enduring symbol of courage and sovereignty—and the martial identity of elite Bakhtiari men.

3. Human Motifs and Occupational Identity

Human figures are comparatively rare and rendered in abstract form, consistent with Islamic artistic conventions that favor non-naturalistic representation. These figures are typically depicted frontally and accompanied by symbolic objects that indicate profession or social role.

Male figures are associated with weapons, horses, or hunting scenes, reinforcing ideals of valor and physical prowess. Female figures, by contrast, appear alongside carpet-weaving tools such as looms, weaving combs (*kerkit*), and scissors. These motifs emphasize the economic and domestic contributions of women within Bakhtiari society. Carpet weaving, as both an artistic and subsistence activity, constituted a key component of tribal identity and household economy.

A particularly significant human motif is the rare “Mirza” representation. Only two examples appear in the cemetery. The motif depicts a seated man respectfully reading from an open book. Ethnoarchaeological evidence identifies the “Mirza” as a traditional teacher responsible for Qur’anic instruction, Shahnameh recitation, and administrative correspondence. The depiction of an open book—likely the Qur’an or the Shahnameh—signals educational authority and moral prestige. The rarity of this motif underscores the exclusivity of scholarly status within tribal hierarchy. Unlike martial imagery, which conveys collective ideals, the Mirza motif reflects intellectual distinction and cultural mediation.

4. Animal Symbolism and Mythic Continuities

Animal motifs in the Shahsavar cemetery are limited to quadrupeds—lion, horse, and ibex—but their symbolic density is considerable. The lion functions as a marker of strength, guardianship, and tribal heroism. Executed in abstract form, it serves both as a decorative and sculptural type. Its widespread presence suggests continuity with ancient Iranian symbolic traditions, where the lion signified sovereignty, fire, and solar power.

The horse motif, often depicted in dynamic motion, evokes mobility, warfare, and prestige. Given the centrality of horsemanship in Bakhtiari life, its representation on gravestones reinforces the deceased’s identity as a mounted warrior or hunter.

The ibex (wild goat), deeply embedded in Iranian iconographic history, symbolizes fertility, abundance, and transcendence. Its curved horns, reminiscent of lunar forms, carry cosmological associations. The inclusion of this motif suggests survival of ancient symbolic frameworks within an Islamic funerary context, demonstrating cultural continuity rather than rupture.

5. Vegetal Motifs and the Tree of Life

Vegetal motifs are comparatively rare, confined primarily to crenellated stepped stones. The most prominent example is the Tree of Life. This motif embodies continuity, regeneration, and cosmic order—concepts present in both pre-Islamic Iranian and Islamic symbolic traditions. Its limited frequency may reflect selective symbolic deployment rather than aesthetic preference, suggesting that vegetal imagery served a more universal and less status-specific function than martial or occupational motifs.

6. Gender Markers and Everyday Objects

Among the most recurrent motifs is the comb, executed in single-sided and double-sided forms. In the Shahsavar cemetery, the comb functions explicitly as a gender indicator: single-sided for men and double-sided for women. This consistent coding suggests a localized symbolic system distinct from other Iranian regions, where comb imagery may not strictly correspond to gender.

Other everyday objects, including shoes (often representing the traditional “Giveh”), appear across multiple gravestone types and for both sexes. Unlike martial motifs, these do not signify elite status but rather everyday identity. The presence of such motifs expands the semantic range of the cemetery from heroic and religious themes to quotidian life.

7. National Identity, Religion, and Cultural Synthesis

The decorative program of Shahsavar gravestones reflects the dual identity of Qajar-era Iran: national and Islamic. Religious elements—Qur’anic inscriptions, invocations, mihrab forms, prayer beads, and prayer



stones—coexist with motifs that evoke pre-Islamic heroic traditions. This coexistence suggests synthesis rather than contradiction.

The Qajar revival of Iranian antiquity, influenced partly by European nationalist movements, encouraged renewed engagement with epic and historical heritage. In Shahsavar, this ideological climate manifests in the prominence of martial symbolism and mythic animal imagery. Yet these elements are framed within an Islamic funerary structure, demonstrating adaptive continuity.

8. Gravestones as Cultural Archives

Ultimately, the Shahsavar cemetery functions as a visual archive of Bakhtiari cultural memory. Each gravestone encodes information about gender, occupation, social rank, religious devotion, and tribal identity. Form and motif together construct a structured symbolic language that transforms the cemetery into a historical narrative in stone.

Rather than serving merely as ritual markers of death, these gravestones articulate the lived values of a community—valor, piety, craftsmanship, scholarship, and honor. Their study reveals how Late Islamic material culture mediated between ancient Iranian symbolism, Islamic belief systems, and Qajar-era nationalism, preserving a layered and dynamic expression of identity.

Conclusion

Symbolic and archetypal analysis suggest that most decorative motifs date back to the Qajar period. Statistical patterns show dominance of military and object motifs, followed by human, vegetal, and animal motifs.

During the Qajar era, religious, epic, and national themes became widespread in artistic representation. A revival of nationalism and a return to ancient Iranian heritage influenced multiple artistic media, including gravestones. Iranian-Islamic identity became a defining characteristic.

Although Western influences appeared during this period, Qajar art retained strong Islamic and national Iranian elements. The coexistence of these two identities reflects synthesis rather than opposition.

Shahsavar gravestones demonstrate exceptional formal and decorative diversity. Their morphological and iconographic study provides valuable information regarding religious beliefs, Iranian-Islamic thought, historical sociology, cultural anthropology, and social hierarchy.

Motifs reflect not only symbolic and religious meanings but also geographical context and revival of ancient Iranian traditions. Religious motifs such as Qur'anic inscriptions, invocations, mihrab forms, prayer beads, and prayer stones emphasize piety. Social and cultural motifs reflect occupation, social class, and tribal prestige.

Gravestone type and decoration correspond directly to the deceased's social status. Elite individuals received elaborate lion-shaped or decorated stones, while others had simpler markers.

Overall, Shahsavar gravestones constitute a visual archive of Bakhtiari cultural identity and a tangible manifestation of Iranian-Islamic continuity in the Late Islamic period.