Research

Structuralism and Representation of the Iranian Cosmos in the Architecture of the Tarazabad Bideh Caravanserai

Zarrīn Fām
Museum Studies Biannual
Volume 3, Issue 5
Fall 2025 and Winter 2026
Print ISSN: 2980 – X924
Online ISSN: 2980 – 9541

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Received: 21 Nov. 2025 **Accepted:** 04 Feb. 2026 **Published:** 20 Feb. 2026

Abstract

The Tarazabad Caravanserai, located along the main Rey–Kerman route near Meybod, comprises diverse architectural elements developed in response to the functional requirements of the caravan system. Unlike buildings that can be understood primarily through their individual components, caravanserais are closely connected to the communication networks and landscapes in which they are situated. This study examines the Tarazabad Caravanserai through both component-based and holistic approaches, focusing on the relationships among its architectural elements and the meanings embedded in its overall spatial organization. The research employs a descriptive–analytical method based on library research and field investigation. Its theoretical framework draws on structuralism, Iranian mythology and cosmology, and studies of symbolic systems and fundamental cultural dualities. From a structuralist perspective, meaning emerges not from isolated elements but from their relationships within an integrated system. Accordingly, the spatial organization of the caravanserai is analyzed through fundamental binary oppositions, including "inside and outside," "center and periphery," "south and north," and "water and fire." The findings indicate that these oppositions extend beyond formal architectural relationships and can be interpreted as manifestations of an Iranian symbolic conception of the cosmos. The enclosed character of the caravanserai represents a protected cosmic interior opposed to the threatening exterior, while the central payab functions as a symbolic center around which peripheral spaces are hierarchically organized. The southern orientation corresponds to associations with paradise and divine forces, in contrast to the north and its association with darkness and Ahriman. The entrance sequence, including the domed elements and hashti, constitutes a mediating and protective zone between exterior and interior. Overall, the caravanserai can be understood as an individual cosmos in which architectural organization reproduces a symbolic order rooted in Iranian mythological thought.

Keywords: Bideh, Caravanserai, Meybod, Structuralism, Tarazabad.

Citation: Hemmatpour, A., & Nilnafs Genoee, Z. (2026). Structuralism and Representation of the Iranian Cosmos in the Architecture of the Tarazabad Bideh Caravanserai. *Zarrīn Fām*, *3*(5), 159-174 (in Persian).
https://doi.org/10.30481/museum.2026.587883.1085

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1. Introduction

Two broad approaches can be adopted when studying a phenomenon. The first involves breaking the phenomenon down into its constituent components and examining each element independently and in detail. The second considers the phenomenon as an integrated whole and focuses on the relationships among its components and their role in producing the overall structure. Architectural studies of historic buildings have predominantly followed the first approach, in which individual spaces and architectural elements are identified according to their specific functions. The second approach, however, considers the building as a unified body whose constituent elements are organized according to a meaningful pattern. In this perspective, the arrangement of individual elements cannot be fully understood independently of the whole, since their relationships contribute to the formation of the building's overall form and meaning.

The present study applies both approaches to the Tarazabad Caravanserai and, in particular, investigates the structure of the building and the meaning embedded within that structure in the Iranian intellectual tradition. Human settlement and the organization of inhabited space have a long history, and the selection of places for habitation has been influenced by factors such as climate, access to resources, topography, security, communication routes, and, in later periods, political, religious, and cultural conditions. In Iran, the particular geographical characteristics of the landscape contributed to the emergence of settlements and cities at considerable distances from one another. Consequently, communication networks and the construction of roadside facilities became essential for connecting these settlements. During periods of strong centralized government, including the Safavid period, the construction of caravanserais expanded considerably, and such buildings served as important infrastructure for trade and communication.

Caravanserais cannot therefore be understood adequately as isolated architectural objects. They formed parts of larger communication systems and were integrated into the routes and landscapes surrounding them. Each caravanserai constituted a segment of a broader network, while its architectural organization responded simultaneously to functional requirements and to the conditions of its geographical setting. Although previous studies have examined traditional Iranian architecture, the historical and geographical structure of Meybod, and the organization of its urban fabric, the authors note that the structural analysis of the caravanserais of Meybod has not been independently addressed in the relevant literature. The present research seeks to address this gap by examining Tarazabad as an integrated architectural and symbolic system.

2. Research Methodology

This research adopts a descriptive–analytical approach based on library studies and field investigation. The library component examined studies concerning structuralism, cosmology, caravanserais, ancient Iranian religious and mythological texts, symbolic systems, and fundamental dualities within Iranian culture. These materials were used to establish the theoretical framework for interpreting the spatial organization of the case study. The field investigation focused directly on the Tarazabad Caravanserai and documented its spatial organization, orientation, arrangement of architectural elements, spatial hierarchy, circulation system, intermediate spaces, and principal architectural features.

The analysis was conducted through two complementary procedures. First, the physical components of the caravanserai were identified, classified, and examined individually from functional, architectural, and symbolic perspectives. Second, following a structuralist approach, the building was interpreted as an integrated semiotic system rather than as a collection of independent elements. Particular attention was given to relationships, oppositions, hierarchies, and spatial interactions. The principal analytical categories were "inside and outside," "center and periphery," "light and darkness," "water and fire," and "south and north." Finally, the structural patterns identified in the building were compared with concepts derived from ancient Iranian cosmology in order to interpret the symbolic meaning of its spatial organization.

3. Discussion

3.1. Structuralism, Architectural Form, and Symbolic Systems

Structuralism provides the principal conceptual framework for interpreting the Tarazabad Caravanserai. In a structuralist perspective, phenomena should not be regarded merely as isolated units but as elements belonging to an overarching system in which their relationships produce meaning. Consequently, the significance of an architectural element cannot necessarily be derived from its individual function or physical characteristics alone; rather, it emerges through its position and relationship within the larger architectural structure. The architectural composition of a building may therefore be understood through

the identification of a symbolic system that organizes the relationships among its constituent elements and reveals the logic underlying its overall form.

One of the central concerns of structuralist thought is the identification of binary oppositions. Within the Iranian intellectual tradition, dualities also occupy an important position. The opposition between good and evil, in particular, constitutes a fundamental feature of Iranian religious and mythological thought. Within this conceptual framework, phenomena associated with life, fertility, order, and blessing are distinguished from those associated with death, destruction, and disorder. The spatial representation of such oppositions provides a basis for interpreting architectural organization as a material expression of an underlying symbolic system.

In mythological thought, abstract concepts are frequently represented through concrete and spatial forms. Spatial symbolism therefore provides a means through which qualitative distinctions can become materially perceptible. In the Iranian context, the opposition between good and evil can be expressed through spatial distinctions such as paradise and hell, above and below, south and north, and, particularly in architecture, inside and outside. Paradise represents the ideal primordial form of the good and becomes a model through which inhabited places reproduce an ideal cosmic order. From this perspective, settlements, sacred buildings, and residential structures may be interpreted as repetitions of a primordial paradise, manifested through their overall spatial form and symbolic organization.

3.2. The Caravanserai as an Individual Cosmos

The concept of the enclosed paradise is particularly significant for understanding buildings located outside urban settlements. In Iranian mythological conceptions, paradise is characterized as an enclosed and protected space surrounded by a potentially destructive external realm. The distinction between the protected interior and the chaotic exterior creates a fundamental spatial opposition. The interior represents order, blessing, light, and life, whereas the exterior represents disorder, darkness, and destructive forces. This symbolic structure becomes particularly relevant to caravanserais, which were commonly situated outside the protected boundaries of cities and were directly surrounded by the open landscape.

Tarazabad can therefore be interpreted as an individual cosmos established within an otherwise unorganized landscape. Its architectural enclosure separates the ordered interior from the exterior environment, while its spatial organization establishes an internally coherent system. The building's introverted character is not interpreted solely in terms of climatic adaptation, privacy, or social considerations. Rather, it may also be understood symbolically as a means of protecting an ordered and life-sustaining interior from the potentially destructive exterior.

The physical organization of the building reinforces this interpretation. Tarazabad is a rectangular, single-story, four-iwan caravanserai measuring approximately 62 by 40 meters. Its courtyard constitutes the principal organizing space, around which the iwans, chambers, service spaces, stables, and other architectural elements are arranged. Despite substantial deterioration, its overall spatial and physical structure remains sufficiently legible to allow its organization to be reconstructed.

3.3. Inside and Outside: The Protected Cosmic Interior

The first major binary opposition is that of "inside and outside." The introverted architecture of the caravanserai creates a clear distinction between the enclosed interior and the open exterior. The walls surrounding the building establish a boundary, while the entrance provides the necessary but controlled connection between the two realms. According to the interpretation proposed in the study, this spatial arrangement corresponds to the mythological conception of paradise as an enclosed and protected domain surrounded by an external realm of disorder.

The distinction does not imply that the interior is completely isolated from the outside. On the contrary, communication between the two realms is necessary for the functioning of the caravanserai. The entrance therefore constitutes a controlled opening in the cosmic boundary. The architectural organization of the entrance sequence provides protection while simultaneously allowing movement, exchange, and access. Thus, the opposition between inside and outside is not simply a physical division but a structured relationship between two qualitatively different spatial domains.

3.4. Center and Periphery: The Payab as the Cosmic Axis

The second principal opposition is "center and periphery." In Tarazabad, the payab occupies the central position of the building, while the other architectural elements are arranged around it and oriented toward this center. The study interprets this arrangement in relation to the Iranian conception of the cosmic axis.

According to the mythological framework discussed in the article, the connection between heaven and earth is essential to the continuation of life. The cosmic mountain, particularly Alborz, represents the principal manifestation of this axis, connecting the earthly and heavenly realms.
The concept of the center is therefore not merely geometric. The center is understood as the point through which different cosmic levels become connected. In inhabited spaces, the reproduction of this central axis provides a symbolic connection between the human world and the divine order. The organization of Tarazabad around its central payab is interpreted accordingly. The payab provides a material and spatial focus around which the internal organization of the caravanserai develops.
The peripheral organization also contains an internal hierarchy. Human accommodation is located closer to the center, while the stables occupy the outer peripheral layer adjacent to the enclosing walls. This spatial hierarchy establishes successive zones between the central element and the exterior boundary. The result is an ordered structure in which the position of each function acquires meaning through its relationship to the center rather than through its isolated function alone.

3.5. South and North: Directional Symbolism

The third opposition concerns the directions of "south and north." Within the Iranian symbolic system discussed in the article, the south is associated with paradise and divine forces, whereas the north is associated with hell, Ahriman, and destructive forces. The direction of the south is consequently regarded as auspicious, while the north is associated with an inauspicious and threatening realm.
The orientation of Tarazabad is interpreted within this symbolic framework. The caravanserai is oriented toward the south, and its entrance opens toward this direction. This orientation is therefore understood as corresponding to the symbolic significance attributed to the south in Iranian cosmological thought. The direction of the building consequently becomes more than a response to spatial or functional considerations; it participates in the symbolic organization of the architectural cosmos.

3.6. Water and Fire: The Central Axis and Cosmic Mediation

The fourth opposition is that of "water and fire." In Iranian symbolism, fire is associated with the connection between heaven and earth, while water is associated with the lower cosmic realm. Fire can function as a sacred intermediary through which communication between the divine and terrestrial realms is established. Water, in contrast, is associated with the lower levels of the cosmos and with the symbolic domain of darkness. The opposition between these two elements consequently provides a further framework for interpreting the concept of the cosmic center.
Within this symbolic structure, the presence of water below and fire above the cosmic axis constitutes a particularly complete representation of the center. The payab at the center of Tarazabad is therefore interpreted as an element capable of representing the central axis of an individual cosmic system. Around this center, the internal spaces of the caravanserai are organized into successive layers. The symbolic relationship between water, the center, and the broader spatial structure reinforces the interpretation of the caravanserai as a self-contained cosmos.

3.7. The Entrance, Hashti, and Protective Elements

The entrance sequence provides another important dimension of the structural interpretation. The entrance of Tarazabad was connected to a sabat, which also appears to have accommodated a small marketplace serving travelers and local inhabitants. The entrance zone therefore represented the threshold between the external environment and the protected interior of the caravanserai.
The domed elements located around the entrance are interpreted as protective architectural forms. In the symbolic system discussed in the article, the dome represents the sky, which protects the realm of light from the forces of darkness. The entrance sequence consequently establishes a series of protective thresholds before access to the interior is achieved.
The hashti occupies a particularly significant position within this sequence. The study interprets the number two as representing the primordial opposition between light and darkness, while three functions as a mediating principle between opposites. In architectural terms, the hashti serves as an intermediate space between the exterior and interior. Its role is therefore not simply circulational but also symbolic: it prevents direct contact between two heterogeneous spatial domains.
The octagonal form associated with the hashti reinforces this mediating function. The octagon is interpreted as an intermediate geometric form between the square, representing earth, and the circle, representing heaven. The number eight is also associated in the article with the eighth region and with the completion

of a cycle and the beginning of a new one. The entrance sequence can therefore be understood as a transition from the external realm into the protected interior, with the hashti functioning as a mediator and protective threshold.

From this perspective, the architectural structure of the caravanserai may ultimately be understood as a three-part sequence consisting of "interior, hashti, and exterior." The intermediate zone resolves the direct opposition between the two primary realms and allows movement between them without destroying the distinction upon which the symbolic structure depends. The protective role attributed to the entrance, domes, and hashti consequently complements the larger organization of the caravanserai as an enclosed and ordered cosmos.

4. Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that the Tarazabad Caravanserai can be interpreted not only as a functional roadside structure but also as an integrated architectural and symbolic system. In the mythological cosmology examined in this study, every inhabited space constitutes a repetition of the primordial act of cosmic creation and reproduces, in formal and structural terms, the same symbolic order. Such repetition is not merely an aesthetic or decorative practice; it is understood as a cosmological necessity through which ordered and sustainable life becomes possible.

Tarazabad embodies this symbolic order through the organization of its spaces and architectural elements. Its enclosed interior represents a protected cosmos in opposition to the exterior realm, while the central payab establishes the axis around which the internal spaces are organized. The spaces occupied by humans are situated closer to the center, whereas the stables form the outer peripheral layer. The orientation of the building toward the south corresponds to the symbolic association of that direction with paradise and divine forces. At the threshold, the domed elements and hashti establish a protective and mediating sequence between the exterior and interior. The hashti, in particular, functions as an intermediate element that resolves the opposition between heterogeneous realms and protects the ordered interior from the disorder attributed to the exterior.

Accordingly, the Tarazabad Caravanserai may be understood as an individual architectural cosmos whose spatial structure reflects a symbolic system rooted in Iranian mythological thought. Its meaning emerges not from isolated architectural components but from the relationships, oppositions, hierarchy, and spatial organization through which those components constitute an integrated whole.