

## INDIVIDUALITY OF ARCHITECTURAL ELEMENTS AS A SELJUKID DESIGN PRINCIPLE

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### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to accentuate an interesting aspect within the Seljukid architecture: Individuality. In different regions, buildings and scales seem to give each architectural element an own identity and hence becoming an artistic principle. Due to the scarce scientific research about the Seljukid period, especially the lack of interdisciplinary analysis, and the Seljuk's experience of a rapid development in political and cultural sense, it is difficult to clarify the reasons of the mentioned principle. In this essay some examples will be displayed of the mentioned phenomenon and possible explanations of some scholars. The research question of the author is: Is the principle of individuality in architectural elements in Seljukid architecture based on the weltanschauung and philosophy of Sufism?

**Keywords:** Seljuk, Individuality, Decoration, design, principle, Islamic Art and Architecture, Sufism

### INTRODUCTION

Richness and diversity have always been important aspects of Islamic art. The ability of the Seljuks to synthesize present architectural techniques and methods according to their new developing Islamic identity enriched the spectrum of Islamic architecture in Khorasan and Asia Minor. As Doğan Kuban writes, there has never been such a scale of diversity among the neighboring cultures, which can be paralleled to the successful synthesis of the Seljuks.<sup>1</sup>

Due to the requirements of the nomad culture, such as the geographical movement during the search for political stability, the Turks have been creating a culture, which consists of certain evolution steps. Thus it is impossible to categorize Turkish-Islamic art and architecture without considering the richness of the developments according many parameters like geo-political or socio-economical facts, as well as cultural backgrounds and domestic synthesis. Eric Schröder underlines the influence of the preseljukid period as follows:

*“The Seljuks witnessed and interfered in the dying struggles of the Samanid Dynasty, they were settled subjects of the Ilak-Khan, and entered the orbit of the Gaznewid sultans. These earlier Dynasties therefore, must be recognized as the tutors of the Seljuks, who owed to them their first acquaintance with Islam, with the arts, and with treachery.”*<sup>2</sup>

In this field of rapid change of identity from Shaman Oguz branch to war veterans of the Islamic community and the efficient transition from nomad culture to monumental architectural achievements confronts us with a very dynamic period. The key concept of the Great Seljuks was to implement and synthesise the domestic cultures. The four eyvan (iwan) concept of Masjid-I Juma in Isfahan displays this capacity properly. In Mesopotamia and Khorasan the eyvan was used in palaces as the most representative element. The Seljuks created a new mosque plan scheme by implementing the eyvan on all four courtyard facades of the mosque. This new plan scheme has been used for centuries after the Seljuks in this region.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Kuban (2010): 18

<sup>2</sup> Pope; Arthur (1939):983

Next to the four eyvan concept, there are further interesting issues of the Seljukid architecture. One of these issues is the individuality of architectural elements. In different buildings in different regions repeating elements like vaulted arches, muqarnas, minarets or patterns display clearly the intention of the architects or masters to find individual aesthetic solutions for repeating elements. The result is an artistic harmony of diversity.

## METHOD

In this study the author uses the method of comparing elements in different buildings, periods or regions. Four mosque examples namely the Masjid-I Juma in Isfahan/Iran, the Great Mosque in Divrigi/Turkey, the Aslanhane Mosque in Ankara/Turkey and the Sahipata Mosque in Konya/Turkey are presented in this paper. The research is carried out by own observation. Opinions of scholars about the analyzed buildings have been sought and analyzed. For the development of this topic, further examples in different regions have to be compared accordingly.

## INDIVIDUALITY

The most fascinating characteristic of the Seljukid architecture is visible on the arcades, eyvan decoration, the stucco works as well as on numerous domes. The intention of creating a unique identity for each architectural element is recognizable in different regions and buildings. Exact repetition seems to become a taboo in certain cases. Different reasons or motivations have been supposed by the scholars for this obvious phenomenon. One of the possible explanations for the endless motivation of finding new forms and developing of more complex and innovative structures lies probably in the weltanschauung and philosophy of that time. Following passage informs us about the level of philosophy and science during the period of the Great Seljuks:

*“The Seljukid rulers were deeply interested in sciences and their application such as Islamic sciences, philosophy, medicine, mechanic and chemistry. The particle algorithms were well developed and within the Islamic world, the tenner fraction was used in daily routine for the first time by the Seljuks. The philosophy and medicine of Ibn Sina (Avicenna 980-1037), whose lecture notes were taught for centuries in the Islamic world as well as western countries as the magnum opus of the medicine which represented the scientific level of that time. The interest on mathematics has been applied in the architecture. We know from Engineer Ebu’l- Izz Cezeri that scientist was involved into the building process especially on important buildings like the Mesjid-I Juma in Isfahan. While the dimensions represented the greatness and power, the expensive and elaborate materials wealth of the state, the muqarnas construction, the dome solutions as well as the complex ornamentation represented the high level in mathematics, geometry and building techniques. In this sense it is very meaningful that the architects were also called hisabi, which meant arithmetic in the context of engineering.”<sup>3</sup>*

There are many architectural examples for the mentioned philosophical assumption. In this paper only a few examples will be mentioned: In the 11th Century Seljuks built extraordinarily sophisticated domes. Arthur Pope, a well known expert on architecture in Khorasan emphasizes the level of Seljukid dome constructions as follows:

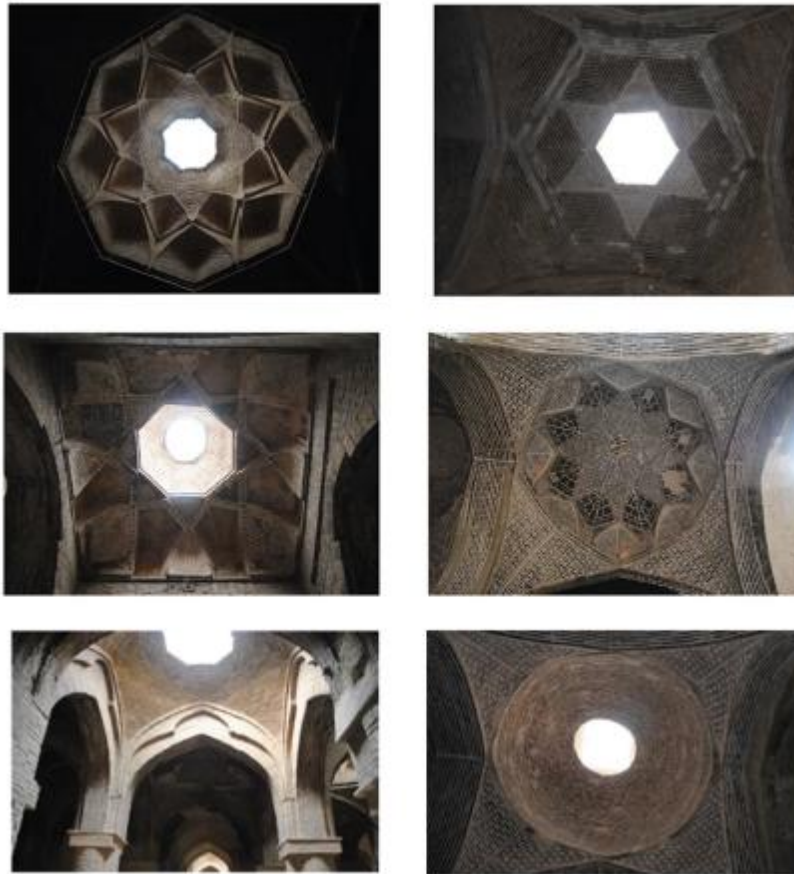
*“The two domes of the masjid-i- juma of Isfahan are incomparable in their simplicity, inevitability and forceful logic. Nowhere is a dome more perfectly united with its base, nowhere is a theme carried out with a more effective consistency.”*

Next to these two main domes of the Masjid-I Juma (also called Great Mosque or Masjed-e Jāmé ) of Isfahan there are more than 200 smaller domes. They demonstrate the

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<sup>3</sup> Simsek, Onur (2014): P.94

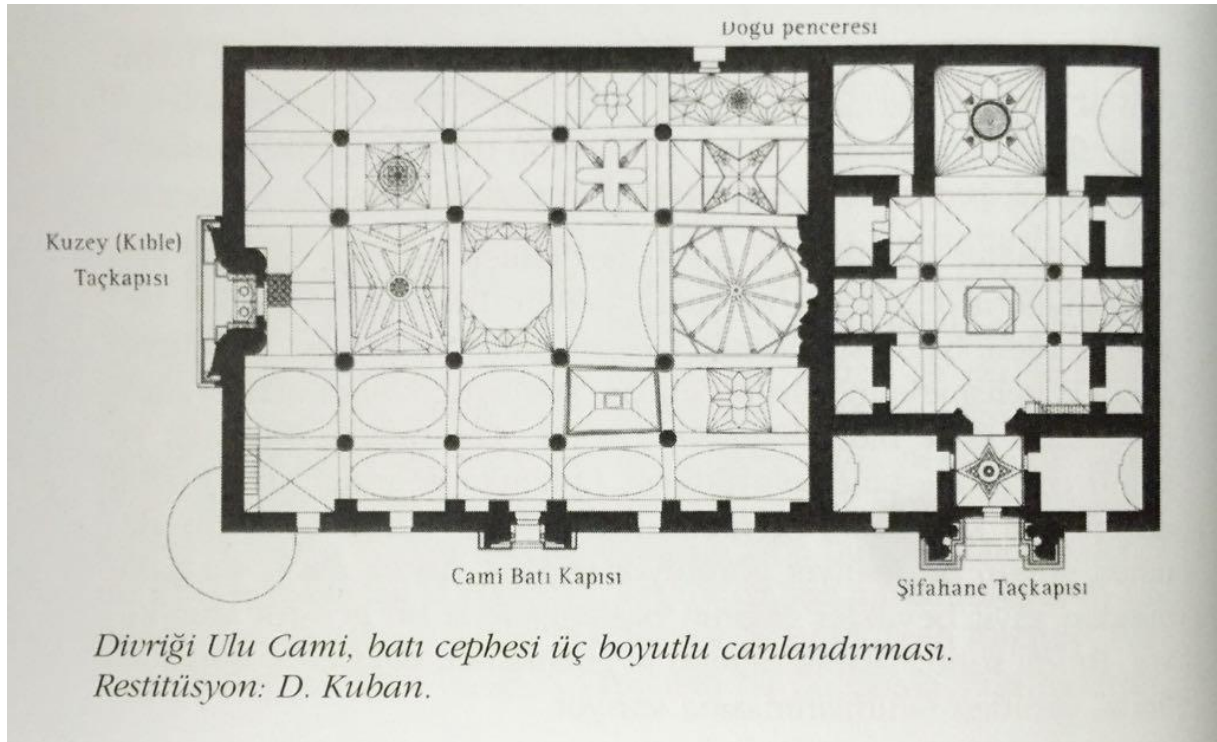
principle of individuality in a unique and impressive dimension. None of them are equal to another in their structures or images. The willingness to create a unique bricklaying method for each dome is visible even for untrained eyes. The result is a catalogue of most powerful transformations of geometrical compositions into three dimensional brick dome constructions.



**Fig.1:** Dome brick structures / decoration, Masjid-I Juma, Isfahan / Iran 2012

Kuban argues that the conquest in Anatolia was the big motivation for the fresh creativity of the Seljuks, which was not present in other Islamic countries. While continuing certain traditions from Khorasan, the Anatolian Seljuks developed new methods and techniques with domestic materials as well as construction experiences.

The phenomenon of individuality in architecture is also evident in the stone cross-vaults of the Divrigi Ulu Mosque from the thirteenth century, which has not only the most impressive Tackapi (portal) decorations within the Seljukid art history, but also cross-vaults with individual characters. Also here, even if the material changes from brick to stone, the intention of giving to each dome a unique identity emerges in the construction. Following plan displays the set of different vault solutions:



**Fig. 2:** Plan of the Divriği Ulu Mosque and Hospital  
(Source: Kuban, Dogan (2010): P.56)



**Fig. 3:** Cross-vault Stone structures, Great Mosque and Hospital Divriği, Turkey / 2012

As another explanation for the richness of vault solutions, Dogan Kuban mentions that the Christian masters with their aim to impress the Muslim rulers and their cooperation with Muslim masters can be a reason for the innovative solutions. Decorative stone vault constructions were not typical in central Asia or in Iran. In those areas the decorative brick

construction, as we see in Isfahan, were developed very well. In Eastern Asia Minor, according to the conclusion of Doğan Kuban, must have happened a combination of the stone technique of north east Anatolia and the decorative brick technique of the Khorasan and Central Asia. And Divriği was perhaps a stage, where brick and stone masters from different backgrounds worked together. Giovanni Curatola agrees with Kuban when he writes that the Seljuks used domestic masters and materials. Curatola also adds the argument that climatic conditions forced the Seljuks to new variations and new solutions. This argument may be valid for covering courtyards or roof constructions but for the given examples like the domes, vaults or muqarnas decorations climatic reasons were not relevant. Also Curatola underlines the individual roof solutions, which base on sophisticated geometrical as well as mathematical knowledge, which are put in a harmony and order. His explanation for this impressive result is the genius of the master.

The last example for the individuality within the Seljukid architecture is from one of the remaining Seljukid wooden mosques, namely the Aslanhane Mosque in Ankara. The mihrab niche in the Aslanhane mosque displays a synthesis of different decoration techniques. Plaster, tile and brick decoration are woven masterly in harmony. The muqarnas rows are constructed by very small pieces of turquoise and black tiles. Each muqarnas displays a different arrangement. The size of the tile pieces does not change. Despite the different compositions the rows build a rich muqarnas decoration in harmony.



**Fig.4:** Mihrab of the Aslanhane Mosque, Ankara , Turkey / 2016



**Fig. 5:** Muqarnas Detail of Mihrab of the Aslanhane Mosque, Ankara, Turkey

Curatola refers furthermore to the Islamic *Weltanschauung* of the one God and his infinite creature when he describes the geometrical decoration in another Seljukid architecture, the Sultan Han in Kayseri. Curatola uses the term ‘open to all direction’ and explains: open to all direction means that the decoration is never closed, rather it is open,

multi-centred and can develop infinitely, like the creation of God, from which we see just a small part.<sup>4</sup> The muqarnas decoration in the mihrab of the Aslanhane mosque supports the idea of infinity in two meanings: one is the potential of infinite development and the second is the endless possibility of geometrical combinations.

Strzygowski says, that the origins of numerous main forms, roots on lost wooden constructions or even the tent art of the nomads, got lost and we don't know (their origins). But we can discover the quality of the original ideas in those forms, which were realized in different materials. The tent construction can have an effect on the dome constructions but as Kuban says this is not enough to explain the identity of the art.<sup>5</sup>

### **ASYMMETRY WITHIN THE SYMMETRY**

The principle of individuality brings up another principle in the architecture of the Seljuks. Although architectural elements are arranged in a symmetrical form, the details of each side portray unique designs. The more one focuses on the architectural element, the more obvious becomes the difference between both sides. The scale of the asymmetrical differences varies.

As an example an analysis will be done on the portal façade of the Sahip Ata Mosque in Konya, built in the year 1258. The portal is flanked on both upper corners by brick decoration. The sizes as well as the colours are the same, but on both sides different names from the four Khalifs are written in Makili (chess kufic) style. On the right corner is the name of the first Khalif Abu Bakr repeated in turquoise colour, while on the left upper corner the repetition of the fourth Khalif Ali fills the rectangular brick decoration. Underneath those Makili decorations, nearly the same stone figures cover two windows on each side. But again, a detailed analysis shows, that the stone decoration changes above the pointed arch and each side gets an individual character. The same principle is visible on the Tackapis of the Divrigi Ulu Mosque: Kuban also points out the principle as follows:

*“Next to the richness of the decorative elements, the asymmetry of the details within the symmetry of the north wall is applied clearly and consciously. This secret quandary is accentuated on the Portal of the Hospital as well as inside on some details of the mihrab or eyvan.”*

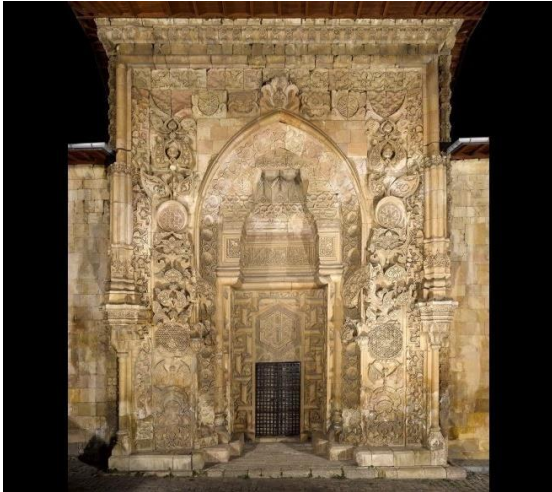
As Pope Godard writes in the following sentences, the relation of art and artist played an elementary role for the outcomes:

*“The art is neither stone, brick nor wood, neither is it word nor skilled formulation; it is more a mirror of the soul of the artist. The expression of the forces, which pilot him, gets visible form. The architectural technique is like the language which is the only means of expression and instrument on duty of the mind. Aligning the meaning of the poet to the poetry, so also within architecture, the architect plays an important role. What is important is that the architecture of a folk is the collective soul of the folk. [...] The intellect which applied the decorative formula and the construction methods indicates them better than the materials used by it. Especially in this context, we see an art, which never felt the penetration of a stronger relation to the manual aspect of its tools.”*

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<sup>4</sup> Giovanni (2010):P.31-34

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Kuban (2010): 43



**Fig.6:** North portal of the Divrigi Great Mosque Divrigi, Turkey  
(Source: <http://www.sanatsalhaber.com>)



**Fig. 7:** Portal façade of the Sahip Ata Mosque, Konya, Turkey  
(Source: [www.mustafacambaz.com](http://www.mustafacambaz.com))

In terms of *Weltanschauung*, the culture and the soul of the artists/masters, Sufism had an enduring influence in the daily life and the understanding of Islam in the Seljukid culture.

*"The esoteric Sufic tradition which enabled the performance of the profession of a meditative way must have played an important role in the fascinating creative design and their technical precise realisation. A closer look at the ideology of the Seljukid time shows strong parallels to this phenomenon. This ideology enables us to understand the existence and the truth as a unity. This means that, the existence with all its diversities, display a certain face of the truth. Every language and accordingly every reading enable a new understanding and a further cognition. As every human has a similar but individual face, as every human narrates a unique story of being, so each dome, column or ornament displays a unique sample to represent and manifest this ideology."*<sup>6</sup>

Following words of the famous scholar of that time, Ebû Bekr Tamistâni strengthens the thesis that the *Weltanschauung* was an elementary issue for the artistic disciplines or professions:

*"The artist, whose intention is to be useful with his art, builds his life in this world and after."*<sup>7</sup>

Most important figures of sufism like Ahmed Yesevi in Turkistan and Celaleddin Rumi or Ibn Arabi in Anatolia had important impacts on the Turkish understanding of Islam. The famous "Vahdeti vücud" theory (unity of existence) and the thought that every being faces an aspect of the truth have been taught in Turkish Islamic regions for centuries. Thus it is probable that the well-educated masters as Hürremshah from Ahlat transported these thoughts into their masterpieces in architectural practice.

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<sup>6</sup> Simsek, Onur (2014):95

<sup>7</sup> Simsek, Onur (2014):115

## CONCLUSION

Individuality of architectural elements within the Seljukid Architecture ranges from Khorasan to Anatolia. From decoration details to structural conception, the aim to avoid repetition occurs in numerous Buildings in different scales and regions. Whereas the fascination of this phenomenon is visible in the analysis of different scholars, the explanations of the same vary. While Kuban points on the cooperation of Christian and Muslim masters, Curatola accentuates the Genius of Hürremshah from Ahlat. But we focus on the influence of the *Weltanschauung* to the discipline of Architecture and decoration which is also mentioned in the arguments of Curatola. In order to frame the design principles of the Seljuks further multidisciplinary research are inevitable. The result will be as interesting as the architectural examples.

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