

Eurasiatica

Quaderni di studi su Balcani, Anatolia, Iran,  
Caucaso e Asia Centrale 4

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# «A mari usque ad mare»

Cultura visuale e materiale  
dall'Adriatico all'India

Scritti in memoria di  
Gianclaudio Macchiarella

a cura di

Mattia Guidetti e Sara Mondini



**Edizioni**  
Ca'Foscari



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Collana diretta da  
Aldo Ferrari

4



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Università Ca' Foscari Venezia

Ca' Cappello, San Polo 2035

30125 Venezia

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Venezia

Edizioni Ca' Foscari - Digital Publishing

2016

«A mari usque ad mare». Cultura visuale e materiale dall'Adriatico all'India  
Mattia Guidetti e Sara Mondini (a cura di)

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Edizioni Ca' Foscari - Digital Publishing

Università Ca' Foscari Venezia

Dorsoduro 1686

30123 Venezia

<http://edizionicafoscari.unive.it/>

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1a edizione luglio 2016

ISBN 978-88-6969-085-3 [ebook]

ISBN 978-88-6969-086-0 [print]

«A mari usque ad mare». Cultura visuale e materiale dall'Adriatico all'India / Mattia Guidetti, Sara Mondini — 1. ed. — Venezia: Edizioni Ca' Foscari - Digital Publishing, 2016. — 418 pp.; 23 cm. — (Eurasiatrica; 4). — ISBN 978-88-6969-086-0.

<http://edizionicafoscari.unive.it/col/dbc/5/Eurasiatrica>

## **«A mari usque ad mare»**

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a cura di Mattia Guidetti e Sara Mondini

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«A mari usque ad mare»

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a cura di Mattia Guidetti e Sara Mondini

## The Use of Quranic Inscriptions in the Bahmani Royal Mausoleums The Case of Three Tombstones from Ashtur

Sara Mondini

(Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia)

**Abstract** Three inscribed tombstones have been (re)discovered within the second royal funerary complex of the Bahmani dynasty (1347-1527), in the village of Ashtur (Bidar district), in the modern state of Karnataka, India. The finding of the tombstones *in situ* and their hypothetical dating – based on the architectural analysis of the nearest structures – call for some considerations with regard to their peculiar location in a funerary chamber under the base of one of the structures of the complex. At the same time, the examination of the content of the inscriptions and the specific choice of some Quranic verses (*ayat*) allow us to reflect on the use and recurrence of Quranic inscriptions in the Gulbarga and Bidar districts in the first half of the Bahmani Sultanate (ca 1347-1436), and on the specific meanings and powers attributed to them when associated with royal burials.

**Keywords** Inscriptions. Quran. Tombstone. Bahmani. Deccan.

It was through Prof. Macchiarella that I first discovered Islamic India and eventually 'fell in love' with the Subcontinent. In my early years as a student at Ca' Foscari University – in the early 2000s – Muslim India was overlooked and dismissed by certain lecturers. Gianclaudio, while having only a marginal interest in it, had instead grasped its appeal and, most importantly, realised just how much important work remained to be carried out on Indo-Islamic art. So it was chiefly thanks to him, to his encouragement and support, that I embarked on a 'marvellous journey' which continues to this day. The memory of the long conversations we had is what inspired my choice of a topic for the present contribution, a topic which I imagine Gianclaudio would have appreciated.<sup>1</sup>

The last survey conducted in the region of the Deccan, in October and November 2015, also touched upon the two capitals of the Bahmani Sultanate (1347-1527), Kalaburagi (Gulbarga), the first capital, and Bidar, the later one. Both sites are located in the modern state of Karnataka and have re-

**1** Note on transliteration of Arabic names and titles: while in the bibliography titles and names are reported as they appear in their original form, within the text I choose to adopt a simplified transliteration, without diacritical marks and long vowels.

peatedly been the object of my surveys. During my visit to the third and last necropolis of the royal dynasty, I focused on three tombstones with Quranic inscriptions rediscovered in an underground chamber. Although many of the inscriptions from the Deccan have been published over the years, a huge number of finds have yet to be catalogued and adequately analysed.<sup>2</sup>

The funerary complex, located just outside the village of Ashtur, 3 km to the North-East of Bidar Fort, is a well-known site<sup>3</sup> and one of the jewels of the second Bahmani capital. Commissioned between 1436 and 1527, it was inaugurated following the transfer of the capital from Kalaburagi to Bidar (Sherwani 1985, pp. 122-126; Firishta 2006, p. 257). The necropolis houses the tombs of the last eight Bahmani sovereigns, along with an indefinite number of minor tombs belonging to members of the royal family.

A first complete description of the complex was made by Yazdani, who visited the second Bahmani capital for the first time in 1915 (Yazdani 1995, pp. 114-140). With regard to the mausoleums lining the road between Bidar and Ashtur, Yazdani suggests that the larger ones on the left side of the road (North) are to be attributed to the sovereigns, while the simpler and smaller tombs on the right side of the road (South) may be assigned to the rulers' consorts, although it is difficult to come up with any precise attribution or dating (1995, pp. 114-140). The recently rediscovered tombstones, which I here wish to discuss, belong to this second group of tombs. They have been found in what appears to be their original location: an underground chamber under a rectangular basement supporting a cenotaph (fig. 1). It is difficult to ascertain whether the basement was conceived in such a way from the start, or whether it was designed as the base of a mausoleum that was never built. However, the first hypothesis seems more likely in the light of the available evidence, the context and the presence of other similar basements within the complex.

India, like the rest of the Muslim world,<sup>4</sup> offers plenty of examples of funerary chambers developing under the floor of mausoleums, usually in order to house the tomb of a sovereign or a member of the royal

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2 Various inscriptions presumably dated to the Bahmani period have been published in *Epigraphia Indica* and *Epigraphia Indo-Moslemica* mainly between 1920 and 1940; Desai published two catalogues of lapidary inscriptions found in South and West India containing material dated to the Bahmani period (1989, 1999), but he focused only on 'historical inscriptions' - without analysing material reporting Quranic passages or *hadiths* - and his attention was mainly directed to inscriptions in Persian (see also Philon 2005, p. 288).

3 Yazdani 1995; Michell, Zebrowsky 1999; Philon 2000, 2012; Mondini 2015, 2016.

4 With the exception of certain mausoleums where a marked emphasis is accorded to the crypt - as in Anatolia, where funerary chambers are raised and accessible through an external, often monumental, stairway (Hillenbrand 1994, pp. 306-311), or in other Iranian mausoleums where the crypt is apparently absent or that were conceived to house the body in an unusual arrangement. In the Muslim tradition it is customary to place the actual burial of the deceased beneath the floor of the funerary structure, or in a lower chamber or crypt.



Figure 1. Funerary complex of the Bahmani dynasty. Rectangular basement and cenotaph above the underground chamber where tombstones were rediscovered. South-eastern view. Ashtur, India (photo: S. Mondini, 2015)

household. In some cases these underground funerary chambers of royal mausoleums are designed in such a way as to be accessible: let us think here of the well-known cases of the Sultan Ghari in Delhi, attributed to the eldest son of Iltutmish (r. 1211-1236) and dated to the years 1231-1232, and the even more famous case of the Taj Mahal, patronised by the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan (r. 1628-1658), which have stairways leading to all of its underground areas (Merklinger 2005, pp. 27-29; Koch 2006, pp. 174-175). It is difficult to establish whether our funerary chamber was originally designed to be accessible, but given its very limited size and how it differs from the better-known examples of accessible funerary chambers just mentioned, it is reasonable to suppose that it was not designed to be accessed from the outside and that it was sealed after the entombment of the body.

The underground chamber where the tombstones are located may be accessed today through an arched opening on the southern side of the basement, where the ground level is lower and leaves a narrow aperture



Figure 2. Funerary complex of the Bahmani dynasty. Access to the underground chamber. Southern side of the basement. Ashtur, India (photo: S. Mondini, 2015)



Figure 3. Funerary complex of the Bahmani dynasty. View of the underground chamber from the entrance. Ashtur, India (photo: S. Mondini, 2015)



(fig. 2).<sup>5</sup> The dark space which opens up, large enough for a person to crawl in on her knees, would appear to extend exactly beneath the cenotaph (fig. 3). In all likelihood, this was the chamber housing the deceased person's grave. In his work, Yazdani mentions this space and its inscriptions in a short footnote, without discussing the actual texts or the structure: «To

<sup>5</sup> It is important to point out that during a recent survey carried out on the site - April 2016 - I've realized that the underground chamber object of the present contribution and its tombstones are not accessible anymore. The local office of the ASI (Archaeological Survey of India) has in fact provided to close again the opening in the ground in order to protect the site and prevent any unappropriated use of the chamber or damages to the tombstones.



Figure 4. Funerary complex of the Bahmani dynasty. View of the underground chamber from the entrance, tombstone in the northern/north-eastern niche with a small blind niche on each side. Ashtur, India (photo: S. Mondini, 2015)

the East of these two sepulchres is a tomb with underground vault. The walls of the latter have some Quranic text inscribed on them. The grave in this vault is that of a lady» (1995, p. 137 n. 2).

The presumed funerary chamber consists in a sort of narrow corridor flanked by small decorative blind niches, plus three larger blind niches: one to the North-Northeast and the other two set opposite one another to the Northwest and Southeast (fig. 4).





Figure 5. Funerary complex of the Bahmani dynasty. Tombstone in the northern/north-eastern niche, located opposite the entrance. Ashtur, India (photo: S. Mondini, 2015)

Despite the difficult access, dimness and the extremely poor state of conservation of the underground vault, which is filled with rubbish and filth, it is easy to notice that the three main blind niches are closed off by as many tombstones. These have an arch-shaped upper section and appear to be inscribed from top to bottom. The ground level would appear to have risen, partly covering the lower section of the tombstones. One in particular shows considerable signs of damage and is missing some parts. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify the content of the three inscriptions: Arab verses (*ayat*) from the Quran, written in a *thuluth* script – generally preferred by the Bahmani patrons (Michell, Zebrowsky 1999, p. 121).

The first tombstone (north-northeastern niche), located exactly opposite the entrance, quotes the famous verse 255 of *sura 2* of the Quran, *Surat al-Baqara*, or *The Cow* (Cortés 1999, p. 53),<sup>6</sup> introduced by the customary *basmala*. The verse in question – known as *ayyat al-kursi*, or *Verse of the Throne* (Cortés 1999, p. 53 n. 255) – is common throughout the Indian Subcontinent and the Muslim world (fig. 5).

North-northeastern niche:

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ  
 اللَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ الْحَيُّ الْقَيُّومُ لَا تَأْخُذُهُ سِنَّةٌ وَلَا نَوْمٌ لَهُ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ مَنْ ذَا الَّذِي يَشْفَعُ عِنْدَهُ إِلَّا بِإِذْنِهِ يَعْلَمُ مَا بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَمَا خَلْفَهُمْ وَلَا يُحِيطُونَ بِشَيْءٍ مِنْ عِلْمِهِ إِلَّا بِمَا شَاءَ وَسِعَ كُرْسِيُّهُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَلَا يَئُودُهُ حِفْظُهُمَا وَهُوَ الْعَلِيُّ الْعَظِيمُ

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful (*basmala*)

Allah! There is no god but He, the Living, the Self-subsisting, Eternal. No slumber can seize Him nor sleep. His are all things in the heavens and on earth. Who is there can intercede in His presence except as He permitteth? He knoweth what (appeareth to His creatures as) before or after or behind them. Nor shall they compass aught of His knowledge except as He willeth. His Throne doth extend over the heavens and the earth, and He feeleth no fatigue in guarding and preserving them for He is the Most High, the Supreme (in glory).<sup>7</sup>

The second tombstone (northwestern niche), located in the niche to the left of the entrance, features two *suras*, each introduced by the *basmala*: *sura 113*, *Surat al-Falaq*, or *The Dawn*, and *sura 114*, *Surat an-Nas*, or *Mankind*, of the Quran.<sup>8</sup>

6 *Sura* revealed in Medina, 286 verses (Cortés 1999, p. 3).

7 The English translation of the three Quranic passages is by Abdullah Yusuf Ali.

8 Both *sura 113* and *sura 114* were revealed in Mecca, they are respectively of 5 and 6 verses (Cortés 1999, pp. 826-827).



Northwestern niche:

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ  
قُلْ أَعُوذُ بِرَبِّ الْفَلَقِ  
مَنْ شَرَّ مَا خَلَقَ  
وَمَنْ شَرَّ غَاسِقٍ إِذَا وَقَبَ  
وَمَنْ شَرَّ النَّفَّاثَاتِ فِي الْعُقَدِ  
وَمَنْ شَرَّ حَاسِدٍ إِذَا حَسَدَ

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ  
قُلْ أَعُوذُ بِرَبِّ النَّاسِ  
مَلِكِ النَّاسِ  
إِلَهِ النَّاسِ  
مَنْ شَرَّ الْوَسْوَاسِ الْخَنَّاسِ  
الَّذِي يُوَسْوِسُ فِي صُدُورِ النَّاسِ  
مَنْ الْجَنَّةِ وَالنَّاسِ

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful  
Say: I seek refuge with the Lord of Dawn;  
From the mischief of created things;  
From the mischief of Darkness as it overspread;  
From the mischief of those who practice secret arts;  
And from the mischief of the envious one as he practices envy.

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful  
Say: I seek refuge with the Lord and Cherisher of Mankind,  
The King (or ruler) of Mankind,  
The god (or judge) of Mankind,  
From the mischief of the Whisperer (of Evil), who withdraws (after his  
whisper),  
(The same) who whispers into the hearts of Mankind,  
Among Jinns and among men.

The third tombstone (southeastern niche), located in the niche to the right of the entrance, also features two *suras*, each introduced by the *basmala*: *sura* 109, *Surat al-Kafirun*, or *The Disbelievers*, followed by *sura* 112, *Surat al-Ikhlās*, or *Sincerity*, of the Quran (fig. 6).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Both *sura* 109 and *sura* 112 were revealed in Mecca, they are respectively of 6 and 4 verses (Cortés 1999, pp. 824 and 826).



Figure 6. Funerary complex of the Bahmani dynasty. Tombstone in south-eastern niche. Ashtur, India (photo: S. Mondini, 2015)



Figure 7. Funerary complex of the Bahmani dynasty. Tombstone in the north-western niche with a large crack in the upper part. Ashtur, India (photo: S. Mondini, 2015)

Southeastern niche:

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ  
قُلْ يَا أَيُّهَا الْكَافِرُونَ  
لَا أَعْبُدُ مَا تَعْبُدُونَ  
وَلَا أَنْتُمْ عَابِدُونَ مَا أَعْبُدُ  
وَلَا أَنَا عَابِدٌ مَّا عَبَدْتُمْ  
وَلَا أَنْتُمْ عَابِدُونَ مَا أَعْبُدُ  
لَكُمْ دِينُكُمْ وَلِيَ دِينِ

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ  
قُلْ هُوَ اللَّهُ أَحَدٌ  
اللَّهُ الصَّمَدُ  
لَمْ يَلِدْ وَلَمْ يُولَدْ  
وَلَمْ يَكُنْ لَهُ كُفُوًا أَحَدٌ

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful  
Say: O ye that reject Faith!  
I worship not that which ye worship,  
Nor will ye worship that which I worship.  
And I will not worship that which ye have been wont to worship,  
Nor will ye worship that which I worship.  
To you be your Way, and to me mine.

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful  
Say: He is Allah, the One and the Only;  
Allah, the Eternal, the Absolute;  
He is begetteth not, nor He is begotten;  
And there is none like unto Him.

While the inscriptions have safely been identified, doubts remain with regard to those parts of the tombstones which are not visible, either because they are buried in the ground or because they are damaged. The main doubts concern the tombstone in the northwestern niche, which not only presents a large crack, which makes part of the first *sura* illegible, but also shows 'too much space' between the second *basmala* and the beginning of the second *sura*. An analysis of the characters of the inscriptions and of the use of space across the three tombstones suggests that some content is missing, although at present it is impossible to identify what this may be (fig. 7).

The choice of texts is perfectly consistent with the historical and artistic context of the first two Bahmani capitals. Although no complete and exhaustive study of the inscriptions from the first independent Deccani

dynasty has yet been carried out,<sup>10</sup> thanks to the research conducted on the funerary architecture of the dynasty it is now possible to identify choices, trends and more or less significant differences between the inscriptions from the first capital and those from the second. The surveys that have been conducted and a first partial examination of the inscriptions reveal that whereas the earliest royal mausoleums lack any significant decorative elements, already the funerary buildings erected in the second Bahmani necropolis at Gulbarga, the Haft Gunbad (ca. 1387-1422), present increasingly complex inscriptions. This genuine evolution in terms of decorative schemes reaches its high point with the mausoleums attributed to key figures of the dynasty, sovereigns such as Firuz Shah Bahmani (r. 1399-1422) – in the Haft Gunbad (Philon 2005, pp. 292-294) – and Ahmad Shah I Bahmani (r. 1422-1436) in the Ashtur necropolis (Philon 2000, pp. 3-10; Mondini 2016), or saints such as Gisudaraz (d. 1422) at Gulbarga (Michell, Zebrowsky 1999, pp. 69-70) and Khalilullah Kirmani (d. 1455) at Bidar (Michell, Zebrowsky 1999, pp. 121-122), for whom highly sophisticated plans were designed and implemented. Within the artistic production from Gulbarga, Arabic is the predominant language, although over the centuries it gradually came to be replaced by Persian first and then Urdu, as is already visible in the last artistic phases of the second capital, Bidar.<sup>11</sup> Traces of a widespread use of colour for both inscriptions and other decorative elements are already to be found at Gulbarga – let us think here of the aforementioned mausoleums attributed to Firuz Shah Bahmani and Gisudaraz – where they foreshadow the creation of genuine pictorial masterpieces at Bidar, although few of these traces survive today (Curatola 1990, pp. 195-234; Mondini 2016).

From the point of view of both inscriptions and decorative schemes, a real evolution would appear to have occurred, with a transition from what we may describe as the more ‘traditional’ stylistic choices of the first capital to the bolder experimentation we witness at Bidar. The increasingly sophisticated and experimental character of artistic production in the second Bahmani capital may at least partly be ascribed to an increased familiarity with the Persian models which had reached the Deccan by that time, along with the growing number of *afaqis*, immigrants coming mainly from Iran

<sup>10</sup> What is most useful here – together with the material collected during the surveys I’ve carried out in the region – is the data collected by Helen Philon during her surveys of the first Bahmani capital, which are presented in the Ph.D. thesis she submitted at SOAS (Philon 2005). A large number of inscriptions found in the Gulbarga district were read and translated for the first time in 2004 by Bruce Wannell; as far as I know this material has not yet been published, but preliminary remarks on the Wannell’s analysis are presented by Helen Philon (2005, pp. 288-296).

<sup>11</sup> For an in depth analysis of the use of Arabic and Persian in Indian inscription see O’Kane 2009, 2012 and also Qutbuddin 2007.



and Iraq. These models spread and were gradually assimilated. Although, to the best of my knowledge, no detailed and complete analysis has ever been conducted of the inscriptions from the Gisudaraz mausoleum<sup>12</sup> or the mausoleums that make up the Haft Gunbad<sup>13</sup> – the structures that present the most complex range of inscriptions in the city – the mausoleums at Gulbarga would appear to feature a repertoire that chiefly consists of Quranic inscriptions and the use of the 99 names of God (*asma' al-husna*), with the Arabic language playing a dominant role. Only in the buildings at Bidar do more sophisticated, non-Quranic texts make their appearance, as Persian acquires increasing importance.<sup>14</sup>

In the light of these considerations, then, the recently rediscovered tombstones would appear to display a repertoire which is perfectly consistent with the local tradition.

Although they are located at Ashtur – and may therefore be associated with the more elaborate artistic tradition inaugurated in the second Bahmani capital – given their position, the tombstones, and hence the tomb in question, are probably to be attributed to a figure of second-rank within the royal court, which would explain the less flamboyant nature of the inscriptions (and of the structure). The studies conducted so far have confirmed the above-mentioned attributions suggested by Yazdani, according to whom the rulers were buried on the left side of the road and other members of the royal household on the right. This general scheme is first of all confirmed by the size and artistic quality of the structures, and only seems to waver in the final stages of development of the complex, by which time the last sovereigns of the dynasty had lost much of their power and had fallen under the control of their Barid ministers – the founders of the dynasty which shortly afterwards rose to the throne, establishing itself at Bidar (ca. 1504-1619) (Firishta 2006, pp. 320-342; Sherwani 1985, pp. 122-126). This general scheme and the linear and chronological arrangement of the structures may suggest a hypothetical date and attribution for the tomb under investigation. In the early stages of development of the complex, the members of the royal household would appear to have

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**12** The case of Gisudaraz's mausoleum is significant, insofar as it reveals that conservation issues are as alive as ever in the region. The paintings on the vault of the mausoleum of one of the most famous saints of south-central India have been arbitrarily replaced by a recent mirror decoration, which has spoiled their original taste and artistic value.

**13** Here too mention should be made of the cataloguing and analysis work carried out by Philon (2005), which represents a first important step for future studies on the architectural heritage of the Deccan, but also for an accurate analysis of the early Bahmani inscriptions.

**14** No doubt, linguistic and stylistic developments of this sort accompanied the process of profound social transformation which occurred in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, when a growing number of immigrants from Central Asia settled in the Deccan, acquiring power and prestigious offices (Coslovi 1990; Eaton 2008, pp. 59-70).

been buried in the immediate vicinity of the sovereign: for example, the structures attributed to the son and consort of Ahmad Shah I Bahmani (r. 1422-1436), whose mausoleum inaugurated the complex, are respectively located opposite and to the side of – but not on the same axis as – the sovereign's tomb (Yazdani 1995, pp. 128-130). Moreover, it is important to bear in mind that in the Indo-Islamic context the cenotaphs of men, women and children usually differ in shape and size, which makes them immediately recognisable. Judging from the shape of the cenotaph, it is reasonable to hypothesize that it belongs to a woman, as suggested by Yazdani (1995, p. 137 n. 2). Its position opposite the two mausoleums attributed to Muhammad Shah III Lashkari (r. 1463-1482) and Mahmud Shah Bahmani (r. 1482-1518) – respectively to the Southwest of the former and Southeast of the latter – and only a short distance away from the two small mausoleums attributed to Ahmad Shah (r. ca. 1518-1521) and 'Alauddin (r. ca. 1521-1523/4), two puppet kings placed on the throne by the cruel minister Amir Barid (d. 1543),<sup>15</sup> suggests that the tomb could date from sometime between the last decades of the fifteenth century and the early decades of the sixteenth.

The choice of texts for the three tombstones, then, appears to be not only consistent with the local tradition and trends of the period, but also adequate for the person they are designed to commemorate, and hence wholly effective.

Verse 255 of *sura 2*, which is inscribed on the tombstone in the north-northeastern niche, frequently occurs in inscriptions in the Muslim world and is a common choice for funerary chambers throughout the Subcontinent. In the specific case of the complex to which the tombstones under investigation belong, the *ayyat al-kursi* also appears on a tombstone now housed in the mausoleum attributed to Ahmad Shah I Bahmani (r. 1422-1436). According to local authorities, the tombstone in question was brought to light during recent excavation near a sacred spring that is believed to be charged with the healing powers of the *wali*-sovereign Ahmad Shah I Bahmani (r. 1422-1436) – powers which over the centuries were extended to the site as a whole.<sup>16</sup> Many *hadiths* confirm the importance and popularity of *Surat al-Baqara* and of this verse in particular, which is often presented as one of the most widely appreciated passages from the

**15** In 1504, following the death of his father Qasim Barid (d. 1504), Amir Barid (d. 1543) assumed control of Bahmani administration. In 1527, with the flight from Bidar of the last Bahmani ruler Kalimullah (r. 1525-1527), Amir Barid became practically independent and was succeeded in 1543 by his son Ali Barid, who was the first to assume the title of 'Shah' (Alfieri 1994, p. 136; Yazdani 1995, p. 137).

**16** Today this tombstone is venerated by the faithful visiting the tomb of Ahmad Shah I Bahmani (Mondini 2015, pp. 138-139).

Quran.<sup>17</sup> The verse is often recited in moments of difficulty and used as a talisman because of the protective powers which are attributed to it – and to the *sura* as a whole.<sup>18</sup>

*Suras* 113 and 114, inscribed on the tombstone in the northwestern niche, are most commonly known as the *suras* of ‘refuge’ («le preservatri«ci», Bausani 1999, p. 737), after the term mentioned in the first verse of each. Held in high regard by tradition, they have been assigned to the end of the first Meccan period or the beginning of the second one by several distinguished orientalist, although some scholars assign them to the Medina period (Bausani 1999, p. 737). Frequently recited together and also known as *al-Mu’awwidhatain*, they are believed to carry healing powers and are therefore inscribed on amulets in order to ward off evil – typically physical evils in the case of *sura* 113 and spiritual ones in the case of *sura* 114. Several *hadiths* state that the Prophet used to recite them before going to bed or when ill, and then pass his hands over his body (Bukhari 1997c, p. 439 *hadith* no. 5016; Bukhari 1997d, p. 356 *hadith* no. 5751, pp. 348-349 *hadith* no. 5735; Bukhari 1997e, p. 187 *hadith* no. 6319). Some *hadiths*, moreover, explicitly note that the recitation of these two *suras* is recommended as a mean to protect oneself against the «jinn and the evil eye».<sup>19</sup>

On the tombstone in the southeastern niche we find *sura* 109, *Surat al-Kafirun*, which in the *hadith* tradition is considered to be worth a fourth of the Quran (Tirmidhi 2007, p. 229 *hadith* no. 2893, p. 215 *hadith* no. 2875, pp. 230-231 *hadith* no. 2895). This *sura* is followed by *sura* 112, *Surat al-Ikhlās*. As it expresses the uniqueness of God, it was originally used against those pagan Arabs who attributed daughters to God, but was later also directed against the Christians and certain Jews (Cortés 1999, p. 826 n. 3). Tradition has it that although it is very short, its recitation is worth that of a third of the Quran (Nawawi 2006, p. 187 *hadith* no. 1014, no. 1015, no. 1016).<sup>20</sup> It is noteworthy that, as in the case of the juxtaposition of *suras* 113 and 114, the juxtaposition of *suras* 109 and 112

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**17** See for example Tirmidhi 2007, p. 223 *hadith* no. 2884, pp. 218-219 *hadith* no. 2878; Nawawi 2006, p. 188 *hadith* no. 1023 (Muslim).

**18** See for example Tirmidhi 2007, pp. 219-220 *hadith* no. 2879, pp. 220-221 *hadith* no. 2880; on protection from Satan, see also Bukhārī 1997b, p. 304 *hadith* no. 3275; Bukhārī 1997c, p. 436 *hadith* no. 5010; Bukhari 1997a, pp. 287-289 *hadith* no. 2311; see also Nawawi 2006, p. 188 *hadith* no. 1022 (Muslim).

**19** «Abu Sa’id Khudri relates that the Holy Prophet used to seek protection against the *jinn* and the evil eye till *suras* *Al-Falaq* and *An-Nas* were revealed. After they were revealed he took to them and distracted everything beside them (Tirmidhi)» (Nawawi 2006, p. 188 *hadith* no. 1019).

**20** The *hadith* no. 1014 and no. 1015 are taken by Bukhari, while the no. 1016 is taken by Muslim.

featured by the tombstone under investigation is rooted in tradition. In particular, certain collections of *hadiths*, like *Sahih Muslim* (Muslim 2003, p. 174 *hadith* no. 726, pp. 300-302 *hadith* no. 1218) and even more prominently so the ones of Tirmidhī and Ibn Majah<sup>21</sup> – recalled by the *Riyad as-Salihin* (Nawawi 2006) – suggest the joint recitation of the two *suras*. Some *hadiths* combine three of the *suras* featured on our tombstones, *suras* 112, 113 and 114 (respectively, *Surat al-Ikhlās*, *Surat al-Falaq* and *Surat an-Nas*), crediting all three with healing powers (Bukhari 1997c, p. 439 *hadith* no. 5017; Bukhari 1997d, p. 354 *hadith* no. 5748) or implying that their joint recitation suffices for faithful Muslims.<sup>22</sup> Other *hadiths* instead combine 109 with 113 and 114, thereby providing what is perhaps the guiding thread behind the choice of texts for the tombstones at Ashtur (Ibn Maja 2007a, p. 208 *hadith* no. 1173).

We may conclude that through their arrangement and choice of texts, the tombstones in question were designed to guard and protect the deceased, not only by providing some comfort from the torment of entombment (Leisten 1990),<sup>23</sup> but also by warding off evil spirits. The tombstones contribute to affirming the religious identity of the deceased through those key passages which ensured the fame of the selected *suras* and their pre-eminence within the Muslim tradition. The small selection of texts carries remarkable strength and evocative power: by asserting the uniqueness of God – «ungenerated» and «ungenerating» (*sura* 112, verse 3) – and His nature as a «refuge» for believers (*suras* 113 and 114 verses 1), not only does it symbolically express the significance of the Quranic text (almost) in its entirety, but confirms the cornerstones of the Islamic faith.

**21** Ibn Majah 2007a, p. 32 *hadith* no. 833, p. 193 *hadith* no. 1148, p. 194 *hadith* no. 1149, p. 194 *hadith* no. 1150, p. 204 *hadith* no. 1166, p. 207 *hadith* no. 1171, p. 207-208 *hadith* no. 1172; Ibn Maja 2007b, pp. 220-229 *hadith* no. 3074.

**22** «Abdullah ibn Khubaib relates that the Holy Prophet said to him: Recite the *Surat Al-Ikhlās* and the two chapters following it three times, morning and evening, and they will suffice thee in all respects (Abu Dawud and At-Tirmidhi)» Nawawi 2006, pp. 244-245 *hadith* no. 1461. The 'the two chapters following it' mentioned are the *Al-Mu'awwidhatain* (i.e. the *Surat Al-Falaq* and *Surat An-Nas*).

**23** The remarkable spread of mausoleums throughout the Muslim world notwithstanding, as they are nowhere mentioned in the Quran, their construction has always been opposed and condemned by the *hadiths* and by the more orthodox commentators and jurists.



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