

Soltaniyeh (Iran)

No 1188

1. BASIC DATA

State Party: Islamic Republic of Iran

Name of property: Soltaniyeh

Location: Zanjan province

Date received: 29 January 2004

Category of property:

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a monument.

Brief description:

The mausoleum of Oljaytu was constructed in 1302-12 in the city of Soltanieh, the capital of the Ilkhanid dynasty. The mausoleum is a key monument in the development of Islamic architecture in Persia, and it is characterised by the innovative design of its double-shelled dome and its interior decoration.

2. THE PROPERTY

Description

The nomination is described as: the *Dome of Soltaniyeh; the pasture which became the capital city of the empire*. The ancient city of Soltaniyeh is located in the province of Zanjan, some 240km from Tehran in north-western Iran. The city of Soltaniyeh was the capital city of the Ilkhanid Mongol tribes for a short period in the early 14th century. The principal monument of the city was the Mausoleum of Oljaytu (Üljaitü) (Ilkhanid Sultan 1304-16), constructed from 1302 to 1312. The mausoleum is the main feature remaining from the ancient city, and today it stands in the middle of a rural settlement, surrounded by fertile meadows, the pasture of Soltaniyeh.

The Mausoleum of Oljaytu is the main feature of the nominated property. The building is octagonal in form, and it rises to a stunning high profile dome, covered with turquoise blue faience tiles. The dome is over 50m tall, measuring externally 38m and having an internal diameter of 25m. Built from 1302 to 1312, this structure represents the earliest existing example to the development of the double dome in Iran. The dome has no buttresses nor any additional thickness, and it is surrounded by eight slender minarets as a decorative feature. A wide band of square Kufic around the drum makes a transition between the light blue and the lapis lazuli blue of the main stalactite cornice. The second-storey galleries of the mausoleum open outwards, anticipating, according to A.U. Pope, e.g. Taj Mahal. "Its imposing scale provides for an interior of great power. Here space is ample and majestic - not mere emptiness but space more intensely realized than an open landscape. The walls, though 25 feet thick, are made less conspicuous by the stately rhythm of eight huge and

soaring arches. Mediated by shallow stalactites, the angles between these arches seem to melt quietly into the circular base of the enormous dome. All components are fused into a unity of serene grandeur." (Pope, 1965: 172) Structurally the building is considered a masterpiece. The interior walls were originally faced with light golden-toned bricks and dark blue faience tiles to form large inscriptions in Kufic. However, in 1313, it was redecorated with plaster, using a rich variety of fine ornaments, often worked in low relief. The second phase of the decoration belongs to the period when the use of the monument as a Shia shrine was given up. The decoration of the exterior belongs to the first phase.

The immediate surroundings of the mausoleum consist of a stone terrace in the form of a citadel (*Arg*), 295x315m = ca. 18ha. Originally, the citadel was surrounded by a 30m wide moat. Today this is an archaeological site.

The *Old city of Soltaniyeh* was founded as the capital of Oljaytu, succeeding to Tabriz. It was built very rapidly to great splendour. Today, only some remains are testimony to the ancient glory. The main structures are included in the buffer zone of the nominated area, and are briefly mentioned below:

The Mausoleum of Sultan Chelebi Oghlu is a brick structure located southwest of Oljaytu. The tomb tower is octagonal and there is a crypt chamber underneath. It was built to a celebrated disciple of Jalal-eddin Rumi, the great Persian mystic and philosopher, and it is dated in the 1330s. *The Mausoleum of Mullah Hassan Kāshī* is located south of Soltaniyeh. It was built to a religious figure and poet at the court of Oljaytu. The building is octagonal in its exterior and it contains a square hall. The interior stalactite decoration was done at the time of Fath-Ali Shah Qajar in the early 19th century. *The remains of Ghazan's tomb at Tappeh Nur* and its adjacent remains known as Tappeh Nur Kuchak, southeast of Oljaytu, form an archaeological mount (*tappeh*), 15m high, covering an area of 1.8ha.

The Pasture: In historic texts the area of Soltaniyeh was called the "Prairie of the Alezans" or the "Falcon's Hunting Ground". The special nature of these meadows is due to the soil that prevents the entire absorption of rain water. As a result, it was especially fertile pasture, particularly appropriate for horse breeding. This was also one of the reasons for the establishment of the city in this location. The area is some 2 x 20km (ca. 35km²), and the main part forms the landscape protection area of the nominated site.

History

In the 13th century, Persia was devastated by the Mongol invasions. They captured Baghdad in 1258, terminating the Abbasid caliphate there. They also founded the Ilkhanid Empire in Persia with the capital in Tabriz, in the north-western part of present-day Iran. The title "*ilkhan*" indicated: 'subordinate or peaceful khan' in deference to the Great Khan in China. After Kublai Khan died in 1294, and the Ilkhanids converted to Islam, the links with China became weaker. The Ilkhanid dynasty governed Persia until 1335.

There is archaeological evidence that the site of Soltaniyeh had been occupied at least from the first millennium BC.

The construction of a settlement however only started by the Ilkhanid dynasty around 1290. The fourth Mongol ruler in Persia, Arqun Khan, decided to build a summer residence in this region, because it offered good hunting grounds and rich pastures for horse breeding. His son, Qazan Khan, had a mausoleum built over his tomb, now known as Tappeh Nur. There is little information about the beginnings of the new settlement until Oljaytu (later Sultan Muhammad Khodabandeh) came to power in 1304 and decided to enlarge the city and make it his capital, naming it Soltaniyeh, the “Imperial”. Together with Tabriz, Soltaniyeh became a major trading centre on the route between Asia and Europe. The principal phase of construction was completed by 1313.

The Ilkhans had converted to Shi'ism, and they are believed to have wanted to transfer the relics of Calif Ali and his son, Hussein, from Baghdad to Soltaniyeh. This never happened, though, and the shrine became the mausoleum of Oljaytu instead. After the death of Oljaytu in 1316, the city started losing in importance, and later it fell in the hands of small local dynasties. In 1384, Tamerlan's army seized the city and sacked it, but spared Oljaytu's mausoleum. In the following years, the city suffered, though it continued to function as a commercial centre comparable to Tabriz. In the 16th and 17th centuries, Soltaniyeh gradually declined and remained in ruins. Only a rural village was built over the remains. Some restoration was undertaken in Oljaytu's Mausoleum in the 19th century. At the same time, the plain served as an instruction camp for the army of Qajar kings.

Management regime

Legal provision:

The nominated property and the major monuments in the buffer zone are state property and directly under the authority of the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization (ICHO). Parts of the buffer zones are in private ownership.

Soltaniyeh is included on the National Heritage List of Iran, and is thus subject to relevant laws. These include the Law of Conservation of National Monuments (1930), the Law of Foundation of National Council of City Constructing and Architecture, and the Law of City Properties (1982).

Management structure:

The management of the site is the responsibility of the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization, and particularly its local office in Zanjan.

There is a management plan with short-term, mid-term and long-term objectives.

Resources:

The site of Soltaniyeh is currently one of the ten major conservation/restoration projects in Iran, financed by ICHO. This includes maintenance, restoration and research, as well as the wages of the personnel and ordinary running costs. The current personnel is some 120 persons, including administrators and professionals, as well as workmen and guards.

Justification by the State Party (summary)

The nomination document stresses the nature of the exceptionally fertile pasture lands of the Soltaniyeh area. This had attracted people from the ancient times, and it was the reason why the Mongol Ilkhans settled here, being nomadic horse-riding people.

Secondly, the nomination stresses the architectural and structural merits of the brick dome of the mausoleum, the largest in Iran, which has given the name to the entire building: Gönbad-e Soltaniyeh (the Dome of Soltaniyeh).

Thirdly, the uniqueness of the interior decoration is given praise. This extremely rich decoration uses glazed tiles, brickwork, marquetry or designs in inlaid materials, stucco work and frescoes, extending to some 9000 square meters.

Criterion ii: Development of architecture as one of the first, if not the first, example of double-shelled domes, which paved the way in erecting very elevated domes on religious monuments. A decisive step in decoration of monuments, where tiles are extensively used both in the interior and the exterior of the building.

Criterion iv: An outstanding case of an original town planning satisfying both the natural and social needs of a cosmopolite society. Soltaniyeh is a rare, if not unique, example of an architectural complex created in relation with its surrounding landscape (the site and the Pasture). The two interrelated components were taken in consideration to meet the needs of nomadic peoples (Mongols and their followers) as well as a sedentary (Persian) society often in total opposition.

3. ICOMOS EVALUATION

Actions by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited the property in September 2004.

ICOMOS has also consulted its International Scientific Committee on Archaeological Heritage Management.

The nomination was originally serial including some minor monuments together with the Mausoleum of Oljaytu. Subsequently, the State Party decided to change it into a single nomination, focusing on the Mausoleum of Oljaytu and including the other monuments in the buffer zone.

Conservation

Conservation history:

The city of Soltaniyeh lost its importance particularly from the 16th century, and was in ruins in the 17th century. The Mausoleum of Oljaytu, instead, remained standing, and it is now the major landmark in this landscape. At the same time, its exterior finishes were lost in part, and the interior decoration also suffered. The surrounding citadel and remaining parts of the ancient Soltaniyeh form now an archaeological area.

State of conservation:

The Mausoleum of Oljaytu was subject to a restoration campaign from 1969 to 1979 jointly with an Italian team, directed by Prof. Sanpaolesi. At this time, major attention

was given to structural stabilisation. From 1994, the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization has initiated a systematic research and conservation programme on the site. This has involved the conservation and restoration of the interior decoration, as well as the arrangement of the remains of the citadel area. At the moment, the condition of the Mausoleum is satisfactory. It is subject to maintenance and conservation by a permanent team of specialists.

Management:

The nominated core zone is surrounded by inner and outer buffer zones. The ensemble and the associated pasture land are included within a large landscape buffer zone. The property is under the direct management of the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization. A management plan has been prepared for the site, and the property is subject to one of the major conservation programmes in the country.

Risk analysis:

The site of the ancient city of Soltaniyeh is now covered by a modest present-day township. The general nature of the area as a pasture land used for local cattle and livestock has been respected until the present. There is no pollution in this region, but the climate has an impact on the mausoleum, considering that there is snow and frost as well as abundant rainfall. The region is subject to seismic hazard, even though no serious earthquake has been recorded in the past decades. There is no tourism pressure, though the number of visitors is slowly increasing.

Authenticity and integrity

The ancient city of Soltaniyeh is today an archaeological area, partly remaining under the present-day small township. The most important standing monuments are the mausoleums, of which the Mausoleum of Oljaytu is the real focus of the nominated property.

Even though the Mausoleum of Oljaytu has suffered over the centuries, it has retained its overall formal and structural integrity. Unfortunately, much of its external decoration has been lost, but the interior is still in reasonable state of conservation. The recent restoration has been carried out correctly respecting the authenticity of the historic material.

Comparative evaluation

The history of architecture presents the Mausoleum of Oljaytu as the most remarkable achievement of the Ilkhanid Mongol period in Persia. A.U. Pope calls it “one of Persia’s supreme architectural achievements” (Pope, 1965: 172). S. Blair and J. Bloom present it as “one of the masterpieces of world architecture” (Hattstein, 2000: 396). The building is important as a key reference in the development of the Islamic architecture from the Seljuk period (11th to early 13th centuries) to the Timurid period (late 14th to 15th centuries; e.g. Khoja Ahmed Yasawi Mausoleum in Kazakhstan, Bukhara and Samarqand).

Due to destruction by the Mongol army, there was relatively little building activity in Persia in the 13th century. The Ilkhanids start a new phase towards the end

of the century, further developing the ideas introduced by the Seljuks.

The importance of the mausoleum of Oljaytu is seen above all in the innovative design of the double shelled dome structure, as well as in its rich interior decoration. The Ilkhanid dynasty undertook several construction works, including the mosques of Tabriz, Varamin and Yazd, a fine mihrab in Isfahan, as well as the adaptation of the Zoroastrian sanctuary at Takht-e Sulaiman into a summer palace. Within this period, but also in the framework of Persian architecture in general, the Mausoleum of Oljaytu is distinguished as outstanding. In fact, outside Iran, the significance of the Dome of Oljaytu has been paralleled to the construction of the dome of the cathedral of Florence by Brunelleschi, completed half a century later.

Outstanding universal value

General statement:

The great Mausoleum of Oljaytu was built in Soltaniyeh, the capital city of the Ilkhanid dynasty, in the early 14th century. This construction is recognized as the most significant of this period in Persia and a key monument in the history of Islamic architecture. Visually it is one of the most impressive standing remains from the medieval period in Iran. It is particularly significant due to the innovative design of its double-shelled dome and its interior decoration, and has been recognized as a major reference in the evolution of Islamic architecture. Its success led masons to experiment further, culminating in the early fifteenth century with domes rising from intersecting arches. The applied decoration is virtually a ‘museum’ of glazed tile work and painted stucco. It was in this period that the brilliant mosaic faience for which Iran is so famous was being developed. The palette was expanding. However, while many monuments in Iran were painted, few mural paintings have survived.

The monument is also important because of its documentary value, and the light it sheds on the political, social, and religious history of the Ilkhanid period. The mausoleum is the main structure with a few minor buildings that remain as a testimony from this ancient capital city. Even though most of the city has been lost, its remains are a valuable archaeological resource. The relationship of the tall domed Mausoleum of Oljaytu with the surrounding meadows and pasture land has been retained until the present day.

Evaluation of criteria:

Criterion ii: The Mausoleum of Oljaytu can be seen as an essential link in the development of the Islamic architecture in central and western Asia, from the classical Seljuk phase into the Timurid period. It is probable that the idea of a double-shell structure would have been introduced earlier. However, the Mausoleum of Oljaytu remains the earliest known example of this type of structure, and it became an important reference for the later development of the Islamic dome. Similarly, the decoration of the mausoleum indicates an important phase toward a more elaborate use of materials and themes, as well as being an outstanding example of this.

Criterion iv: The nomination document stresses the importance of the town planning scheme in relation to the

surrounding pasture landscape. There is also a mention of the multicultural relationship of the nomadic Mongol tribes and the sedentary Persian society. More relevant than the town plan is the Mausoleum of Oljaytu itself, which has been recognized as an outstanding achievement in architecture, reflecting the innovative engineering structure, spatial proportions, architectural forms and the decorative patterns and techniques.

Criterion iii: While not proposed in the nomination document, this criterion is considered applicable taking into account the importance of Soltaniyeh as the ancient capital of the Ilkhanid dynasty, and the light it throws on the period. A large part of the site has retained its archaeological character, representing an exceptional testimony to the history of the 13th and 14th centuries in Iran.

4. ICOMOS RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation with respect to inscription

ICOMOS recommends that the World Heritage Committee adopt the following draft decision:

The World Heritage Committee,

1. Having examined Document WHC-05/29.COM/8B,
2. Inscribes the property on the World Heritage List on the basis of ***criteria ii, iii and iv:***

Criterion ii: The Mausoleum of Oljaytu forms an essential link in the development of the Islamic architecture in central and western Asia, from the classical Seljuk phase into the Timurid period. This is particularly relevant to the double-shell structure and the elaborate use of materials and themes in the decoration.

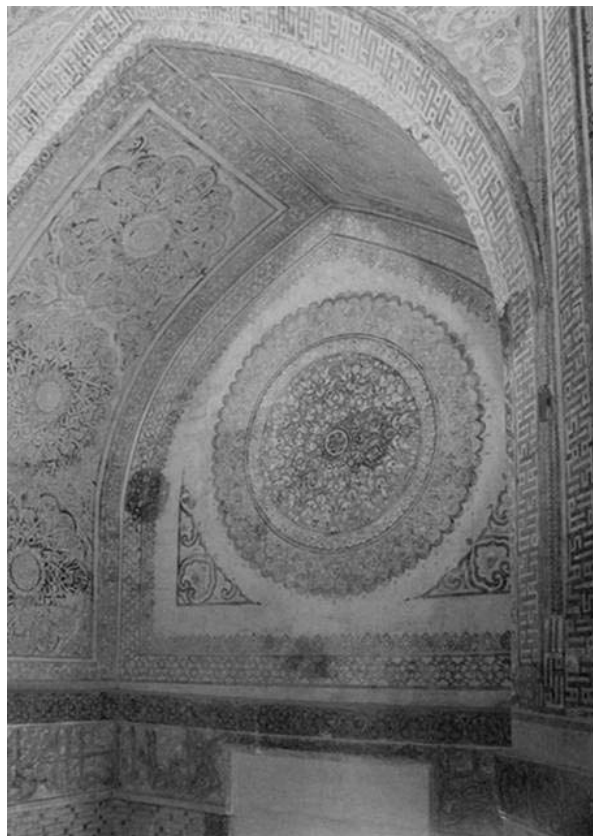
Criterion iii: Soltaniyeh as the ancient capital of the Ilkhanid dynasty represents an exceptional testimony to the history of the 13th and 14th centuries.

Criterion iv: The Mausoleum of Oljaytu represents an outstanding achievement in the development of Persian architecture particularly in the Ilkhanid period, characterized by its innovative engineering structure, spatial proportions, architectural forms and the decorative patterns and techniques.

ICOMOS, April 2005



Mausoleum of Oljaytu



Interior detail of the Mausoleum of Oljaytu