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## OF BRICK AND MYTH

*Holly Edwards*

Reviewed by Naila Khan\*

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### BOOK REVIEW

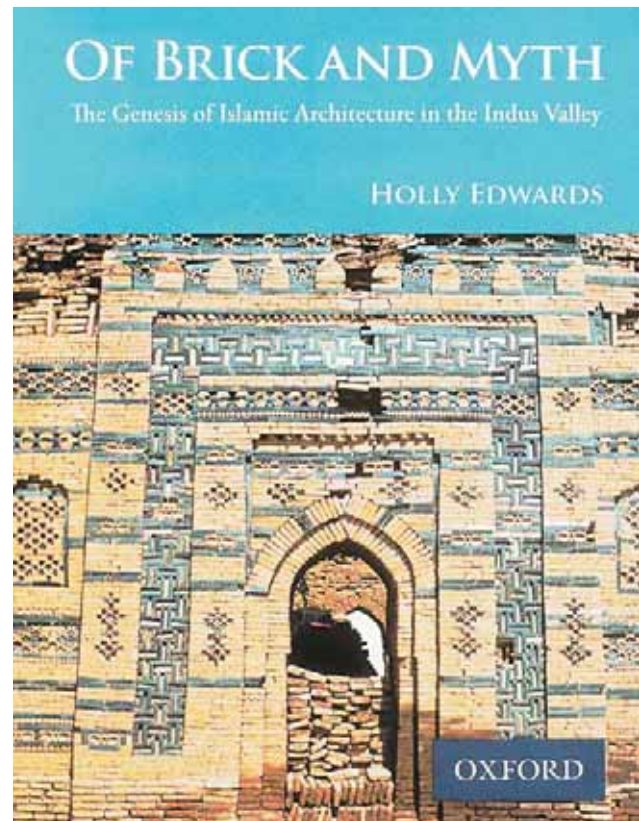
This book is a very comprehensive and detailed treatise on the birth and development of Islamic Architecture in the Indus Valley region of present day Pakistan by Prof Holly Edwards, senior lecturer in Arts Department of Williams College New York. Edwards is historian, scholar, critic and prolific writer on the subject of Islamic art and architecture, she explains in her own words: *"I am interested in the cracks between cultures and the genesis of new traditions"*. Her interests are in portraiture and iconoclasm, its perception and representation; also the study of funerary architecture in Indus valley which has resulted in the book: *Of Brick and Myth*, published in 2015 by OUP Pakistan.

This book is a body of research work that was developed over many years, the research strategy is two pronged:

1. It traces the brutal history of the Indus valley area from its pre-Islamic idol worshipping and Buddhist times through its many conflicts and wars to 14<sup>th</sup> century when Islam spread and found consolidation in the Indus valley and beyond.
2. In parallel, it addresses the earliest development of forms of funerary architecture particularly tombs, across Sindh. These simple structures developed from vernacular local traditions of simple mud brick architecture and culminated to a high quality of faience tile work, carrying influences from Afghanistan, Iran and Central Asia.

The appropriateness of the title of the book suggests and encompasses these two important strands found throughout the book: brick architecture and myths of history.

The book is a journey of historical documentation of real structures that depict multiple layers of historical interludes between local and foreign culture and building traditions. Emphasis is on the impact of a conscious and continuous



morphing of vernacular cultural traditions in art and architecture with external forces and influences brought by interactions with neighboring military encounters.

The forms of structure and styles of decoration, particularly in the funerary architecture examples, speak of this plurality and fusion of ideas. This absorptive capacity of existing secular thought aligned the development to a new identity

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of the regional architecture. The shift from non Muslim to Muslim Sufi funerary architecture is the full scope of this historical journey.

The Introduction captivates the reader with an ancient anecdote about a local Raja Dalu Rai in Sindh plain, how his immoral inclinations for lust and power bring his downfall. Though this folk tale is verified by more than one reference, it is based on verbal discourses rather than documented references, which is an underlying truth for most of the historical data present for the early civilizations of Indus valley and Punjab.

The story goes like this: the lecherous raja's eyes fall on two young and beautiful maidens named Duagan (the praying one) and Suhagan (the bride) who, fearing for their captivity by the raja, engage in prayer to be saved. The prayer is answered, the river Indus a sustaining force for countless villages along its sinuous path recedes from the raja's lands and the raja is forced to leave his seat and move to a far off location. The tombs of these two girls almost identical still stand in Sukkur near the Rohri canal besides Indus. These structures date back to the earliest examples of funerary architecture in Sindh, and are constructed using mud bricks of a fine quality, square in plan with four arches on four sides capped by a dome and the interstices plugged in by four squinches. The interiors of the tombs are plain while the exteriors are textural with brickwork creating geometrical patterns. The brickwork at this early stage is of fine rendering: motifs show a geometrical complexity and sensibility of local craftsmen to morpheme with Hindu traditions that was a vernacular tradition. Recounting this tale sets the context creatively for the reader by starting a discourse on architectural development of Indus valley against historical events spanning over centuries of power struggles in the region.

The reader is introduced to different building typologies: religious and secular, resulting forms and decorative styles. Selected building examples are documented extensively in subsequent chapters both by text and graphics providing valuable insights of processes of design conceptualization in the early stages of architectural thought. The writing style of relating historical context to building form is intentional and essential to keep the reader focused in the author's objective of seeing the link between history and architecture.

In the following chapters after Introduction, the narrative is about the people and places of Indus valley; dating back to pre Islam Samaa rule of 4<sup>th</sup> cent with multi religionism at its cultural core. Speckled with wars and conflicts it is a troubled history till mid 8<sup>th</sup> cent when Sind saw a period of peace which gave impetus to its cultural efflorescence. Early

examples of funerary architecture show the much overlapped cultural and building practices prevalent with mud brick as a vernacular element of building design. Invasions by Arabs and the arrival of Muhammad Bin Qasim to Deebal establishing Dar Ul Islam, and Islam took root as a monotheist religion in a land of multiple faiths. The author also explains the ethos of Sindh by the ethnic, religious, political nature of marriages that took place between Hindu Rajputs and Sind Soomros resulting in a hybrid ethnicity and its implications on the funerary architecture that developed here.

Later chapters focus on Multan and Mansura, two historical cities that were centers of opulence and literary scholars as the new religion of Islam spread. From Afghanistan the armies of Ghaznavids in 977 ce, captured Multan and it went through transformation from idol worshipping to a city of Islam and later with Turkish interactions, finally to Sufism. Being at the crossroads of trade and pilgrimage, a continuous flow of ideas and craft skills were absorbed in local traditions refining architectural thought and establishing the fluidity of territorial boundaries. The following chapters cover more historical ground to the point when in 10<sup>th</sup> cent, after many hundreds of years of invasions of the Afghan warlords they establish their government in Lahore and pronounce it as capital city of Punjab. Yet sanctioning it a title of a monolithic Ghaznavid capital is misleading because of its variety of religious sects. The conclusion to the chapter on Multan and Mansura renounces the author's admittance to the weakness in the historical data about Multan and Lahore, stating "...it is neither definitive nor detailed: it is impressionistic and partial..."

The introduction to Islam of the Indus valley by the coming and conquest of Muhammad Bin Qasim did not entail a radical change in the social order but a revalidation of the status quo. Change was brought about conscientiously by the Ghaznavids who regularized Islamic ascendancy not by the socio cultural order but by introducing economic illustrators like gold and silver coins bearing Quranic inscriptions the use of which was carried on later to architecture.

The chapter about the Gaurids, coming from Afghanistan centered in Ghûr mid-12<sup>th</sup>- early 13<sup>th</sup> cent, is a gem- it succinctly tells a historical tale yet engages the reader about information on buildings built by them clearly endorsing the author's objective of showing the impact of foreign invasions on the changing fabric of local architecture. The typology of a Qalaa and Qasr are discussed, a type of fortified structure that was built on difficult to access mountain tops for safety from enemy advances. One particular example shows how the design of such a building was carefully planned on the

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twelve zodiac signs in astrology, aligning its openings to capture precisely the rise of the sun. Another building type was the solitary tower of circular plan, cylindrical in form and its surface divided visually into bands that bore fine textural rendering with intricate brickwork, such as the tower of Jam in Afghanistan. The mosque, mausoleum and khanqah complex is another building typology developed and built by the Ghaurids. It was a commemoration of the dead patron alongside a place of prayer, devotion, rest and provision for travelers enroute a long journey for trade or hajj purposes.

While the Qasr- Qala being a testimony of power, the solitary tower as a symbol of victory, the mosque complex had both religious and secular connotations at the core of its design. The fine points in design clearly show that the Ghaurid courts patronized learned men of scholarship and their knowledge was duly incorporated in the design of buildings. “These examples are architecturally rendered and self conscious aspirations rooted in the natural landscape.....” the author writes. The later chapter on a detailed description of Ribbat of Karmakh, consolidates the author’s position that “...architectural form was consciously developed as a tool by the Ghaurids to promote advance, consolidate and safeguard their political and social hegemony.”

Traditional burial practices in design start with an octagonal platform, with tapering walls capped by a dome with decorative squinches. The building is a single chamber with arched openings on sides, decorative mihrab and a relatively plain interior but a visually interesting and decorative exterior. However, though it shows similarities with 12<sup>th</sup> cent Ghazni with differences and irregularities, using both rough and fine bricks, confirm the involvement of local traditions and craftsmen that were not as yet well experienced. The details of the mihrab are not location or time specific, infusing local non-Islamic with Islamic traditions of Central Asia. The mihrab of Karmakh is a complex artifact in itself, the author’s incisive reading of the subtle nuances of meanings derived from its analysis is commendable. The author tabulates the tri lobed arched form from Hindu tomb traditions, Quranic inscriptions bordering the mihrab from Muslim faith, floral decorations such as the purna gatha (overflowing vase) on adjoining pillars and gavaksha (window) also from Hindu and Buddhist temples.

The selected composition of Quranic inscriptions (verse 9 of surah Tauba) are investigated on three levels:

*1. Face level- seeing the inscription as randomly selected text from Quran just for decorative purpose.*

*2. Profoundly- seeing the text as a significant selection that correlates historical time of building with a similar parallel event described in Quran.*

*3. Metaphorically- seeing the text as a carefully selected and planned personal message by the patron, his understanding of the text transfer to the viewer as a personal message.*

The mihrab composition is the result of conscious thought and careful planning being unique for that early time; it elevates the design thinking to a higher level of sophistication.

Although the use of calligraphic inscriptions was in practice here on epitaphs, but the use of Quranic inscriptions on building parts as conceived in Mihrab of Karmakh, had a profound impact on commemorative and religious architectural buildings such as tomb and mosque. This tradition reached far and manifested in the works such as Quwwatul Islam in Dehli and Dhaj din ka Jhonpra in Ajmer.

This perspective provided by the author is very significant in understanding and appreciating Islamic architecture that developed in North India, not only in Ghaurid dynasty but subsequently to the Tughlaq and Moghul periods. The Ghaurids had mystical tendencies that show complex relationships with Sunnism and Sufism, patronizing such renowned Sufi saints as Moeen ud din Chishti, khwajah of Ajmer, this is evident in the building projects that they undertook during their reign. “Hence the Ghaurids synthesized tribal, Muslim, regional and mystical convictions in a unity that would have a profound impact on the ethos and architecture of the Indus valley”, Edwards concludes.

The full blooming of the style is visible in the most well known shrine complex, that of Shah Rukn e Alam in Multan of 14<sup>th</sup> cent, land of the Sufi saints. It is an imposing three tiered structure in brick, topped with a large dome. The building rises from an octagonal base with tapering walls held together by cylindrical bastions. Arches and openings punctuate the walls, an ambulatory open to the sky circulates and surrounds the second story commanding the view of palm trees in the expanses beyond. The magnificence of this building is embedded in its graceful form and proportions, stage wise floors much in the tradition of the Tower of Jam, adorned with bands of ceramic tiles or glazed and unglazed brickwork. Dazzling in the strong Punjab sun, colors of blue, white and turquoise communicate the completion of a circle- a culmination of the building traditions traced from the earliest pre Islamic periods to the matured Islamic Sufi traditions in the Indus valley.

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Although the author here differs from the conclusions of another renowned scholar Hillenbrand who has documented this building extensively; Edwards here hypothesizes and concludes that after penning down all the evidences of the birth and development of tomb architecture, starting from the square base plan to the octagonal base and techniques of brickwork, it shows a continuum of local tradition and craft rather than a hybridization of local and foreign roots afar in Turco- Iranian or Central Asian regions.

It is up to the reader to draw their final verdict on this- to me I tend to agree with Hillenbrand as the links cannot be easily ignored, albeit the impossibility of extricating the real truth by conjecture. So closing this discussion, I believe without going into the academic validation of whether the

brickwork and architecture of funerary traditions is more local than foreign- its impact and importance in imparting a unique identity of Islamic culture in the Indus valley, goes beyond its historical truths. Whether we approach the subject as historical myth or mythical history of the region of Indus valley- it seems to be shrouded in the fog of myth- then let it be so.

The scholarship is valuable to the student of history of the Indus valley- its art architecture and its culture and traditions knit together like a uneven yet interesting patchwork making a unified whole. The narrative is engaging and reads fluidly with anecdotes and graphics giving glimpses of a real place in a real time.