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Review Article

Comparative Morphology of Wooden Tomb Cenotaphs in the Islamic World: An Analysis of the Evolution of Form, Structure, and Ornamentation in Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Egypt, and Syria

Alireza Sheikhi[1]; **Seyedeh Narges Hosseini**[2]

1. Corresponding author, Associate Professor, Department of Handicrafts, Faculty of Applied Arts, Art University, Tehran, Iran.
E-mail: a.sheikhi@art.ac.ir
2. Master's student in Islamic Art, Department of Art, Faculty of Art, Sooreh University, Tehran, Iran.

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Abstract

Introduction: Burial methods and tomb decorations have changed a lot throughout history. These changes led to the construction of shrines and tombs, and their decorations became a key part of each region's cultural identity. This study examines wooden grave cenotaphs (cenotaphs) found in tombs in Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Egypt, and Syria from the 3rd to the 12th century A.H. It tries to answer these questions: What is the background of making wooden grave cenotaphs, and what are the shared features and differences between them in Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Turkey, and Syria?

Research Method: This study is descriptive and analytical, and it covers the wide time period from the 3rd to the 12th century A.H. The samples were chosen on purpose and include 93 wooden cenotaphs from Iran and 30 from Iraq, Turkey, Egypt, and Syria. Information was gathered through fieldwork and library research.

Findings: Looking at the wooden grave cenotaphs in the five countries studied shows that each region follows a general shared structure, but also has its own special decorations and calligraphy style. In Turkey, the cenotaphs have a triangle-shaped frame on top and are marked by bold Thuluth script; their decoration is simpler than in other regions. In Iraq, a rectangular box shape is most common, and decorative Kufic script is used over a background of Islimi patterns. In Syria, two examples—Mohsen ibn Imam Hussein and Khalid ibn al-Walid—have mihrab-shaped frames with repeating patterns and show Ruq'ah script alongside Kufic. In Egypt, knot-work (Girih) decoration covers all four sides of the cenotaphs, and Islimi patterns fill the background; the framing on these cenotaphs is more complex. In Iran, the cube shape is the most common form, and the Thuluth script is the most widely used style. Also, the use of patterned vase designs and the combination of several techniques in a single piece are special features of Iranian cenotaphs.

Conclusion: Grave cenotaphs became common after the arrival of Islam, and over the centuries, they were made with more decoration and detail. Given the large number of grave cenotaphs still remaining in Iran, it seems that Iran was the main place where this art form began.

Keywords

Grave Box, Wooden Box, Islamic Art, Origin and History of Grave Cenotaphs, Islamic Period, Wooden Artifacts, Burial Tradition

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Introduction and Problem Definition

The social, cultural, and religious importance of holy shrines, especially in Islamic countries, is well established. In Islamic-period Iran, tomb buildings rank second only to mosques in architectural prevalence, underscoring their centrality to religious architecture and warranting serious study of their decorative and functional elements. Wood and wood-related arts hold particular significance here: wooden grave cenotaphs, doors, and architectural decorations shaped both the appearance and meaning of these buildings. Cenotaphs—boxes of wood, stone, or metal, plain or ornamented—were placed over graves as covers. Their carved inscriptions (maker's name, construction date, patron's name, poems, prayers, Quranic verses) suggest they served not only as expressions of faith but also as vehicles for transmitting religious knowledge and for commemoration. Despite their importance, existing studies of wooden grave cenotaphs remain limited and fragmented—mostly single-building or single-region documentation (e.g., Khorasan, Mazandaran, Gilan) or narrow two-example comparisons, without a broader picture of change across the Islamic world. Studies outside Iran similarly focus on individual works (e.g., Imam Hussein's box in Cairo, Anatolian cenotaphs) and rarely compare traditions across countries. This leaves an uneven understanding of the tradition's origins, evolution, and spread. This gap raises a central question: though the wooden grave cenotaph has pre-Islamic roots and spread widely across Islamic lands from Iran to Egypt and Syria, was it a single interconnected tradition, or did each region develop independently in form, structure, and style? Answering this requires comparative study—rarely attempted before—which this research undertakes for wooden grave cenotaphs in Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Egypt, and Syria. Main research question: What is the background of wooden grave cenotaph production across the Islamic world (Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Egypt, Syria), and what shared features and differences exist between these regions?

Research Method

The research sample includes 93 cenotaphs from Iran, 9 boxes from Egypt, 8 boxes from Iraq, 7 boxes from Syria, and 6 boxes from Turkey. Data collection was conducted through two methods: fieldwork and library research. The research is applied in nature and examines the style and decorations of wooden cenotaphs from the first century to the late twelfth century A.H. The research is descriptive-analytical, and in the first stage, the works were categorized by geographical region. Then, Arabic, Persian, English, and Turkish sources related to these works were studied to complete the identification and data of each piece. Some of the works in Iran were documented and photographed during field visits, and images of other samples were obtained from museum archival records and historical written sources. In the third stage, by analyzing historical sources and documents, examining various aspects of the works over time, and identifying decorative patterns, the systematic temporal and spatial relationships among them were revealed.

Research Background

Little precise information exists about wooden grave cenotaphs before Islam or about when they began to be used for grave decoration, though some historical sources record examples, construction dates, and inscriptions. «Mostafavi» (1996) documented wooden works in

Tehran's Imamzadeh shrines, while «Sotoudeh» (1987), in «From Astara to Astarabad», recorded and photographed numerous wooden cenotaphs from Gilan and Mazandaran. Several regional case studies exist: «Sheikhi» (2016), in a Ph.D. dissertation on power relations under Timurid Shahrukh, analyzed carved wooden works from Khorasan and part of Mazandaran, examining size, pattern, design, technique, construction, and inscriptions. «Salahi and Ghaffari» (2018) compared decorations and techniques on the Safavid-era cenotaphs of Sheikh Safi al-Din Ardabili and Shah Ismail I. «Madhoushiannezhad et al.» (2020) studied fifteen 9th-century A.H. Marashian wooden cenotaphs from Mazandaran. «Williams» (1987) examined Quranic inscriptions on Imam Hussein's wooden box in Cairo (c. 550 A.H.), finding both Kufic and Naskh scripts and Quranic verse selections reflecting the Shia beliefs of its Fatimid patrons; made of Indian teak, it is considered a leading example in the parallel development of Islamic architectural inscription-writing. «Altın» (2019) analyzed four Karamanid-period cenotaphs in the Hezirbeg tomb at the Taşkın Pasha complex, using visual/drawn documentation to establish their significance in Turkish art and, through inscriptions, confirmed that they belonged to Hezirbeg, Hasan, and Ilyas Beg. Öter (2022) traced how the concept and form of these cenotaphs evolved in Anatolia from early periods through the Ottoman era, finding shifts in design, decoration, and function, from a symbolic tomb element to a cemetery burial cover.

Dating Tombs in the Islamic Era

No large tombs survive from early Islam, as the Prophet recommended simple burials—a practice generally observed across the Islamic world, with graves marked only by headstones. Turkic ruling leaders were reportedly the first to abandon this tradition, building polygonal or circular burial towers reminiscent of Central Asian nomadic tents; many Islamic tombs also survive in Egypt from the Fatimid period (Künel, 1997, 46). No datable tomb structures survive in Iran from the 1st-3rd centuries A.H., though Harun al-Rashid's burial in Khorasan may be an early example, later foundational to Mashhad's major Shiite shrine (Gharavi, 1997, 99). Few 4th-century A.H. or earlier buildings remain, but notable examples include the Samanid tomb in Bukhara (331 A.H.), the Arab Ata tomb (367 A.H.), and the restored Mir Sayyed Bahram tomb in Karmana (Spüler et al., 2005, 85). From the early 9th to the 10th centuries A.H., the construction and restoration of tomb structures expanded considerably. A prominent example is the Yasawi shrine, which was built in Turkestan on the orders of Timur in 801 A.H. (Ettinghausen & Grabar, 1999, p. 121). This trend continued during the reign of the later Timurids. The flourishing of tomb construction reached its peak during the reign of Timurid ruler Shahrukh, who, alongside the construction and restoration of shrines, also undertook the construction of various mosques and schools (Peacock et al., 2023, p. 118). With the rise of the Safavids, the establishment of Shiism as the state religion, and the Safavid rulers' devotion to the descendants of the Imams, the construction, restoration, and decoration of religious monuments expanded considerably. These activities continued during the Qajar period as well (Molazadeh, 2008, p. 85).

Tombstones and Cenotaphs

A wooden or khatam (inlaid) cube box, inscribed with Quranic verses or poetry, is traditionally placed on the graves of Imams, Imamzadehs, and other notable figures (Dehkhoda, 1994, 13287). Mausoleums eventually incorporated barriers around tombstones, sometimes simple wood or metal shrine enclosures. Islamic historical sources indicate that one of the earliest cenotaphs was for Imam Ali's tomb, commissioned by Dawud Abbasi, a prominent Kufa figure of the Abbasid period (886–887 C.E.). In 727 A.H., Ibn Battuta described Imam Ali's cenotaph as a square wood-covered platform beneath the dome, overlaid with finely worked gold sheets fastened by silver nails, concealing the wood entirely, and standing less than human height. Historical sources on early Islamic Iran and subsequent dynasties (Umayyads, Abbasids) show evidence of cenotaphs donated and built for the Ahl al-Bayt and the Sadat. This practice continued under local dynasties (Taherids, Saffarids, Samanids, Al-Ziyar, Buyids) and peaked under the Timurids and Safavids. Notable surviving examples include the cenotaph attributed to Hazrat Sakina in Damascus's Bab al-Saghir cemetery (6th century A.H.) and remnants of Imam Ali's Buyid-era cenotaph. Documentation also exists of a silver-covered wooden cenotaph built for Imam Reza's shrine during the Khwarizm Shahi period, described by Ibn Battuta in 734 A.H. (Kheirollahi, 2009, 52).

Studying the Structure of Wooden Cenotaphs

Given the cenotaphs' historical geographic distribution, examining their structural features enables classification and regional stylistic analysis by construction type. Key structural classification factors include:

1. Geometry and Dimensions: The rectangular cube was by far the most common geometric form, with only a small number of works in other shapes (triangles or squares). Framing and segmentation on each side of these rectangular cenotaphs varied across periods (Table 1).

1.1. Framing: Banded frame at the top, thinner banded frame at the bottom**,** main central frame on each side, symmetrical vertical side frames, and marginal frames (a repeating pattern encircling the main frame) (Fig. 1).

Framing style on each of the four sides depended on the artisan's working style, geographic region, and historical period. For example, 7th-9th century A.H. rectangular cenotaphs from the Tehran region featured interlocking horizontal and vertical rectangular frames, each section ornamented with inscriptions or plant motifs, depending on the frame type. Certain framing styles are also period-specific (e.g., 8th-century A.H. Iranian cenotaphs typically featured a continuous inscription as the top frame).

A detailed study of surviving cenotaphs from this period reveals a common banded framework containing prayers of the Fourteen Infallibles, the Ayat al-Kursi, or Quranic verses. This framing style persisted in Iran into the 10th-12th centuries A.H., with only ornamentation added over time (Fig. 2).

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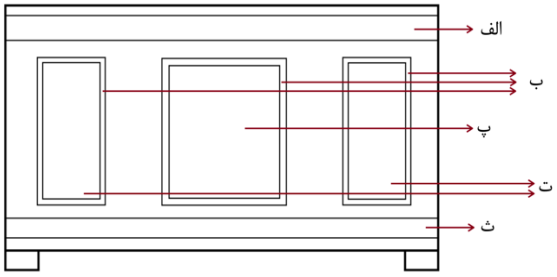


Fig. 1. Types of framing on one side of a wooden cenotaph: a) top strip frame, b) border frame, c) central frame (main motif), d) vertically symmetrical frames, e) bottom strip frame. Source: Authors.

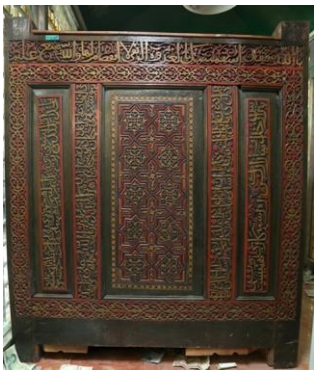


Fig. 2. Framing of the wooden cenotaph of Imamzadeh Soltan Ahmad, Shemiranat, Tehran (937 A.H.). Source: Authors.

Table 1. Types of Wooden Cenotaphs Based on Geometric Structure and Body Shape. Source: Authors.

Pyramidal (triangular)		**Cuboid (rectangular)**	
			
Cenotaph (23)	Cenotaph (16)	Cenotaph (6)	Cenotaph (38)
With vase motif (with base)		**With vase motif (without base)**	
			
Cenotaph (13)	Cenotaph (20)	Cenotaph (29)	Cenotaph (4)
Two-part (attached to the ground)		**Two-part (geometric roof)**	
			
Cenotaph (39)	Cenotaph(26)	Cenotaph (27)	Cenotaph (36)

The number of frames or divisions per panel appears to have varied by period, with details and frame counts increasing from the 8th century A.H. onward.

1.2. Roof and Door: Depending on the cenotaph type and how it was positioned on the grave (movable versus permanently fixed with building materials), the main body incorporated elements such as a door, roof, or compartment, including:

- Small double door: On the cenotaph's smaller side, typically with a lock.
- Complete roof: A flat, movable plate on top (plain, inscribed, or multi-part with varied ornaments per section; sometimes geometrically shaped).
- Completely closed roof: A fixed, immovable upper surface.
- Half-open roof: A framed top plate (ornamented or plain) with a central hole covered by a movable door (Fig. 3).

Each roof type served a distinct function, often reflecting the artist's individual style; for instance, removable roofs allowed cleaning inside the tomb without moving the entire cenotaph (Table 1).

1.3. Vases and Bases: Although the bases were generally placed as a factor to strengthen the cenotaphs in continuation of the main frame, they also included part of the ornaments and beauty of the cenotaphs (Table 2)

1.4. Frame and Main: The final part of the geometric structure of the cenotaphs is the thickness of the walls and the main frame. The thickness of the walls is proportional to the length, width, and height of cenotaphs, and factors such as durability, wood type, strength, and artistic techniques have been considered in their selection.

Table 2. Types of Vase Motifs on Wooden Cenotaphs Based on Decoration. Source: Authors.

Islimi and Khatai patterns		Simple (without decoration)	
			
Cenotaph (20)	Cenotaph (52)	Cenotaph (40)	Cenotaph (13)


Cenotaph (28)


Cenotaph (5)


Cenotaph (32)


Cenotaph (31)

Geometric patterns | **Inscription and plant motifs**


Cenotaph (21)


Cenotaph (30)


Cenotaph (4)

2. Materials: The role of locally available materials in the expansion of the cenotaphs is evident. The wood used in the construction of the cenotaphs has usually been of local varieties such as cedar, walnut, and plane tree. In addition to the main wooden body, details made of metal or stone have also been added over time. The use of metals such as brass, copper, silver, and gold, in addition to their beauty, has contributed to greater strength in the chests. Metal pins, nails, hinges, rings, and fasteners used on all four sides of the boxes have increased the boxes' structural strength and durability (Fig. 4).


Fig. 3. Wooden cenotaph with a half-open roof of Imamzadeh Mot'em Taher, Damavand (727 A.H.). Source: Authors.


Fig.4. Decorative metal clasp on the upper frame of the wooden cenotaph of Imamzadeh Younes, Shemiranat, Tehran (887 A.H.). Source: Authors.

3. Reinforcements and Construction Methods: Depending on the type of ornament and carving used, these cenotaphs are constructed using different methods. For example, the frame-and-plate or frame-and-thin technique is very common in carpentry. In this method, a main frame is considered for the work, and within it, various frames are designed in proportion and generally symmetrically. Also, the edges of all frames are framed with another rectangular frame. In this technique, the main board is solid, and the frames designed within it can take on different shapes (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Frame-and-panel technique; from right: front face, back view (frame divisions), wooden cenotaph of Taj al-Molk (877 A.H.). Source: RISD Museum, 2021.

The back of this frame is intact, and one can see two distinct frames interlocked on the back of the work. The tool-and-lock technique is among the most common methods in the art of latticework and inlay. In this technique, two pieces (tool and lock), each corresponding to the type of ornaments or cuts they have, are placed side by side and connected. The noteworthy point is that these two parts are connected without a thread or nail, and the connections must be made with great care and skill so that they are completely interlocked (Table 4). Also, materials with similar geometric shapes can be placed side by side using this technique. Also, in this technique, the back of the pattern has a similar division to the main pattern, which is connected to each other with wooden fasteners, and in a way, this issue itself reflects the /a:lat/ and /loqat/ technique, and these fasteners are installed behind the main frame due to the connection of the pieces to each other (Fig. 6).

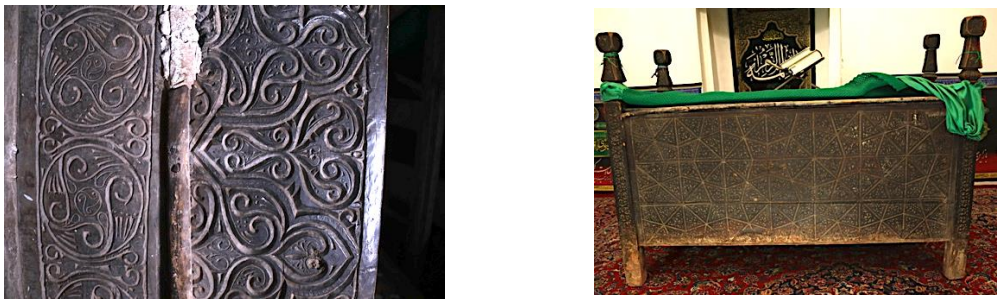
Table 3. Types of Construction Techniques for Wooden Cenotaphs. Source: Authors.

Frame and panel			
			
Cenotaph(6)	Cenotaph(40)	Cenotaph(17)	Cenotaph(21)
Alat and Loqat (mortise-and-tenon joinery)			



Cenotaph(39) Cenotaph(10) Cenotaph(50) Cenotaph(51)

Single-piece



Cenotaph(5) Cenotaph(20)

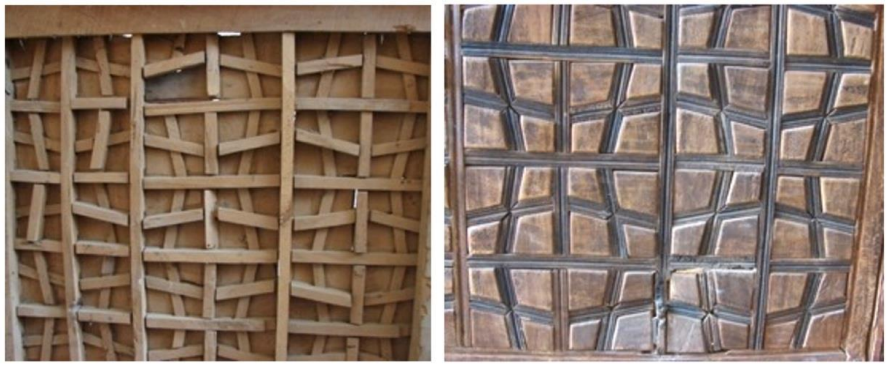


Fig. 6. From right: front face, back of the Girih (knot-work) frame, wooden cenotaph of Imamzadeh Mahruq, Nishapur (8th century A.H.). Source: Authors.

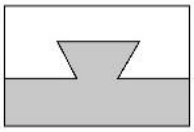
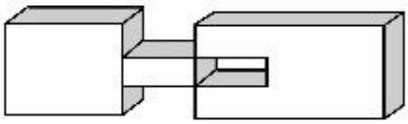
4. Joints: There have been various methods for joining two pieces of wood. Before the use of metal joints, such as hinges, wooden joints, or joints of the same type of work were generally used (Fig. 7).

4.1. Half-and-Half Joint: In this method, two pieces of wood to be joined are cut to the same size and then fastened together. In addition to gum and glue, wooden nails were generally used to fasten these two pieces of wood.
4.2. Mitered Halving Joint: In this method, two pieces of wood are cut at a forty-five-degree angle to form a frame and fastened together. In addition to strength, this type of joint was also considered part of the ornament and beauty of a work.
4.3. Dovetail Joint: In this style of joint, swallow-shaped grooves were created in two pieces of wood that were symmetrical in two planes and fastened together. Since this style of connection is difficult and requires considerable skill, it is used less often than other connections.
4.4. Tongue-and-Groove Connection: In this style of connection, one of the two pieces of wood is cut into a rectangle or triangle, and a groove is made in the other piece, symmetrical to the same cut, which will be locked into the cut. This connection style is very common in the construction of cenotaphs and is very strong (Table 4).



Fig. 7. Wooden pegs (nails), wooden cenotaph of Imamzadeh Qasem, Tehran (Safavid period). Source: Authors.

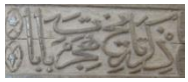
Table 4. Types of Joints Used in the Construction of Wooden Cenotaphs. Source: Authors.

Half-lap joint
 
Cenotaph (38)
Half-lap mitered joint
 
Cenotaph (45)
Dovetail joint
 
Cenotaph (38)
Groove-and-tongue joint
 
Cenotaph (56)

5. Motifs and Ornaments

5.1. Inscription: Since the early Islamic centuries, inscriptions have been an inseparable part of architectural ornaments and works of art. The use of inscriptions was not merely decorative or aesthetic; it also served as an informational or propaganda function. It is rare to find a work of art without an inscription (Farid, 2022). One might conclude the decorative process and the fonts used in writing have undergone changes over the centuries to make it deeper, more durable and easier to read, in addition to the beauty of writing (Table 5).

Table 5. Types of Calligraphy Scripts Used on Wooden Cenotaphs. Source: Authors.

Kufic				
				
Cenotaph (59)	Cenotaph (6)	Cenotaph (4)	Cenotaph (24)	Cenotaph (1)
				
Cenotaph (60)	Cenotaph (9)	Cenotaph (62)	Cenotaph (8)	Cenotaph (11)
Ruq'ah				
				
Cenotaph (25)	Cenotaph (3)	Cenotaph (12)	Cenotaph (10)	Cenotaph (51)
Thuluth				
				
Cenotaph (63)	Cenotaph (39)	Cenotaph (26)	Cenotaph (41)	Cenotaph (58)
				
Cenotaph (27)	Cenotaph (44)	Cenotaph (43)	Cenotaph (23)	Cenotaph (33)
Nasta'liq, Naskh				
				
Cenotaph (56)	Cenotaph (36)	Cenotaph (26)	Cenotaph (61)	Cenotaph (54)

With the passage of time, the combination of Islimi and Khatai motifs alongside the inscriptions and the use of Thuluth, Muhaqq, Reqa, and Nastaliq calligraphy styles added to the aesthetic importance of the inscriptions in addition to their written expressiveness (Fig. 8)



Fig. 8. Simple Kufic inscription, part of a wooden cenotaph (3rd century A.H.), Egypt. Source: LACMA Collections, 2021.

5.2. Botanical Motifs: Two views exist on ornament: one holds that ornaments are purely external covering with no religious or cultural meaning, used only to conceal rough surfaces. Others, like Burckhardt, argue motifs carry historical, mystical, and contemplative significance—ornament as layered, symbolic, and transcendent rather than merely decorative (Burckhardt, 2008, 58). In Iran, certain plants have carried distinct religious and social meanings since antiquity: from the Sassanid period onward, the palm symbolized holiness, the artichoke was used in funerary rites, the grape symbolized blessing, and the lotus symbolized purity. These associations persisted among Iranians and later reappeared in new forms within Islamic motifs. While complex plant-based ornamentation was largely absent in Iran during Islam's early centuries, such ornamentation began to emerge by the early 4th century A.H. (Jansouz & Sodaei, 2021).

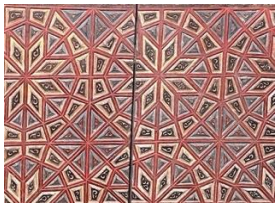
5.3. Islimi (Arabesque): Arabesque's curved, soft forms make it the most common and distinctive expressive element in Islamic art, built from three-part leaves with five-part palmettes at their bends, and extensively used in plasterwork from the Palaces of Bishapur, Damqan, and Ctesiphon. It was especially favored in Iran and Mamluk Egypt, appearing in wavy, intertwining, and knotted forms (Savari & Sheikhi, 2023). A defining feature of Arabesque is the regular rotation of its lines/stems, used by artists to fill empty space with harmonious design. Some attribute the emergence of the arabesque to the prohibition of depicting living beings, but its roots can be seen in pre-Islamic Iranian art (Sassanid period) (Savari & Sheikhi, 2023). Its naming is also due to its widespread repetition in Islamic art, not its exclusivity (Mirzaei, 2012, 57).

5.4. Khatai: Khatai motifs have a plant-based foundation, and their presence is very widespread. These motifs are also famous as symbols of femininity (Talbot, 2010, 114). The origin and history of the Khatai motif are not precisely known. Some believe its name is derived from Khotan in China, and even in some Eastern texts, Khotai is synonymous with the Chinese word (Mayel Heravi, 1993, 274). With the onset of the Timurid period, its widespread presence in artistic works is observed. The main elements of this motif are buds, leaves, and intertwined stems, but over time, the buds have expanded and taken on more complex forms, such as Shah Abbas flowers and kangri leaves (Eskandar Monshi, 1988, 170). On cenotaphs, Khatai motifs began as simple, unadorned flowers and buds within inscription fields, grew more detailed, and by the Timurid period served as frames, then became the main motif in the Safavid period. Combined Islimi-Khatai motifs sometimes form the cypress tree or tree-of-life motif, together expressing deeper pre-Islamic Iranian concepts (Table 6).

Table 6. Types of Decorative Motifs on Wooden Cenotaphs. Cenotaph names refer to Table 1. Source: Authors.

Islimi		
		
Cenotaph (19)	Cenotaph (52)	Cenotaph (6)
		
Cenotaph (7)	Cenotaph (8)	Cenotaph (28)
Khatai		
		
Cenotaph (41)	Cenotaph (46)	Cenotaph (23)
		
Cenotaph (33)	Cenotaph (49)	Cenotaph (35)
Geometric		
		
Cenotaph (25)	Cenotaph (51)	Cenotaph (26)


Cenotaph (38)


Cenotaph (40)


Cenotaph (45)

5.5. Geometric Patterns: Islamic teachings hold that God is beautiful and all creation reflects that beauty, referencing the Quranic verse «He Who created everything best» (Surah As-Sajdah, verse 7); an attitude reflected throughout Islamic art. Geometric ornament is among Islamic art's most renowned features, tied closely to geometry, mathematics, human intuition, and mysticism, with the prohibition on figurative imagery also driving Muslim artists toward such elaborate geometric forms. These motifs and knots, with their complex proportions, in some sense express perfection (Torkchin, 2022). These motifs can be considered among the most abstract decorative patterns in Islamic art, concealing extensive features and concepts within themselves (Fig. 9).


Fig. 9. Shamse (medallion motif), cenotaph of Sheikh Safi al-Din Ardabili (8th century A.H.). Source: Authors.

The evolution of the use of geometric patterns in Islamic decorations is worth examining. Initially, simple geometric shapes such as circles, multi-pointed stars, triangles, and other geometric forms each had different meanings. The peak of geometric patterns can be observed during the Timurid period in wooden chests, where the use of various knots has doubled the beauty of the piece and showcased the carpenter's skill and expertise. During the Safavid period and thereafter, this trend continued, and geometric motifs, alongside other designs, were used in numerous frame designs (Table 6).

6. The History of Plant Motifs (Islimi-Khatai) and Geometric Motifs in Cenotaphs: Plant motif ornamentation grew more complex and detailed over time (Fig. 10). Early examples (Table 5) suggest inscriptions played the primary decorative role, with plant motifs filling remaining empty spaces. Based on the study, motifs can be classified by period as follows:

6.1. 4th-6th Centuries A.H. (10th-12th C.E.): In Iran, the use of mihrab framing for separating motifs has generally been employed. Alongside that, simple geometric patterns and linear banding have also been used as frames. The continuous swirling vines, along with the three-leafed headband, have been used as the main motif, and the Islamic knot has also been employed to decorate the background of the inscriptions. Inscriptions are usually written in simple Kufic or floral Kufic script. After the 4th and 5th centuries, the Reqa script was observed. Reqa and Towqi developed after the Thuluth, and the history of their names, along with other initial items, dates back to the mid-second century (Tounji & Fazaeli, 2001, 225).



Fig.10. Combination of Islimi and Khatai patterns, first wooden cenotaph of Imamzadeh Qasem, Tehran (963 A.H.). Source: Authors.



Fig. 11. Rectangular frame with Islimi patterns (along with a Kufic inscription), wooden cenotaph of Masjid al-Hussein, Egypt. Source: Museum of Islamic Art Cairo, 2019.

In other selected countries, it seems that the 4th to 6th centuries A.H. can be considered the era of the use of Kufic script. In this period, the arabesque played a prominent role, and complex knotwork was not commonly seen; rather, the use of geometric motifs in the form of frames or the repetition of a geometric motif within a frame was prevalent. Usually, the background of the inscriptions consists of curved lines with very few floral decorations. The rectangular framing should be considered the most important pattern for inscription frames in this period (Fig.11).

6.2. 7th century A.H. (13th C.E.): During the Ilkhanate period (13th-14th C.E.) and after, Islimi motifs became more widespread, including Islimi framing (repeating an Islimi motif as a border for the main motif). Inscription-related Islimi motifs shifted from ivy toward Islimi Khartoumi (trunk), combined with more detailed ivy, while simple linear plinths gradually gave way to Islimi framing. Khatai motifs entered ornamentation during this period, appearing mainly as simple, multi-petaled flowers in the backgrounds of inscriptions, often combined with Islimi motifs. Rectangular inscription and central-motif frames began to be divided into multiple sections, unlike earlier periods. Script-wise, the Reqa script was common in the early 7th century A.H. but was gradually replaced by the Thuluth script toward the end of the century. The 13th century C.E. was marked by regional rule by the Anatolian Seljuks (Turkey), Ilkhanids (Iran), Ayyubids (Egypt), and Mamluks (Syria), with far more surviving works than in earlier centuries. In Iran, Islimi framing motifs expanded and grew more detailed, sometimes recurring throughout a work; simple Khatai motifs also appear, combined with Islimi. Reqa script, alongside Kufic, was widespread and sometimes used together in different frames within the same work (Fig. 12).

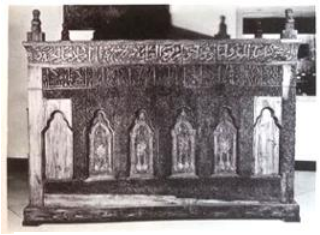


Fig. 12. Use of Ruq'ah script in the upper frame and decorative Kufic in the lower frame, cenotaph of Khalid ibn al-Walid, Damascus, Syria. Source: National Museum of Damascus, 2014.

This period also shows more advanced, detailed geometric interlace, occasional altar frames, and, notably, the combination of multiple patterns across different frames on a single cenotaph, distinguishing it from earlier work. Inscription scale (not just script type) is also notable, with some works featuring large-pen inscriptions spanning entire frames.

6.3. 8th-9th Centuries A.H. (14th-15th C.E.): This period saw an expanded combination of Islimi and Khatai motifs in carving, including multi-petaled flowers merged with an

Islimi Chang (handle) to form cypress-tree structures, and repeated Islimi/Khatai motifs used as frames. Khartoumi and Dahan Azhdari scripts appear in inscriptions, with Thuluth as the standard script; framing styles for inscriptions also changed. Banded top-and-bottom inscription frames filled with Islimi/Khatai background ornament are characteristic of this period (Sheikhi, 2025)., along with an increased number of variously designed frames—often paired symmetrically. Framing innovations included repeating a single Islimi design as a marginal frame throughout a work (Fig. 13).

Beam and vase ornamentation also increased, with more frequent repeated Islimi/Khatai motifs. Geometric designs grew more diverse and complex, sometimes featuring several interlace types within one panel, or serving as the cenotaph's central motif, leading to greater use of knots without a central Shamsah (pointed star). From the late 9th century, ornamental detail increased further, with color introduced in places, marking the start of painted cenotaphs and the wood-painting technique. Several notable 14th-century Iraqi works survive with unique, structurally similar ornamentation, distinguished by large-scale, convex, wood-carved Kufic script. These works are marked by overall simplicity: minimal decoration, rectangular Islimi frames around the main inscription, and Islimi-motif circles within the inscription field. This century also saw the expansion of pyramidal/triangular cenotaphs in present-day Turkey (then under Seljuk rule), built not as a single frame-and-plate structure but from separate plates set within a frame. A shared feature of these works is a large third-pen script running along all sides of the cenotaph (Fig. 14).



Fig. 13. Symmetrical Islimi frames, cenotaph of Taj al-Molk (877 A.H.). Source: RISD Museum, 2021.



Fig.14. Pyramidal (triangular) wooden cenotaph, decoration: Thuluth inscription, concave Islimi background, Turkey (Seljuk period). Source: Amasya Archaeological Museum, 2015.

Although few works of Syria's historical geography from this century survive, two carved cenotaphs with distinctive ornamentation stand out. Besides their varied rectangular and Mihrab frames, both feature painted wood decoration, with multicolored motifs setting them apart from other works (Fig. 15). Overall, no single style characterizes all works across the geographic regions studied. However, more extensive ornamentation, varied frames, and diverse inscriptions may typify 14th-15th century C.E. works.

6.4. 10th-12th Centuries A.H. (16th-18th C.E.): Ornamental diversity expanded considerably in this period. Khatai motifs became common in inscription fields and grew increasingly varied over time. Multiple frames of varying dimensions increased Islimi frame

diversity, and combined Islimi-Khatai motifs became prominent. Unlike other periods, Khatai motifs were now used as the central motif, sometimes with several flower types appearing within a single frame. Islimi patterns also appear in more complex forms—triangular, spruce, and diamond headbands—while the three-petal Islimi headband and tulip headband evolved distinctly from earlier periods. The number of frames per work, and the diversity of their motifs, continued to expand. A striking feature of this period is overall simplicity: minimal decoration, rectangular Islimi frames around the main inscription, and circular fields decorated with Islimi motifs within the inscription area. Beyond the strip inscription frames at the top and bottom, a central inscription frame typically appears within a Mihrab or rectangular main frame, bearing historically significant text. Thuluth script, alongside Naskh and Nastaliq, is characteristic of this period, as is expanded use of color, varied framing, and combined techniques (Fig. 16).



Fig. 15. Two similar cenotaphs with mihrab-shaped framing and painting on wood, belonging to Sheikh Mohammad al-Maghribi and Sheikh Ahmad Halabi, Syria (Mamluk or Ottoman period). Source: Faqih Mohammadi Jalali & Khameyar, 2014.



Fig. 16. Cenotaph of Imamzadeh Soltan Ahmad, Shemiranat, Tehran (937 A.H.), symmetrical geometric framing and Thuluth inscription with Islimi and Khatai decoration. Source: Authors.

Regarding inscriptions, legibility and detail improved notably after the 8th century and again in the 10th-12th centuries, yielding richer historical and religious information. This period also saw growth in the complexity and diversity of geometric motifs and interlace patterns. Among the 16th-18th century wood-carved cenotaphs studied, several were donated to shrines in Syria and Iraq by Iranian kings such as Shah Tahmasb and Shah Ismail Safavid, thereby effectively becoming part of the Iranian corpus. Iranian kings also donated Khatam cenotaphs to the Shiite Imams and Imamzadeh shrines in the post-Safavid and Qajar periods. Some cenotaphs were inaccessible because of their storage locations, so the researcher relied on descriptions in historical texts. Since inlay art flourished in the Safavid period and expanded further under the Qajars, some works combine inlay with woodcarving; inlay was also used to repair older woodcarved cenotaphs, as with the Shrine of Abdul Azim Hassani (Fig. 17). Because inlay combines metals (gold, silver), bone, ivory, and precious woods, its use reflects royal attention to sacred sites. Few inlaid cenotaphs from these periods survive.

7. Fittings: Beyond wood, metal elements were used in cenotaph construction, primarily for structural security, though they evolved into decorative features over time. Common metal fittings include hinges, handles, locks, chains, studs, and metal frames, with studs and fittings being the most common and diverse. These were typically made of copper, brass, or iron, and occasionally gold or silver. Their structure, design, and usage vary and can be categorized by pattern type and frequency across periods (Fig. 18).



Fig. 17. Combination of woodcarving (Monabbat) and marquetry (Khatam), cenotaph of Imamzadeh Abd al-Azim al-Hasani, carving dated 725 A.H., marquetry dated 1329 S.H. Source: Authors.



Fig. 18. Metal fittings, cenotaph of Sheikh Safi al-Din Ardabili (8th century A.H.). Source: Authors.

Simple, small circular studs were common in the Seljuk period; by the Ilkhanate period, symmetrical Islimi-motif fittings appeared on all four sides of cenotaphs. From the 8th-9th centuries onward, studs grew more complex and numerous, taking forms such as grapefruit shapes, clovers, multi-petaled flowers, raised flowers matching cenotaph motifs, and corrugated circles. Gold and silver studs appear on cenotaphs of the Ahl al-Bayt (Table 7).

Table 7. Types of Metal Decorations on Wooden Cenotaphs. Source: Authors.

Rosette nail (Gol-mikh)		
		
Cenotaph (5)	Cenotaph (64)	Cenotaph (61)
		
Cenotaph (25)	Cenotaph (41)	Cenotaph (39)

Clasp (Bast)		
		
Cenotaph (34)	Cenotaph (26)	Cenotaph (14)
		
Cenotaph (40)	Cenotaph (36)	Cenotaph (60)

Notably, cenotaphs from the other studied countries (excluding Iran) were largely free of metal ornaments, with only a few featuring metal fittings (Fig. 19). This suggests metal ornamentation was widespread and varied across periods in Iran, but far less common elsewhere.

8. Artistic Techniques: Before presenting the historical classification of the studied cenotaphs, the researcher first outlines the artistic methods used on them across different centuries (Table 9).

8.1. Woodcarving: Most surviving wooden works, including the cenotaphs examined here, are carved in wood, making woodcarving the primary technique for ornamenting wooden objects. Although various carving methods emerged over different periods and arts like Khatam later gained greater prominence, carving's deep influence on the arrangement of Islimi art remains undeniable.

- Flat Woodcarving: The simplest and most common type, flat woodcarving, is executed in various ways and categorized by carving depth.
- Convex Woodcarving: This more delicate method causes motifs to project from the surface, with the degree of projection depending on background depth. It is used for inscriptions, plant motifs, and occasionally geometric patterns. The technique began in the Seljuk period (early 5th century A.H.) and peaked during the Ilkhanate era (Fig. 19).



Fig. 20. Khatai patterns using concave carving technique, cenotaph of Imamzadeh Darvish Fakhr al-Din, Babol (833 A.H.). Source: Authors.

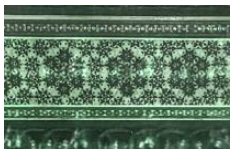


Fig. 19. Kufic inscription, revolving Islimi background (convex carving), cenotaph of Imamzadeh Nur, Gorgan (525 A.H.). Source: Authors.

Concave Woodcarving: Given the multi-level nature of woodcarving, there was a need to use various methods to display these levels in wooden works, as well as in stucco and metal works. Therefore, the concave technique, with its ability to be performed at varying depths to create various motifs, flourished in the Timurid period (Fig. 20). This method was widely used in designing interlace, geometric, and plant motifs within the loqats, and it was combined with flat inlay in various parts of the cenotaphs. The peak of the use of this method can be attributed to the Timurid period (Sheikhi, 2024). In subsequent periods, to use lattice ornaments on wood and more complex motifs, such as animal motifs, this method was presented and applied more fully in the works. Also, one important application of the concave method is the use of the Nastaliq script in inlay work.

8.2. Painting on Wood: Painting on wood is an ancient technique, often attributed to Egypt, though Iran and other countries developed their own variations. A common method combines natural pigments with egg yolk to enhance durability. Based on this study's findings, the earliest painted cenotaphs date to the Timurid period, in which color was used to render motifs and backgrounds, distinguish framing, and highlight inscriptions (Table 8).

Table 8. Types of Artistic Techniques Used in the Construction of Wooden Cenotaphs. Source: Authors.

Flat carving (Monabbat-e Takht)		**Khatam (marquetry)**	
			
Cenotaph (4)	Cenotaph (34)	Cenotaph (55)	Cenotaph (26)
Convex carving (Monabbat-e Mohaddab)		**Concave carving (Monabbat-e Moqa'ar)**	
			
Cenotaph (9)	Cenotaph (24)	Cenotaph (35)	Cenotaph (46)
Painting on wood		**Marquetry (Moaraq), Engraving**	
			
Cenotaph (57)	Cenotaph (53)	Cenotaph (25)	Cenotaph (2)

8.3. Inlay (Khatam): Khatam involves ornamenting the surfaces of objects, especially wood, with regular polygonal pieces of wood, bone, and metal. This art appeared in wooden works from the late 9th century A.H., reaching its peak during the 10th-12th centuries, as evidenced by surviving high-quality Khatam works. However, despite its wider use during

this period, few inlaid cenotaphs survive, and most extant examples combine inlay with woodcarving.

8.4. Engraving and Jowak-Kari Techniques: Fine (thin) engraving uses 1-2 mm thick colored wood pieces, shaped according to traditional calligraphic designs, to ornament wooden works (Fig. 21). The Jowak and inlay work in the wooden cenotaphs of the tomb in this study is very limited.



Fig. 21. Combination of Marquetry (Moaraq) and Khatam work, cenotaph of Sheikh Safi al-Din Ardabili (8th century A.H.). Source: Authors.



Fig. 22. Joubak-kari (grooved carving) technique on one face of the wooden cenotaph (9th century C.E.). Source: Museum of Islamic Art Cairo, 2019.

9. Analysis and Classification of the Cenotaphs: Based on the study, the remaining works can be grouped into several types of classification. This classification allows for a stylistic understanding of the artworks, helping to answer the following:

- In which time period was the use of wooden cenotaphs most common?
- Which geographic region was the origin and main user of these wooden works?
- Who was the target group for these cenotaphs (the places and people they were made for)?

It appears that Iran, with 93 wooden cenotaphs recorded so far in Persian and Arabic sources, has the largest number of wooden grave cenotaphs. However, this cannot be fully confirmed or refuted, as accurate figures for other countries are unavailable. The classification below covers the wooden cenotaphs of the four countries, Turkey, Iraq, Egypt, and Syria, based on the date of construction. Together, these four countries have 30 wooden cenotaphs.

Turkey: Six cenotaphs, three from the 7th century A.H., two from the 8th century A.H., and one from the 9th-10th century A.H. period.

Iraq: Eight cenotaphs, three from the 3rd-4th century A.H. period, one from the 7th century A.H., two from the 8th century A.H., and two from the 10th century A.H.

Egypt: Nine cenotaphs, two from the 3rd-4th century A.H. period, two from the 5th-6th century A.H., and five from the 7th century A.H.

Syria: Seven cenotaphs, three from the 5th-6th century A.H. period and four from the 7th century A.H.

9.1. Classification of Iranian Wooden Cenotaphs: Of the 93 known wooden cenotaphs in Iran, the Timurid period has the largest number, with 49. This shows how important the Timurid government was in building, restoring, and honoring the tombs of sayyids and Imamzadehs. From the Safavid period to today, 21 cenotaphs have been identified in Iran. It is worth noting that during this period, Safavid kings also gave a number of cenotaphs as gifts to holy shrines in Iraq and Syria. From the 4th to 6th century A.H. period, five

cenotaphs have been found, showing the unique decoration style of that era. From the Ilkhanid period, eight cenotaphs have been identified.

Conclusion

The findings show that the grave cenotaph is not merely a basic wooden structure but the result of a dynamic relationship among religious beliefs, political structures, technical skills, and regional traditions. Over twelve centuries, these elements formed a connected and influential network. The early foundations of this art took shape mainly in Fatimid Egypt and Iraq during the 3rd to 6th centuries A.H., where flat carving, simple framing, and Kufic inscriptions formed the basic structures. Moving into the middle period, especially the Ilkhanid and Timurid eras in Iran, cenotaphs moved away from their early simplicity and became a space for technical and artistic innovation. The appearance of convex carving, and later concave carving, allowed for deeper three-dimensional shaping, more complex patterns, and multi-layered knot-work. This same process turned Iran into the center of this art's development; in fact, the largest number of cenotaphs were made during the Timurid period, which also marked the highest point of technical and visual skill. In later periods, namely the Safavid and Qajar eras, the mixing of techniques, such as combining carving with marquetry, painting on wood, and the use of valuable metal fittings, showed the high status accorded to these shrines and the rulers' efforts to honor holy places. During these periods, cenotaphs not only became more complex in their beauty but also became «ritual-display objects»; works that reflected sacredness, political identity, and artistic taste all at once. The development of patterns and inscriptions also sheds light on another part of this historical process. The shift from Kufic script to Thuluth, then Naskh, and later Nasta'liq, along with the spread of Islimi and Khatai patterns and geometric knotwork, shows that wooden cenotaphs moved beyond their early practical role and became spaces for displaying the highest level of calligraphy and decorative skill. In Iran, in particular, the combination of complex knotwork with plant symbols such as the cypress tree reflects mystical and cosmological ideas within the structure of these works. Overall, the results of this study confirm that the making of wooden grave cenotaphs was a regional-cultural phenomenon with a shared Islamic identity, while also showing local variety. These works, while following a general shared tradition, were always shaped by the climate, religious beliefs, and political support of each land. For this reason, tracing the origin and development of these cenotaphs not only reveals hidden layers of Islamic art history but also highlights the importance of protecting, documenting, and carefully studying this wooden heritage for the future.

Author Contributions

This article is the result of joint work by all the authors. All authors contributed to writing the sections, reviewing the findings, analyzing the results, and giving final approval for the article.

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Conflict of Interest

The author (s) declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest related to this research, in writing, and publication of this article

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Appendix

1. B. Allardice (2024) personally photographed the collection of Imam al-Shafi'i cenotaphs.
2. K.A.C. Creswell (1926) personally photographed the wooden cenotaph of Saladin (Salah al-Din Ayyubi).
3. In 2012, Ahmad Khameyar photographed the cenotaphs of Najm al-Din Ahmad ibn Mas'ud, Hazrat Sakineh, and Arghavan Khatun.
- In 2020, Gabriel Boyz photographed the wooden cenotaph from the Al-Sabah Collection.

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