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TASH RABAT ET GARDANEH-YE-NIR DEUX CARAVANSERAILS REMARQUABLES

TASH RABAT AND GARDANEH-YE-NIR TWO REMARKABLE CARAVANSERAIS

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TASH RABAT AND GARDANEH-YE-NIR TWO REMARKABLE CARAVANSERAIS

Pierre Lebigre
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Though geographically very far apart since one is situated in Kirghizstan and the other in Iran¹, the Tash Rabat and Gardaneh-ye Nir caravanserais show remarkable architectural similarities. These similarities which do not exclude important differences appeared more clearly at the end of the UNESCO Analytic and Systematic Inventory of Caravanserais in Central Asia (1998-2004)². These ones would have not drawn my attention if I did not acquaint myself with the numerous questions and debates concerning functions and the date of construction of Tash Rabat since the first description the traveller, explorer and Russian of Kazakh extraction Chokan Valikhanov (1835-1865) did in 1859, and especially the surprising sketch he presented (Fig; 1) . Such are the elements which prompted me to compare, on the face of it, these two caravanserais, in putting forward the hypothesis that these two structures were sharing, perhaps, some connections and were able, at least, to throw light on each other.

So I shall examine successively, from the angle of their similarities and their differences, the main geographical and architectural features of these two structures, then I shall try to draw some conclusions.

But first, I shall mention some reference and questioning points³. If Tash Rabat is, at the present time, one of the most known caravanserais and was the most studied in Kyrgyzstan⁴, the same is not true of the Gardaneh-ye-Nir caravanserai which, apparently, remains a still underestimated in Iran. Therefore it is not surprising the bibliography concerning Tash Rabat is abundant when the available information sources concerning Gardaneh-ye-Nir are, still today, very limited. In addition, it should be noted the two caravanserais were recently restored⁵.

Concerning Tash Rabat, it is not the place, here, to continue debates which seem to be ended. I shall remind simply it was said that this structure was, by turns, a garrison building, a mosque, a Nestorian monastery, a caravanserai.

As for its dating and functions, a consensus seems, henceforth, to have been reached by specialists for considering the structure to be a caravanserai and dating this one back to the 10-12th century, i.e. back to Karakhanids.

The same is not true, on the other hand, for the *Gardaneh-ye Nir* caravanserai. If functions of this structure were never called into question, the same authors, in the only two

¹ These two caravanserais are 2.500km apart as the crow flies and 3.000km by ancient caravan routes.

² Inventory carried out from 1998 to 2004 that I had the honour of being the general coordinator

³ Concerning Tash Rabat, I owe the bulk of information summed up below to J. Imankulov and B. Amanbaeva who did a summary in the framework of the UNESCO Analytic and Systematic Inventory of Caravanserais in Central Asia (op.cit.). Concerning Gardaneh-ye Nir, informations come from works of W. Kleiss and M. Y. Kiani (see bibliography) whom I thank here once again.

⁴ Following the first description of C. Valikhanov, *Tash Rabat* was, between 1867 and 1902, the subject of researches carried out by some Russian scientists as N.A. Severtseva, F.R. Hosten-Saken, A.N. Fetisov, N.L. Zelanda, A. Voitsercovith, N.N. Pantusova or V.V. Bartold. The latter continued under the Soviet time. However, since the independance of the country, in 1991, to my knowledge, no research seems to have been begun.

⁵ Since the plan of W. Kleiss in 1987, Gardaneh-ye Nir was the subject of a restoration done by ICHTO (Iranian Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization) and Tash Rabat was restored partly, in 1980-1984, by the special scientific restoration workshop of the Kyrgyz Ministry of Culture (J.Imankulov, T.Bakyiev et M.Pomaskin).

recent and successive works which are mentioning them, are dating it either “*back to Seljuk time*” (W. Kleiss and M. Y. Kiani, 1995) or “*probably (back to) Safavid time but on a pre-islamic structure*” (W. Kleiss, 1996). Therefore, the dating of this caravanserai seems to still uncertain.

Geographical locations (Plate 1)

Within the huge set of caravan routes which was formed progressively between the East and the West since the Silk Road's opening, about 200 BC, the *Tash Rabat* and *Gardaneh-ye Nir* caravanserais are not located on the main itineraries linking Europe to China but on routes of lesser importance.

Tash Rabat is located in the Central Tien Shan, in the west part of the At-Bashy massif, on a north-south route which linked At-Bashy to Kashgar, crossing the present Torugart pass (3.800 m), when the main route, following the Ferghana corridor, east-west oriented, linked directly Osh to Kashgar, via the Irkeshtam pass (3.000 m).

As for the *Gardaneh-ye Nir* caravanserai, it is located on the foothills of the Elbourz massif, on a route linking Tabriz to Ardebil via Sarāb, crossing the Nir pass (2.200m), near by to which it is located. This route ensured to leave the main south continental route of the Elbourz in order to go past on the north, hot and humid side of this massif and to take the route going along the Caspian Sea⁶, before joining the main route at Mashad.

So, the two caravanserais have first similarities as for their respective locations: locations on alternate routes, layouts at high altitude (more than 2.000m for Gardaneh-ye-Nir and more than 3.200m for Tash Rabat), near by high passes.

Architectural features

On the set of architectural features of these structures, I shall emphasize for my part seven ones which seem to me significant.

1 – Both caravanserais are completely covered. This feature resulting from their mountainous location enabled these structures to give to caravans and travelers the necessary protection against heavy climatic conditions, especially cold and snow prevailing during a large part of the year⁷. Nevertheless, it should be noted this feature is not particular to mountainous caravanserais. Indeed, this one is shared, in very various geo-climatic context by some roadside caravanserais of Anatolia⁸, Armenia⁹, Arabic-Persian gulf¹⁰, Kazakhstan's steppe¹¹ as well as urban caravanserais¹².

⁶ This difficult route and, because of that, not much used had to cross numerous torrents and rivers coming down sides of this mountainous massif the summit of which (Damavend mount) reaches 5.670 m at its peak .

⁷ « Dans les montagnes d'Iran, les tempêtes de neiges sont violentes et soudaines, chaque année plusieurs caravanes sont englouties. » SIROUX, M., *Caravansérails d'Iran et petites constructions routières*, IFAO, Tome LXXXI, Le Caire, 1949, p.35.

⁸ Seljuk caravanserais studied firstly by K. Erdmann (c.f. ERDMANN, K., *Das Anatolische Karavanseray des 13. Jahrhunderts*, Ester Teil Ed., Istanbuler Forschungen, Band 21, Berlin 1-2-3, 1961-1976) who did the first typology and paved the way for an important set of subsequent studies. See in particular the whole set of Ezinepazar han, Egret han, Horozlu han, Kadin han, Oresin han, Sarafsa han and Susuz han.

⁹ See in particular the Selim et Zor caravanserais.

¹⁰ See in particular the whole set of caravanserais Bād-e-ney , Berke-ye-soltān , Bargeh-sefid, et Bargeh-se ta, in the Iranian Hormozgan province or the Shaik , Chah Baghin et Houz-khan Panj caravanserais, in the province of Kerman. Cf. W. Kleiss and M. Y. Kiani, *Iranian caravanserais*, ICHTO, Tehran, 1995, p. 313-16 et 295, 306 et 308.

¹¹ See the Akyrtas caravanserai n° 4 (VIII-IXème siècle), in Kazakhstan, cf. l'Inventaire UNESCO, op.cit.

¹² See in particular the khans Ass'ad Pacha and Suleiman Pacha, in Damascus or khan Marjan in Bagdad.

Besides, as most of roadside caravanserais, some mountainous caravanserais have a central court surrounded by rooms. Therefore, a mountainous location is not a sufficient constraint for leading to the total cover of a caravanserai. Other constraints had to be brought together in order these structure have this specific configuration, in particular, either a continental geo-climatic location, or a high altitude and the immediate nearness of a pass. As we have just seen it, these three elements are present for these two caravanserais and explain this general feature.

2 - Their building material is stone block quarried on place. Tash rabat (in Kyrgyz language, *tash* means stone) is built of schist block, of various sizes, roughcasted with clay mortar. For Gardaneh-ye-Nir, I have not ant information concerning the nature of stones, except that, from W. Kleiss, it is very rough.

3 – The dimensions of caravanserais, without being identical, are comparable: 32,4 m x 32,8 m for Tash Rabat and 29 m x 18,5 m for Gardaneh-ye-Nir¹³. (Fig. 2, 3)

4 – They have both rounded corner turrets. If this feature is common in roadside caravanserais, it is not in mountainous caravanserais. Indeed, most of these structures do not comprise them. However, one will note some differences : Tash rabat, half buried in mountainside, have only two big turrets on each sides of entrance, when Gardaneh-ye-Nir, built on a little hillock, have four plus two turrets in the middle of lateral walls, getting in this way, for this feature, similar to some roadside caravanserais.

5 - Both caravanserais have a central layout axis leading, on both sides, to some symmetry of rooms. On each ones of axis there is an entrance hall and, major element, a large central hall. Large angled halls have similar dimensions: about 7,00m x 7,00m for Gardaneh-ye-Nir and 7,00m x 8,50m for Tash Rabat.

The entrance halls and halls are opening on:

- Galleries, of comparable dimensions, covered with pointed barrel vaults, and holed by some oculi.
- little rooms, covered by either little cupolas holed each ones by a little central oculus (Tash Rabat), or in a way similar to galleries (Gardaneh-ye-Nir).

One will note that, in Gardaneh-ye-Nir, all galleries are parallel to the central axis when in Tash Rabat, these ones are either parallel or perpendicular to this axis. In addition, little rooms are numerous in Tash Rabat when Gardaneh-ye-Nir has only two rooms.

6 - Each hall is covered by a large dome which indicates very strongly the structure from outside. These domes, comparable by their dimensions, have on the outside a general shape of bonnet¹⁴ (Fig. 4, 5, 6, 7). Their corner surfaces linking to vertical parts of halls are very little elaborated not to say primitive: corbels in Tash Rabat, squinches in Gardaneh-ye-Nir¹⁵.

However, one will note some important differences:

- the Tash Rabat's dome is made of three successive and clearly identifiable parts (a first octagonal designed part forming a drum and having four side openings; a second slightly ovoid part and a third part having four little openings and an oculus) when the

¹³ Without the adjacent structure of whom W. Kleiss had planned traces, in his opinion, from a later date. Probably it is for a lack of sufficient information (this adjacent structure was completely ruined when he planned it) that the recent restoration of this caravanserai skipped parts of it, as well as the jointed enclosure.

¹⁴ This shape is not visible on plans which were done. Nevertheless it is obvious particularly at Tash Rabat ; much less in the restoration of Gardaneh-ye Nir. However, it appears explicitly on the photograph done by W. Kleiss, en 1987.

¹⁵ After a telephone discussion with W. Kleiss, this point could not be clearly established. W. Kleiss hesitates between entre corbels and primitive squinches.

one of Gardaneh-ye Nir, all in one piece, has a slightly ovoid internal profile and one oculus¹⁶.

- the intrados of the Tash Rabat's dome was, originally plastering covered comprising carved decorative details when there is no information concerning possible traces of internal plastering on the one of Gardaneh-ye-Nir.

7 – At least, pointed arched entrance portal of both structures, have similar dimensions. However, the one of Gardaneh-ye Nir is simply in the entrance wall when the one of Tash rabat is inserted in a massive porch forming a kind of pishtak (Fig. 8, 9).

To sum up, in spite of numerous and important differences, the Tash Rabat and Gardaneh-ye-Nir caravanserais have, obviously, major similarities:

- Similar geographical locations on high mountains and alternate caravan routes,
- Similar building materials and general shapes with comparable dimensions,
- Similar architectural features: corner turrets, central layout axis, nearly complete symmetry of rooms, angled main halls, large domes,
- Galleries covered with pointed barrel vaults, similar entrance portals.

Provisional conclusions

These similarities are not due to chance. They make these two structures unquestionably closer and, moreover, distinguish them from all existing mountains caravanserais: indeed, to my knowledge, there is no other caravanserai having all these features¹⁷.

Therefore, which thoughts and hypothesis is it possible to put forward?

1 – These similarities bring additional arguments for the Tash Rabat's identification as a caravanserai, identification questioned still few years ago.

2 – Without going as far as to say that both structure have the same architect, one is entitled to suppose there was, at least, influences and/or diffusions of architectural knowledge. In which way? Until now, nothing ensures to know it. Nevertheless, for historical reasons and by the fact that Tash Rabat has architectural elements more advanced than the ones of Gardaneh-ye-Nir, it seems that these transmissions would have probably been from Seljukids to Karakhanids. Therefore, it would have been transmission and development of an architectural model which seems to have had no subsequent descendance.

3 – Probably the dating of Gardaneh-ye-Nir is able to be specified: if the slightly ovoid shape of the central dome's intrados have a similarity with Sasanid structures, the argument is not sufficient for dating this structure from that time. Seems more significant the cover of galleries (pointed barrel vaults): this one pleads for a probable Seljuk origin as Maxime Siroux felt it for the nearly identical vaults of the Néré caravanserai (located precisely on the same route) he dated "*probably from 12th century*"¹⁸.

¹⁶ From the plan of W. Kleiss, this skylight was, apparently, very little. Nevertheless, the photograph he did at the same date shows a larger central opening. The only photograph I have concerning this structure (done in 2007, therefore after restoration) shows a very large circular opening at the top of the dome. I do not know the reason of these differences.

¹⁷ However, two other Iranian caravanserais are similar: The one of Néré located, also, precisely on the same ancient Tabriz-Ardebil via Sarāb route and the one of Gambouch located between to dangerous ancient passes linking Amol to Rey (currently Tehran). If they are both located in the same way (high altitudes, nearness of passes) and have similar features, nevertheless, they differ by very more little dimensions and the absence of corner turret. In addition, the Gambouch caravanserai have a concentric design: its galleries surround the central space and have sectional vaults. cf. SIROUX, M., op. cit. pp. 35-6.

¹⁸ SIROUX M., op. cit. p. 36, notice (2).

4 – By this way, the Tash Rabat's dating would be able to be also specified. Indeed, nearly at the same time¹⁹, the Karakhanid oriental kingdom had to recognize the Seljuk's sovereignty, admittedly more limited than the one of the occidental kingdom.

Would have Tash Rabat been built at that time?

This short comparative study having been carried out only on documents, the analysis elements as well as provisional put forward conclusions will have to be confirmed (or will be perhaps invalidated) by in the field studies.

Nevertheless, I hope having drawn attention to the remarkable characteristics of these two structures and encouraged researchers and students to pursue the investigation of the huge and fascinating field of studies that are caravanserais and caravan routes.

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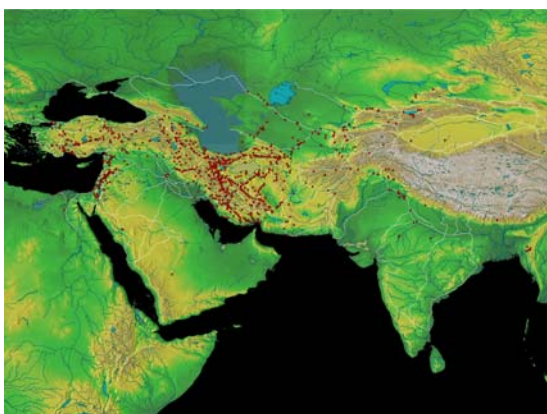
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- Photograph (J. Salmon, mai 2006).
- Telephone discussion with W. Kleiss done through R. Wimmel, Berlin, August 2011.

¹⁹ Under the reign of (Hasan) or Harun (1075-1102 AD.)

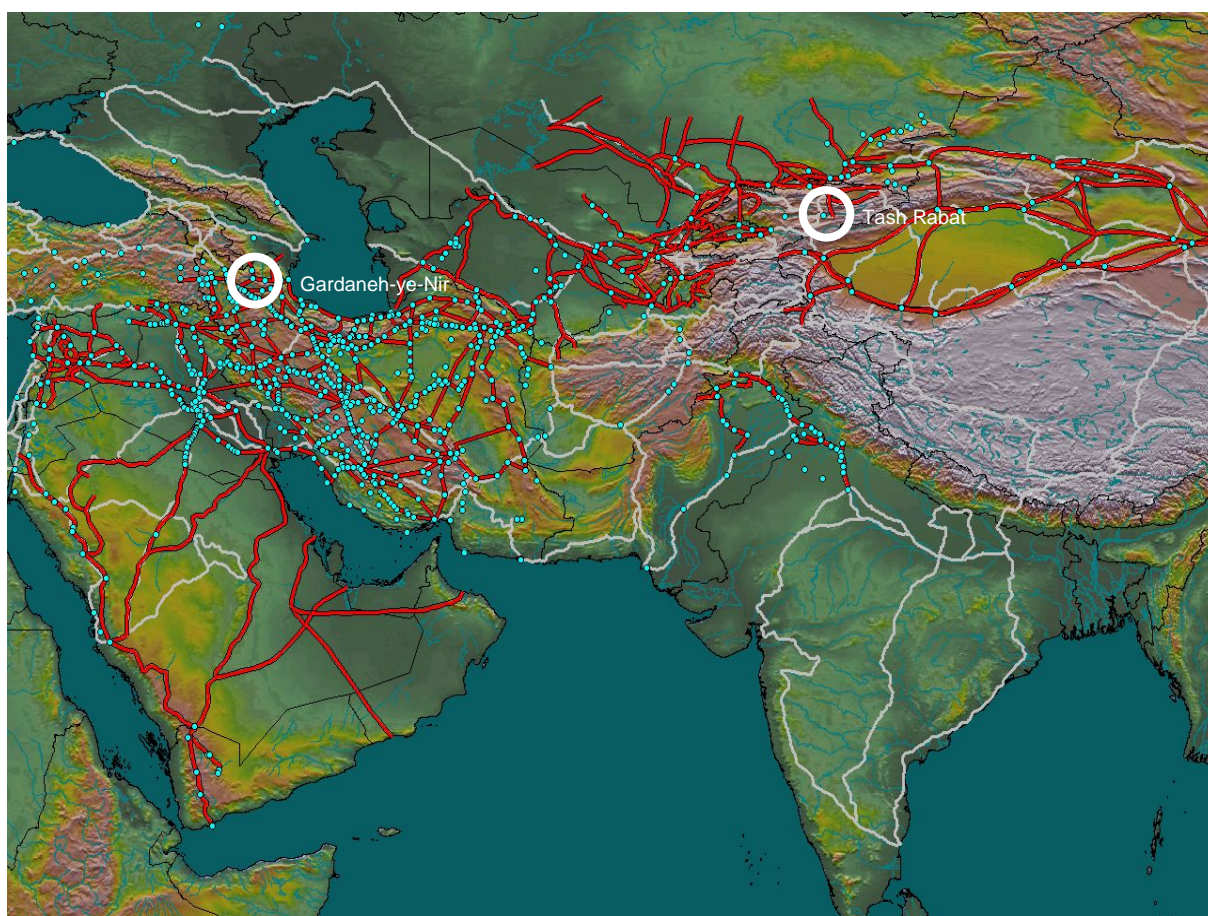
TASH RABAT ET GARDANEH-YE-NIR - PLANCHE 1



Principaux tracés des routes de la soie (Source: Univ. Nara)



Inventaire UNESCO des caravansérails (Source : CIERAM)



Inventaire des caravansérails et routes caravanières (Source : CIERAM – EVCAU)

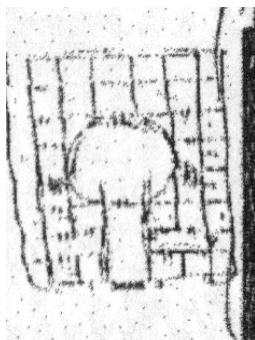


Fig. 1 : Schéma de C. Valikhanov

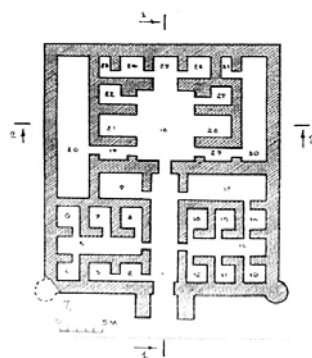


Fig. 2 : Tash Rabat – Plan

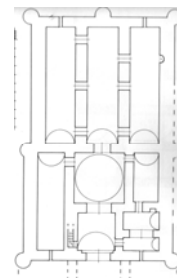


Fig. 3 : Gardaneh-ye-Nir - Plan

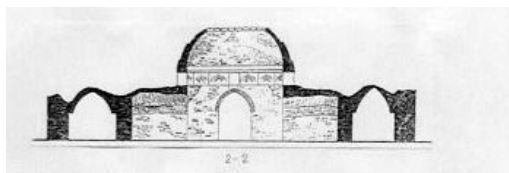


Fig. 4 : Tash Rabat – Coupe transversale
Avant restauration

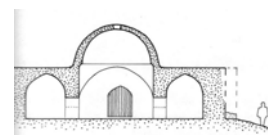


Fig. 5 : Gardaneh-ye-Nir – Coupe transversale

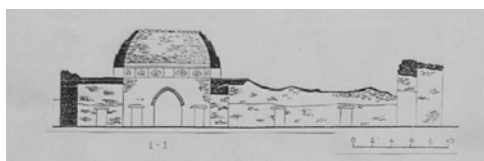


Fig. 6 : Tash Rabat – Coupe longitudinale
Avant restauration

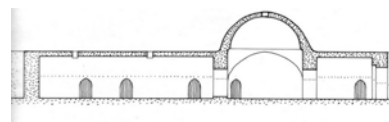


Fig. 7 : Gardaneh-ye-Nir – Coupe longitudinale



Fig. 8 : Tash Rabat – Photo façade d'accès



Fig. 9 : Gardaneh-ye-Nir – Photo façade d'accès