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Vague Traits
Strategy and Ambiguities in the Decorative Programme of the Aḥmad Šāh I Bahmanī Mausoleum

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Abstract   The essay reconsiders the decorative programme of the Aḥmad Šāh I Bahmanī (r. 1422-1436) mausoleum in Ashtur (Bidar, modern Karnataka) focusing, in particular, on the inscriptions adorning the dome. The reign of the ninth Bahmanī sovereign was marked by a growing complexity as far as the socio-political and religious context is concerned, and also, by a deepening divide between *āfāqīs* and *dakhnīs*, and the arrival of the first exponents of the Ni'matullāhiyya Sufi order in the Deccan. The region witnessed a marked interplay between temporal and spiritual power, and the religious orientation of Aḥmad Šāh I remains debated. By making some specific remarks concerning the decorative scheme and the epigraphic programme of the mausoleum, we not only discuss the idea of the king's adherence to Shi'a Islam, but also provide valid support for historians wishing to reconsider the process of Shi'ization of Deccan and of the Sufi order itself.

Keywords   Bahmanī. Deccan. Funerary architecture. Religious identity. Shi'a. Ni'matullāhiyya.

In a recently published work (Mondini 2015) I have sought to trace the evolution of the perception of the mausoleum dedicated to Aḥmad Šāh I (r. 1422-1436), the ninth sovereign of the Bahmanī dynasty (1347-1527), who was responsible – according to the sources – for establishing the Ni'matullāhiyya order in the Deccan. While that contribution focused on the modern sharing of the structure by members of different faiths, on its frequentation and veneration, I now wish to examine its decorative scheme and the political and religious discourse it inherently promotes. For this purpose, I will start with some considerations that emerged during the conference *Shi'i Spirituality and Sufi Paths in Early and Modern Times*, held at Ca' Foscari University, Venice, 2014.[1] Among other topics, participants discussed the Ni'matullāhiyya order and its development in the Indian Subcontinent.

Despite the widespread idea of what could be defined as a 'late

Shi'ization' of the Deccani branch of the *tariqa*, in my opinion the issue of the religious orientation of the sovereign – and indirectly of his relation with the firsts Deccani exponents of the order – remains open. I am convinced that some remarks concerning the decorative scheme of the mausoleum could constitute a valid support for historians – including religious historians – wishing to reconsider the issue and the Shi'ization process of the region, as well as of the order.

As rightly stated by Speziale in his paper at the above-mentioned conference and in his article (2013, pp. 92-93; 2014), soon after the foundation of the Ni'matullāhiyya in Iran, the Deccani region became the crucial setting for the development of the order over the following four centuries. For a better understanding of the spread and phases of development of the brotherhood, its 'Indian history' must be divided into two main periods: in the first, Bidar – then the capital of the Bahmanī Kingdom and today in the modern state of Karnataka – served as main centre, while in the second period, which roughly began in the mid-seventeenth century, the order moved to the Hyderabad area, in the modern state of Telengana (Speziale 2013, pp. 92-94).

Studies on Deccan history, religion, and art have shown how in the region the issue of sovereigns' adherence to Shi'a Islam, and of the Shi'ization of orders – as is the case of the Ni'matullāhiyya – before the seventeenth century, is no small matter (Haig 1924, pp. 73-80; Rizvi 1986, pp. 251-256; Siddiqi 1989, pp. 78-85). This was a complicated phase from a sociopolitical and religious point of view, where we witness a marked interplay between temporal and spiritual power, here embodied by the numerous Sufi brotherhoods. At the same time, the power of what had emerged as a firm Sunni majority (whose members are known as *dakhnīs* or *mulkīs*), appears to have been affected by the emergence of a new class of immigrants coming from central Asia (*āfāqīs* or *ghayr-mulkīs*), increasingly of Shi'i orientation. This complexity, which has been analysed in various works (Sherwani 1985; Coslovi 1990; Khalidi 1990; Sherwani 1990; Eaton 2008), does not appear to be completely elucidated by the inaccurate (or unreliable) sources we have,[2] making it difficult to reconstruct both the religious view of the members of the main dynasties and the orientation of some religious orders, as well as to trace any doctrinal shift.

However, in this morass of gaps that are still waiting to be bridged, historians can sometimes find support in artistic and architectural evidence. Fortunately, in recent decades the Deccani heritage has attracted the attention

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2 On the sources concerning the Ni'matullāhiyya see Speziale (2013, pp. 95-96). On the sources concerning the history of the Bahmanī dynasty a good overview was offered by Fischel on the occasion of the Simon Digby Memorial Conference (Fischel 2014). What remains emblematic, for instance, is the negative opinion on Firishta, one of the main sources we have on Bahmanī history (Hardy 1977, pp. 943-945).
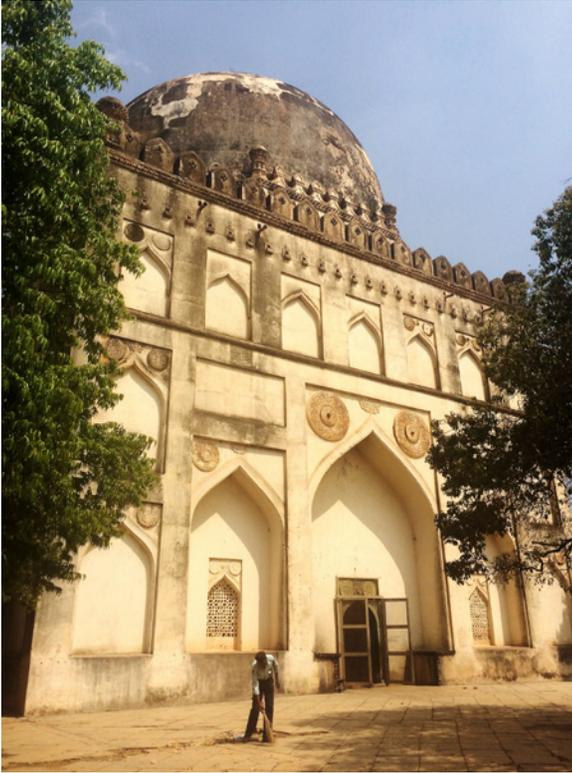
Figure 1. The mausoleum of Aḥmad Šāh I Bahmanī, exterior (photo: Mondini, 2015)

of art historians; but despite the high quality of recent research,[3] because of the amount of monuments and their state of disrepair much evidence is still waiting to undergo more accurate and systematic investigation.

It is in this context, then, that I believe an analysis of the decorative program – and particularly the inscriptions – of the dome and the internal walls of the mausoleum of Aḥmad Šāh I Bahmanī (figs. 2-4) suggests the idea of an adherence to Shi'a Islam by the sovereign, and could perhaps contribute to future studies on the development of the Ni'matullāhiyya in the Deccan region.

The mausoleum attributed to Aḥmad Šāh I (fig. 1) is located 2.5 km away from Bidar, within the last Bahmanī royal necropolis, which encloses the tombs of the sovereigns based in the capital. The renowned funerary complex was erected north-east of the city, on the road leading to the vil-

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3 See for example the proceedings of the two last great conferences dedicated to Deccani artistic productions (Haidar, Sardar 2011; Parodi 2014).

lage of Ashtur.[4] The structure – which inaugurated the complex that was later expanded, up until 1527 – both symbolically and artistically seems to perfectly meet the requirement of preserving the memory of the sovereign while epitomizing Bahmanī power, in keeping with a consolidated tradition of patronage perpetuated by many of the Islamic dynasties that ruled the Indian Subcontinent.

The choice of locating the structure in a different city from that of the mausoleums ascribed to the previous sovereigns – all of which are in Gulbarga[5] – was probably due to the move of the capital and the religious and political context at the beginning of Aḥmad Šāh I's reign. The sultan's ascent to the throne was deeply marked by internal struggles between opposing factions, which had broken out with the contrast between himself and his brother and predecessor, Fīrūz Šāh (r. 1397-1422).

Thus, in order to fully understand the early history of the Ni'matullāhiyya in the Deccan, as well as its connection to the ruling authorities and its influence, it is necessary to analyse the political and historical circumstances in which the order was established.[6]

During his reign, Fīrūz Šāh, a man of culture and a generous patron, promoted an agreement between the temporal power held by his dynasty and the spiritual power exercised by the Sufi brotherhoods rooted in the area. Despite the fact that the Bahmanī dynasty had hitherto remained of strict Sunni observance, during Fīrūz Šāh's reign Shi'a Islam acquired an increasingly important role in the Deccan. Probably in the wake of the influx of new settlers from the west – especially Iran and Iraq – and the arrival at court of the 'new immigrants', the *āfāqīs*, the Shi'i doctrine also started spreading among the local population (Eaton 1978, pp. 40-43; Rizvi 1986, pp. 248-251; Coslovi 1990, pp. 97-121). However, until then, the sovereign had been capable of preserving the crucial balance between the various social and religious components of his kingdom – the very balance that was probably lost during the later history of the dynasty.

What probably contributed to the rise of Aḥmad Šāh I to the throne was the deterioration of the relations between Fīrūz Šāh and Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusaynī Gīsūdirāz (d. 1422), the famous representative of the Čishtiyya

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4 The complex consists of a small funerary mosque, thirteen mausoleums, and a series of minor tombs and secondary structures that are now in a very poor state (Yazdani 1995, pp. 114-140; Philon 2012, pp. 91-99).

5 Gulbarga today is known under the name of Kalaburagi. In October 2014, the Indian government approved the plan to change the name of twelve cites in the state of Karnataka, proposing a return to the old Kannada names. In the case of Gulbarga the change brought some protest from Muslims.

6 For the sake of my argument, it is necessary to provide an exhaustive summary of relevant historical and political events. The overview that follows is based on my abovementioned article (Mondini 2015).

Figure 2. The mausoleum of Aḥmad Šāh I Bahmanī, interior (photo: Mondini, 2015)

Figure 3. Aḥmad Šāh I Bahmanī mausoleum, interior. Pictorial decoration and its state of preservation (photo: Mondini, 2015)

Figure 4. Aḥmad Šāh I Bahmanī mausoleum, interior. Pictorial decoration of the dome (photo: Mondini, 2015)

order, whose *dargāh* is still one of the most visited Islamic pilgrimage sites in south-central India. After settling in Gulbarga during the early years of Fīrūz Šāh's reign, Gīsūdirāz received a warm welcome from the sovereign and acquired a leading role. However, the disagreements between the two soon undermined the popularity of the sultan, much to the benefit of Aḥmad Šāh I, who meanwhile had won the religious leader's favour.[7]

Only a few months after the new ruler came to power, Gīsūdirāz passed away. His death marked not only the disappearance of a figure who had played a crucial role in the social and religious context of the city – and in the history of the dynasty – but also the loss of the main supporter and advocate of Aḥmad Šāh I's political success. It seems likely that once he was deprived of such a popular supporter, the new sovereign came to be regarded as a usurper of his brother's throne and found himself at the mercy of the internal power struggles that had first broken out at the time of his succession. These circumstances may account for the sovereign's decision to move the capital from Gulbarga to Bidar. Aḥmad Šāh I probably hoped to set the political and religious policies of the dynasty on a new course; but in Bidar he still lacked a 'worthy legitimiser' – that is, an authoritative religious figure who might help him regain the consensus required for him to more firmly establish his throne. Aḥmad Šāh I therefore turned to Ni'matullāhiyya, the Iranian Sufi order, repeatedly inviting its leading representative to move to Bidar (Sherwani 1985, pp. 133-134; Siddiqi 1989, pp. 9-81). Following the move of the capital, this 'new' religious orientation, based on the choice of a new supporting and legitimising order, would further appear to confirm the idea of a change of course and the attempt on the sovereign's part to assuage possible critics. At the same time, the choice of the Ni'matullāhiyya must have seemed like an ideal way of dealing with the by then unstoppable social transformations taking place in the Deccan: as a strategic way of consolidating the support given to the ruler by the new class of *āfāqīs* from central Asia. The latter were growing in number and were increasingly becoming involved in politics and opposed to the *dakhnīs*, the political class of the 'Deccanis', the long-established immigrants form the Delhi Sultanate and their descendants.

Ni'matullāh (d. 1430), the founder of the Iranian order, initially turned down the sovereign's offer. A few years later, however, upon Aḥmad Šāh I's insistence, he agreed to send his grandson Nūrullāh to court. This latter was given an extraordinary welcome and the sovereign bestowed upon him

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[7] The deterioration of the relations between Gīsūdirāz and Fīrūz Šāh eventually led the latter to ask the shaykh of the Čištiyya to leave his *khānqāh* – which, according to the sources of the period, was situated in the immediate environs of the palace (Firishta 2006, p. 240; Eaton 2008, p. 52). With regard to this event, it is important to note the importance of the location of royal mausoleums and *dargāhs*, as well as their reciprocal proximity within the urban context (Sherwani 1985, pp. 130-131; Mondini 2009).

the title of *malik al-mašā'ikh*, thus in a way asserting his authority over all orders in the area. Following the death of Ni'matullāh, his son Khalīlullāh (d. 1455) – Nūrullāh's father – also moved to the Bahmanī court (Sherwani 1985, p. 134; Siddiqi 1989, pp. 80-83; Aubin 1991, pp. 239-241).

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the historical and political developments that took place in this phase of Bahmanī rule is Aḥmad Šāh I's enduring attempt not just to consolidate his political role but to establish his authority in the religious sphere as well. Ever since the time of his close contact with Gīsūdirāz, the sovereign had drawn attention for his devotion, not least through his frequent visits to the latter's *khānqāh*. But it was only after the death of his legitimiser that Aḥmad Šāh I's efforts and ambitions seem to emerge most clearly. In this respect, a turning point in the transformation of the sovereign's image would appear to have occurred through his initial contacts with Ni'matullāh, through which the ruler acquired new prestige, adopting the title of *walī*, which in a Sufi context is generally attributed to religious figures (Mondini 2015, pp. 132-133). According to Siddiqi, the title was bestowed on the ruler by Ni'matullāh (1989, p. 80). The latter, having declined the sovereign's invitation to take up residence at the Bahmanī court, nonetheless apparently sent him a letter of 'initiation', addressing him by the title of *walī* and sending him «a cap of discipleship and a robe authorizing the sultan to act as Ni'matullāh's disciple» (Rizvi 1986, pp. 251-252). As already noted by Yazdani, the origin of the title is all but clear (1995, p. 115).[8] Although the title, according to the sources, occurred in the *khuṭba* and appears on Bahmanī coinage from the period, the only material evidence comes from the reign of Aḥmad Šāh I's successor, 'Alauddin Aḥmad II (r. 1436-1458) (Khan 1964, p. 97; Yazdani 1995, p. 115).

One may cynically assume, then, that after witnessing a 'delay' in the emergence of a new authoritative legitimiser of his power, Aḥmad Šāh I chose to invest himself with the spiritual authority necessary to gain legitimacy, thus seeking to merge his role as a political guide with his new role as a spiritual one. This newly acquired prestige and the way in which the figure of the ruler evolved over the following decades and centuries eventually led to his consecration and veneration as a saint. Still, it is difficult to trace the various stages of this 'construction of identity' in any detail and to establish whether – and to what extent – it was 'planned', or

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8   Firishta traces the origin of the title bestowed to Aḥmad Šāh I back to a miracle, which the sovereign reputedly performed by bringing rain during a drought through the power of his prayers, thus stirring his subjects' fervor and devotion (Firishta 2006, p. 250). The attribution of the 'rain miracle' to Aḥmad Šāh I, however, can easily be identified as one of the most recurrent *topoi* in Islamic hagiography, which frequently ascribes the effective use of *ṣalāt al-istisqā'* (lit. 'prayer for the rain') to religious figures throughout history. The explanation of the title by the historiographer would appear not so much to reflect actual reality as to effectively meet the need to sanctify the sovereign.

simply the outcome of a lucky coincidence which the sovereign succeeded in seizing and making the most of politically. What is certain is that Aḥmad Šāh I not only came to be acknowledged and counted among the followers of the Ni'matullāhiyya, but was also assigned the title of *walī* – in the sense of 'saint', rather than simply 'disciple'[9] – and credited with miracles and healing powers. On his part, moreover, the sovereign bound his family to that of his new legitimiser, blending his own line with the *silsila* of the Ni'matullāhiyya order even more closely (Siddiqi 1989, p. 161).

Aḥmad Šāh I thus came to superimpose his alleged qualities as a spiritual authority upon his role as sovereign. These qualities, which continue to be celebrated to this day, led to the veneration of his figure and tomb – much in the same way as the most important Sufi saints of the Deccan, and of India more generally, are venerated. Following Aḥmad Šāh I's death, his son and heir to the throne 'Alauddin Aḥmad II had a magnificent mausoleum erected in his father's honour: it is a gem of late Bahmanī architecture and is now a *ziyāra* destination. Both 'Alauddin Aḥmad II and his successor, 'Alauddin Humayun Zalim (r. 1458-1461) also minted coins proclaiming them as the descendants of Aḥmad Šāh I Walī (Khan 1964, pp. 97, 112).

The new fame and the new role bestowed upon the figure of Aḥmad Šāh I are clearly reflected today by the powers attributed to his tomb, and especially by the acknowledged importance of visiting it. Locally, the tomb is even regarded as being a more important destination than the nearby *dargāh* devoted to Khalīlullāh Kirmāni, his descendant and disciple.[10] While, strictly speaking, the funerary structure devoted to him cannot be regarded as a *dargāh* – since in India the term is usually restricted to funerary complexes devoted to saints and representatives of Sufi brotherhoods – and although the appeal exercised by the mausoleum cannot be compared to that of the main *dargāhs* in the region, such as Khuldabad or the *dargāh* dedicated to Gīsūdirāz at Gulbarga,

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9 The Arab term *walī* covers a range of meanings related to the authority, protection, and care exercised by the *walī* towards the people who entrust themselves to him (for God is the best *walī*). A complementary meaning of *walī* is 'servant': the term designates the loyal and obedient servant who loves his lord and hence is close to him. Thus, in our specific context, the term *walī* acquires a meaning very close to that of *mawlā* (which stems from the same root and literally describes the personal, intimate servant of a master, who enjoys his proximity and trust). Just like the *mawlā*, within the limits of his subordinate position, the *walī* is a friend to his master, whose will he perfectly conforms to. Hence the translation of the term *walī* as 'saint', friend of God, as a confirmation of his proximity to the divine (Mondini 2015, pp. 132-133).

10 Whereas the pilgrimage to Ahmad I Shah's mausoleum and the veneration of his tomb would appear to have become established practices – destined to endure more or less uninterruptedly down to the present – immediately after the ruler's death, what makes the modern interpretation of the site and the rites connected to it even more difficult is the acknowledgment of the religious authority of Aḥmad Šāh I on the part of Hindus as well, and especially of *Lingayats* (Mondini 2015).

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the monument still continues to attract thousands of pilgrims. The great celebrations that takes place each year on the anniversary of the rulers' death (*'urs*)[11] and the constant stream of Hindu and Muslim pilgrims who make their way across the silent countryside to pay homage to the tomb, intrinsically reveal how the religious authority of Aḥmad Šāh I has long outweighed his role as a sovereign. A range of different powers are attributed to the ruler-saint: healing powers, the ability to solve fertility problems, and more generally the possibility of acting as an intermediary with God – by virtue of his proximity to the divine as a *walī* – and hence the capacity to dispense *baraka*. As is customary, after Aḥmad Šāh I's death, the powers attributed to him were transferred to his tomb, which became a symbol of his presence and charisma and a physical means for their transmission.

While the dynamics of the mausoleum's frequentation have been discussed elsewhere (Sherwani 1985, pp. 135-137; Sikand 2003, pp. 82-83; Yazdani 1995, pp. 115-116; Mondini 2015, pp. 133-141), for the sake of the present enquiry it is important to examine the stylistic elements of the structure and the information we can infer from them.

In the Deccan as elsewhere, artistic and architectural patronage met the constant need to represent political power and fulfil propaganda requirements by visually conveying the distinguishing features of ruling dynasties. This often meant the use of select registers and especially inspiring models and symbolic elements even in the architectural field: as might be expected, the peculiarities of patronised monuments and their specific location at times make up for existing gaps in terms of identity or religious orientation. From this point of view, the mausoleum of Aḥmad Šāh I constitutes a striking example.[12]

In terms of shape – a quadrangular layout with a domed roof – and exterior decorations, the building (fig. 1) reflects models and tendencies commonly adopted in the region, starting from the model of the mausoleum dedicated to the first legitimiser of Aḥmad Šāh I, Gīsūdirāz.[13] The

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[11] From Arabic *'urs*, lit. 'marriage', it stands for the union with one's beloved – the divine. In Muslim India, annual celebrations of this kind are usually reserved for Sufi saints: they are meant to commemorate the saints' union with God on the anniversary of their death. While it is true that throughout its history India has also witnessed celebrations held for the *'urs* of sovereigns such as Aurangzēb (d. 1707) and Mumtāz Mahal (d. 1631), or of famous poets such as Bīdel (d. 1720) (Green 2004, p. 135, 142), contemporary research enables us to appreciate just how striking the endurance of the celebrations for Aḥmad Šāh I are, and what great influence they exert – at least on a regional level (Mondini 2015).

[12] I wish to thank my colleague Vicente Martì Tormo for the endless discussions and fruitful critical exchanges we had during the drafting of this work.

[13] Although some scholars stress the differences between the mausoleums dedicated to Gīsūdirāz, Fīrūz Šāh and Aḥmad Šāh I, a broader comparative analysis of the Bahmanī buildings in Gulbarga and Bidar brings out the main features shared by the three mon-

interior, however, presents some of the most remarkable and sophisticated decorations to be found in the region. Despite their serious deterioration, it is possible to appreciate how both the walls and the dome originally featured a magnificent painted decorative programme consisting of floral arabesques of Persian inspiration, interspersed with geometrical motifs and calligraphic bands skilfully developed according to the *kufi*, *naskh* and *thuluth* styles (figs. 3-4).

The complex decorative programme of the building – which finds no parallel in fifteenth-century Indo-Islamic art[14] (figs. 3-5) – is mentioned in all the leading studies published on the artistic heritage of the region, as well as in relation to its political and religious history. Yazdani provides an accurate description of the decorative elements and a partial translation of the inscriptions (1995, pp. 114-128). The omissions are probably due to the poor state of conservation of the decorations in the 1950s (p. 114) – and the situation nowadays is even worse. The limited visibility, due to the little light filtering through the entrance and the lower *jalis*, combined with the poor state of conservation of the decorations, makes the inscriptions difficult to identify and decipher.

In recent years, the restoration of the painted decorations has only concerned a small part of the interior walls. Still, they have proven useful insofar as they have brought back the bright colours which now give visitors an idea of the original splendour of the interior. Aside from whole fragments of inscriptions that are flaking off or are covered in grime, traces are to be found of recent alterations, although it is unclear whether these only affected the colour of the inscriptions or also their text.[15] As things stand, the decorations on the wall are difficult to interpret and a complete analysis is impossible. What seems comparatively easier is an analysis of the epigraphic bands on the dome (figs. 4, 6), which may provide the information required for the sake of the present argument.

The painted decorations, recently described by Philon (2000), bring out the layout of the interior. While the lower section is punctuated by blind

uments, namely their general layout and the exterior as well as the interior decorative elements.

14   Philon notes how the painted decorations of the mausoleum not only find no parallel in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century south-Asian art, but may be regarded as important evidence for Islamic painting in this period, which is otherwise only evidenced by limited Yemenite, early Ottoman, and Timurid examples (2000, p. 5).

15   In certain cases the colours visible today appear to be inverted compared to Yazdani's descriptions. For instance, Yazdani describes the background of the inscriptions enclosed within the eight ovals as red, while today it looks dark (possibly dark green), and traces of red only survive within certain letters (fig. 4) (Yazdani 1995, p. 118). Moreover, the lower inscription, skirting the four walls of the mausoleum, would appear to have been touched-up, even though it is not entirely legible (fig. 5).

Figure 5. Aḥmad Šāh I Bahmanī mausoleum, interior. Pictorial decoration of the walls, epigraphic bands (photo: Mondini, 2015)
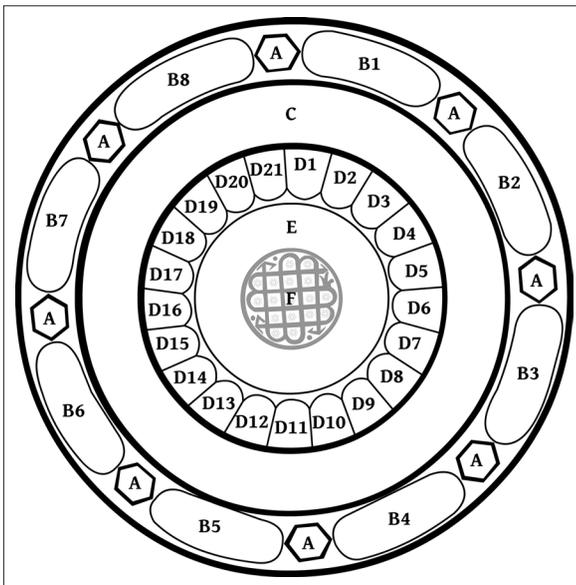

Figure 6. Aḥmad Šāh I Bahmanī mausoleum, interior. Pictorial decoration of the dome, analysis diagram of the epigraphic bands

niches, mouldings, and panels chiefly adorned with geometric and floral patterns, the upper section is centred around the dome: the painted decorations mark its outline, drawing the viewer's gaze towards the apex. The strength of the decorative programme lies in the remarkable variety of shapes and the sophisticated, marked contrast of colours that seem to envelop the whole space, lending depth to the representations, and especially to the textual element – the guiding thread of the decorative programme.

The dome is partitioned by a series of concentric bands (figs. 4, 6). The first, just above the zone of transition, are filled with plant motifs, while the upper bands include extensive inscriptions.[16]

The first epigraphic ring (fig. 6; A, B) comprises eight oval panels with blessings on the Prophet, his descendants and other prophets, interspersed with small hexagons with ʿAlī's name repeated over and over. An analysis of the inscriptions shows that Yazdani's interpretation and translation are largely correct:

Inscription and translation (figs. 4, 6):[17]

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم. اللّهمّ صلّ على محمّد   B1
امّا اختلف الملوان والتعاقب العصران وتكرر الجديدان   B2
واضاء القمران بلّغ منّا روح محمّد تحيّةً وسلاماً و   B3
اللّهمّ صلّ على محمّد عبدك ورسولك النبي الامّي   B4
وعلى آل محمّد وسلّم اللّهمّ صلّ على محمّد سيّد الاوّالين   B5
وصلّ على محمّد سيّد الآخرين اللّهمّ صلّ على محمّد وعلى   B6
آل محمّد وسلّم وبارك وصلّ على جميع الانبياء والمرسلين و   B7
الملائكة المقربين وعبادك الصالحين والحمد لله ربّ العالمين   B8

B1   In the name of God the Most Merciful and the Most Compassionate. Oh god bless Muḥammad

B2   until the day and night differ, and the two periods ('Past' and 'Present') come one in reverse succession to the other, and the day and night follow one another,

B3   and the two luminaries (sun and moon) shine. Convey from us to the soul of Muḥammad benedictions and salutations. And

B4   Oh God, bless Muḥammad, Thy servant and apostle, the illiterate Prophet,

B5   and the progeny of Muḥammad and assail them. Oh God bless Muḥammad, the lord of the early nations,

B6   and bless Muḥammad, the lord of the coming nations. Oh god bless Muḥammad and

B7   his descendants and assail them. And bless and grant benediction to all prophets and apostles sent by Thee,

16   It is worth noting that while these inscriptions are better preserved than the texts on the walls, in some parts they are still difficult to make out: any doubts concerning their interpretation have been flagged in the transcriptions and translations.

17   Translation quoted from Yazdani (1995, pp. 118-119 n. 4).

B8   all angels who are in close attendance on Thee, and all servants of
      Thine who are pious: and all praise unto god, the Cherisher of all
      the worlds.

The second ring (fig. 6; C), with no subdivisions, features a *silsila* linking
Niʻmatullāh to the founder of the Qādiriyya.[18]

Inscription and translation (figs. 4, 6):[19]

C

محمّد رسول الله, علي المرتضى, حسن البصري, حبيب العجمي, داود الطائي, معروف الكرخي,
سري السقطي, جنيد البغدادي, ابو علي رودباري, ابو علي الكاتب, ابو عثمان المغربي, الشيخ
ابو القاسم, أبو بكر النسّاج, احمد الغزالي, ابو الفضل البغدادي, ابو البركات ابو سعيد الاندلسي,
ابو مدين المغربي, ابو الفتوح السعيد, كمال الدين الكوفي, صالح التبريزي, عبد الله يافعي,
نعمت الله الحسيني

C

Muḥammad Rasūl Allāh, ʻAlī al-Murtaḍā, Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, Ḥabīb al-ʻAjamī,
Dāwud al-Ṭāʼī, Maʻrūf al-Karkhī, Sarī al-Saqaṭī, Junayd al-Bagdādī, Abū
ʻAlī Rūdbārī, Abū ʻAlī al-Kātib, Abū ʻUṯmān al-Magribī, al-Šayḫ Abū al-
Qāsim, Abū Bakr al-Nassāj, Aḥmad al-Gazzālī, Abū al-Faḍl al-Bagdādī,
Abū al-Barakāt Abū Saʼīd al-Andalusī, Abū Madyan al-Magribī, Abū al-
Futūḥ al-Saʼīd, Kamāl al-Dīn al-Kūfī, Ṣāliḥ al-Tibrīzī, ʻAbd Allāh Yāfiʼi,
Niʻmat Allāh al-Ḥusaynī

The third ring (fig. 6; D) is divided into twenty-one sections, each of which
encloses a name. Through this second *silsila*, an attempt is made to es-
tablish a connection between Niʻmatullāh and Junayd al-Bagdādī via the
former's distinguished disciple Abū ʻAlī Rūdbārī (Yazdani 1995, p. 115).

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18   It should be noted that Niʻmatullāhiyya is regarded as a sub-branch of the Qādiri order
(Siddiqi 1989, p. 78).

19   Transcription quoted from Yazdani (1995, p. 115 n. 3).

Inscription and translation (figs. 4, 6):[20]

داود D5 حبيب العجمي D4 حسن البصري D3 علي المرتضى D2 محمّد المصطفى D1
الشبلي (ابو بكر) D9 جُنيد البغدادي D8 سري السقطي D7 معروف الكرخي D6 الطائي
D10 علي الهكاري D12 ابو الفرح زنگاني D11 ابو الفضل التيمي
D13 ابو سعيد المحزمي (المحزومي؟)
D14 احمد الواسطي D17 محي الدين العربي D16 يونس التيمي D15 عبد القادر الجيلاني
D18 نعمت اللّٰه الولي D21 عبد الله (يافعي) D20 ابراهيم المكي D19 مجير......ني

D1 Muḥammad al-Muṣṭafā, D2 ʿAlī al-Murtaḍā, D3 Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, D4 Ḥabīb al-ʿAjamī, D5 Dāwud al-Ṭāʾī, D6 Maʿrūf al-Karkhī, D7 Sarī al-Saqa5ṭī, D8 Junayd al-Bagdādī, D9 al-Šiblī (Abū Bakr), D10 Abū al-Faḍl al-Tīmī, D11 Abū al-Faraj Zanğānī, D12 ʿAli al-Hikārī, D13 Abū Saʿīd al-Muḥzamī (al-Maḥzūmī?), D14 ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī, D15 Yūnis al-Tīmī, D16 Muḥīy al-Dīn al-ʿArabī, D17 Aḥmad al-Wāsiṭī, D18 Mujīr…nī, D19 Ibrāhīm al-Makkī, D20 ʿAbd Allāh (Yāfiʿī), D21 Niʾmat Allāh al-Walī

The fourth ring (fig. 6; E), again with no subdivisions, does not appear to have been transcribed or translated by Yazdani. It features an invocation (*durūd*) of the twelve imams of Twelver Shiʿa Islam, as well as of the Prophet Muḥammad and his daughter Fāṭima.

Inscription and translation (figs. 4, 6, 7):[21]

E

اللّٰهمّ صلِّ على محمّدٍ المصطفى وعليٍّ المرتضى وفاطمةَ الزهراء والحسن المجتبى والحسين
الشهيد بكربلاء وعليّ زين العابدين، ومحمّد الباقر، وجعفر الصادق، وموسى الكاظم، وعليّ الرضا،
ومحمّد الجواد، وعليّ الهادي، والحسن العسكري، والحجّة القائم محمّد المهدي

E

Allahumma ṣalli ʿalā muḥammad al-muṣṭafā wa-ʿalī al-murtaḍā wa-fāṭima al-zahrāʾ wa-l-ḥasan al-mujtabā wa-l-ḥusayn al-šahīd bi-karbalāʾ wa-ʿalī zayn al-ʿābidīn wa-muḥammad al-bāqir wa-jaʿfar al-ṣādiq wa-mūsā [mūsā] al-kāẓim wa-ʿalī al-riḍā, wa-muḥammad al-jawwād wa-l-ḥasan al-ʿaskarī wa-l-ḥujja al-qāʾim muḥammad al-mahdī

20 Transcription quoted from Yazdani (1995, p. 115 n. 3). Where Yazdani reads 'al-Tīmī' we should probably read 'al-Tamīmī' (D10; D15); and Abū al-Faraj Zanğānī (D11) reported by the inscription should be identified with Abū al-Faraj al-Ṭurtūsī.

21 This text is not included in Yazdani's work (1995, pp. 114-128).

Figure 7. Aḥmad Šāh I Bahmanī mausoleum, interior. Pictorial decoration of the dome, epigraphic band 'E'

By marking out the names occurring in the decorative ring with the *durūd* (figs. 6, 7), one reads:

Muḥammad al-Muṣṭafā
ʿAlī al-Murtaḍā
Fāṭima al-Zahrā'
al-Ḥasan al-Mujtabā
al-Ḥusayn al-Šahīd bi-Karbalā'
Alī Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn
Muḥammad al-Bāqir
Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq
Mūsā al-Kāẓim
ʿAlī al-Riḍā
Muḥammad al-Jawwād
al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī
al-Ḥujja al-Qā'im Muḥammad al-Mahdī

Finally, the central disc at the apex of the dome (Fig.6; F) is filled by what Yazdani has identified as a *tuğrā* with the name of Allāh and the *pan-jetan* – lit. 'the five', i.e. the five names of Muḥammad, ʿAlī, Fāṭima, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn (1995, p. 119). Philon instead believes this to be a repetition of the name of Allāh (2000, p. 7).

Although the work of Yazdani (1995) remains of crucial importance, it

now seems necessary to conduct a study of the inscriptions that is more than just descriptive and is supported by an adequate analysis of the political and religious context in which the monument was built.

In their – often cursory – analysis of these decorations, many scholars have addressed the issue of the religious orientation of Aḥmad Šāh I – and hence of the Niʿmatullāhiyya order –, but without reaching any consensus on the matter. Yazdani briefly deals with the question by stressing the lack of any real proof of the sovereign's adherence to Shiʿa Islam, and noting in particular the lack of *walī* (saints) within this religious tradition (1995, pp. 115-116). Previously, Haig had reached very different conclusions: he had stressed the importance of the decorations we are examining precisely as conclusive evidence of the ruler's new Shiʿi persuasion (1924, pp. 78-79). Sherwani, a distinguished expert of Deccani history, is sceptical about Haig's theory: like Yazdani, he attributes the fine quality of the decorations and the repetition of the name of ʿAlī to the hand of the calligrapher, in all likelihood a Shiʿite himself (Sherwani, however, identifies the calligrapher with Mughīs of Shīrāz, contrary to what emerges from Yazdani's translation, where he is identified as «Shukr-Ullāh al-Qazvīnī, the painter»).[22] Sherwani acknowledges that the decorations are evidence «of the Sufic or perhaps Shiʿah influence par excellence» (1985, p. 131). However, although he refers to episodes which might suggest an inclination towards Shiʿa Islam on the part of Aḥmad Šāh I, the scholar examines the evidence for the spread of Shiʿa in a Bahmanī context by focusing on later decades, in particular starting from the arrival of Maḥmūd Gāwān in Bidar in 1453 (Sherwani 1985, pp. 274-277).[23] Rizvi, who refers to both Haig's and Sherwani's theories, acknowledges that the absence of the names of the other three 'Rightly Guided Caliphs' (*al-khulafāʾ al-rāshidūn*) – Abū Bakr, ʿUmar and ʿUthmān – is certainly noteworthy in the mausoleum of a Sunni sovereign. But while he follows Sherwani's opinion in acknowledging the decorations to be 'predominantly Shiʿi', Rizvi appears to downplay their importance: he once again assigns the calligrapher a key role[24] and regards the inscriptions as simply intended to trace Niʿmatullāh's descent from ʿAlī – based on the idea that his father was a *sayyid*, a descendant of Ismāʿīl b. Jafar – in such a way

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22 «The interior was decorated under the supervision of the calligraphist Mughith of Shirazi» (Sherwani 1985, p. 131). Sherwani, however, gives no sources for this name. According to Yazdani, the name mentioned in the inscriptions above the *miḥrab* and three entrance arches (north, east and south) of the mausoleum of Aḥmad Šāh I is Shukr-Ullāh al-Qazvīnī: «The work of the servant, Shukr-Ullāh al-Qazvīnī, the painter» (1995, pp. 125-126). Yazdani also claims that the name of Mughīs of Shīrāz is to be found in the nearby mausoleum of Khalīlullāh Kirmāni (1995, pp. 125-126).

23 On the social and religious composition of the Bahmanī kingdom in the years in question, see also Eaton 2008, pp. 59-77.

24 Quoting Sherwani, Rizvi identifies this calligrapher as Mughīs of Shīrāzi (1986, pp. 251-256).

as to win the favour of the 'new' subjects (Rizvi 1986, pp. 251-256). Rizvi further emphasizes how the names of the imams are «set in the scheme of the names of Shāh Niʿmatullāh Walī and his spiritual ancestors who had not declared themselves Shīʿīs», thus noting that the evidence is inconclusive (Rizvi 1986, p. 255). One discordant voice is that of Khalidi who, probably taking up Haig's theory, claims that «in 1429 Aḥmad Shāh Walī Bahmanī (1422-1436) was overtly converted to Shiʿism» (1990, p. 5).

At present, it seems difficult, if not impossible, to find support for either of these theses concerning the religious persuasion of Aḥmad Šāh I, given the doubts that endure despite the textual analyses which have been conducted. Another open problem is that of the social and religious changes which occurred in the Deccan in the period under consideration. So far, many historians and art scholars – including the present writer – have adopted an approach revolving around the idea of the contrast between two social groups – *dakhnīs* and *āfāqīs*, or *mulkīs* and *ghayr-mulkīs* – rooted in the Deccan, based on the vain assumption that this might contribute to shed light on political and religious dynamics in the region. However, the underlying concept through which the identity of these two groups is established – the notion of a more extended presence in the region, of being older 'immigrants' – seems rather questionable.[25] What became of these two groups in subsequent generations? In particular, did second or third-generation *āfāqīs* continue to regard themselves or to be perceived as 'foreigners'? One further problem related to the identity of these two groups is their religion. As Roy Fischel has noted, the sources – at any rate those pertaining to the first Bahmanī phase in Gulbarga – would not appear to report any spread of Shiʿa Islam in the region (2014). But if the distinction between *dakhnīs* and *āfāqīs* was exclusively a matter of provenance and 'arrival date', then on what grounds did the *ḥabshīs* – the Abyssinians who reached the region in growing numbers in the decades in questions, swelling the ranks of Deccani armies as slaves – side with the *dakhnīs* instead of the *āfāqīs* in power struggles, as would appear to have been the case? (Sherwani 1985, p. 131 n. 2, p. 134 n. 3; Eaton 2006, pp. 115-124)

While many questions remain open for now, certain features of the decorative programme of the mausoleum may be seen to provide significant clues.

The overall decorative plan adopted for the dome was not new within the context of the Deccan. Concentric epigraphic bands – often consisting of painted stucco-work – adorn the upper part of domes or walls in several mausoleums from the later Bahmanī phase in Gulbarga, the first Bahmanī capital. This kind of decoration prominently occurs in the two most important mausoleums among those chronologically and stylistically

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25 I here wish to thank Prof. Sunil Kumar for his insights on the occasion of the Simon Digby Memorial Conference.

close to Aḥmad Šāh I's monument: the mausoleum of Fīrūz Šāh and that of Gīsūdirāz. Although traces of colour are to be found in these decorations in Gulbarga, the evidence is not sufficient to enable us to reconstruct any dominant trends or style; in any case, these traces are not comparable to those found in the mausoleum of Aḥmad Šāh I. Painting would appear to have acquired a key role at the beginning of the Bidar phase, in parallel with the consolidation of typically central Asian stylistic elements – one may refer here to the decorations found inside Bidar Fort (Curatola 1990, pp. 195-234) and to the use of the Persian arch, which was adopted for the first time precisely for the mausoleum of Aḥmad Šāh I (Merklinger 1981, p. 83; Philon 2000, p. 4). No doubt, the most crucial elements to be taken into account are the epigraphic bands on the dome. In terms of content, the inscriptions inside the mausoleum of Aḥmad Šāh I would appear to mark a real break from those in Gulbarga. Although a systematic comparative study of inscriptions from the Bahmanī period has yet to be conducted, a survey of the material published so far and my own on-site investigations suggest that in the first Bahmanī phase the decorative repertoire chiefly consisted of Koranic inscriptions and the use of the 99 names of God (*'asmā' al-ḥusnā*). What emerges, then, is the significant absence of ʿAlī's name or any allusions to the *panjetan* – at any rate from the monuments examined so far.

One further element which I wish to focus on is again related to the content of the inscriptions. While the two chains of authority I have presented would be compatible with the idea of the ruler's commitment to the Niʿmatullāhiyya order – with the exception, perhaps, of the mention of Muḥīy al-Dīn al-ʿArabī – the twelve imams mentioned in the invocation (*durūd*) are no doubt those acknowledged by the Twelver Shiʿa tradition.[26] The choice of featuring a full list of all the twelve Shiʿi imams in the interior of an allegedly Sunni mausoleum can hardly be viewed as simply an attempt to assert the descent of the ruler's 'legitimiser' from ʿAlī. But what is most remarkable in the context of the mausoleum is the use of the adjective 'martyr' (*al-šahīd bi-karbalā'*, martyr of Kerbala) in relation to al-Ḥusayn's name, which confirms the impression that the inscriptions may have served an additional purpose.[27] In the light of the extremely innovative character of this content in the Deccani context and of its striking powerful message – a point I will shortly return to – I would be wary of laying the responsibility for the choice of the inscriptions exclusively on the calligrapher, as Sherwani has done, followed by Rizvi – «The interior was decorated under the supervision of the calligraphist Mughīs of Shīrāz, perhaps himself of Shiʿa

26 I here wish to thank Alessandro Cancian for his valuable observations and suggestions.

27 One may consider the fact that in the inscriptions of the *miḥrab* of the Great Mosque at Bijapur, for instance, the names of ʿAlī, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn not only lack any adjectives of this sort, but are accompanied – within the complex epigraphic programme – by the names of the other Rightly Guided Caliphs (Mondini, forthcoming).

persuasion, who has inscribed the names of the apostle of Islam and the fourth caliph ʻAlī in a hundred ways and inserted the Shiʻite daruud» (Rizvi 1986, p. 255). Judging from what we know about patterns of patronage in Muslim India, it is difficult to accept the idea that the calligrapher may have created such a striking decorative scheme – especially given that the elements at play are far from marginal – without the consent and approval of his sovereign or patron. The powerful message delivered by the inscriptions, which I trust the present analysis has made quite clear, is precisely what jars with the idea of *taqiyya*, or ʻdissimulation'[28] – a practice believed to have been in force in the Bahmanī kingdom up until the age of Maḥmūd Gāwān, on account of the open contrast between *dakhnīs* and *āfāqīs* (Allan 2012, pp. 60-61) – thereby undermining the notion of a merely private adherence to Shiʻa Islam on the part of Aḥmad Šāh I.

As already noted, we still lack a systematic comparison with the earlier corpus of inscriptions from the Deccan. An easier task would be to draw a comparison with the later inscriptions commissioned by the dynasties of the Niẓāmšāhis, ʻĀdilšāhis, and Quṭbšāhis. In his work *The Art and Architecture of Twelver Shiʻism*, Allan (2012) identifies in later Deccani architecture a series of structural and decorative elements connected to Shiʻa that may be regarded as – often unmistakable – markers of religious belief. While, as Allan himself notes, Indian art has yet to be subjected to a systematic investigation of the sort which has been conducted on Fatimid art (Allan 2012, p. 63), by adopting his approach one soon realizes that certain decorative elements of the mausoleum of Aḥmad Šāh I are distinctly Shiʻi.

First of all, it is worth noting the repetition of ʻAlī's name. In the first ring of inscriptions, the name of the fourth caliph is repeated three times within each of the small hexagons between the ovals containing the blessings (figs. 4, 6; A). This recurrent use of the name is unusual in itself for a ʻSunni monument', given the aforementioned absence of the names of the other Rightly Guided Caliphs. It appears even more significant, if we consider the fact that the name ʻAlī (mentioned no less than twenty-four times in the hexagons alone) is far more frequent than that of the Prophet Muḥammad.

One further element is the presence at the apex of the dome of what Yazdani has identified as the *panjetan* in the shape of a *tuğrā* featuring the five names of Muḥammad, ʻAlī, Fāṭima, Ḥasan, and Ḥusayn (1995, p. 119) – another element which Allan lists among the recurrent decorative features of monuments commissioned by Shiʻi patrons in the Deccan. As an example, one may refer here to the *panjetan* which was added on the blind arch of the entrance gate of Gīsūdirāz's mausoleum with the restoration work carried out under the ʻĀdilšāhis (Allan 2012, pp. 65, 77).

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28 According to this practice, a pious Shiʻi Muslim may conceal his faith, if public acknowledgment of it would endanger his or his family's life.

Figure 8. Mausoleum of Aḥmad Šāh I Bahmanī, interior. Three 'alams preserved and still used in occasion of the sovereign's'urs (photo by the Author, 2015)

Although in the case of the mausoleum of Aḥmad Šāh I it is difficult to make out the *panjetan* in the shape of a *tuğrā* described by Yazdani – the above-mentioned hypothesis suggested by Philon (2000, p. 7) seems here more plausible – there is no doubt that the five names play a key role within the decorative scheme of the building. Considering that decorative elements are often hierarchically arranged, it is also significant that the names of the imams of Twelver Shi'a Islam are displayed immediately after those of the Prophet and his daughter Fāṭima, near the centre of the dome. In the Deccan, most inscriptions of this sort were commissioned by the – openly Shi'i – dynasties that followed the Bahmanī within Sufi shrines and family mausoleums, in which case they usually adorn the ruler's cenotaph. Let us think here of the cenotaph of Muḥammad Qulī Quṭbšāhis (d. 1602) in the royal necropolis of Golkonda, which combines Koranic inscriptions with an invocation of the twelve imams (Allan 2012, pp. 65-66).

Finally, it is interesting to note that three specimens of *'alam* are preserved in the mausoleum of Aḥmad Šāh I (fig. 8). This kind of standard

Figure 9. Khalīlullāh Kirmāni dargāh, Ashtur (Bidar), external facade of the monumental gateway (photo: Mondini, 2015)

Figure 10. Khalīlullāh Kirmāni dargāh, Ashtur (Bidar), detail of the gateway's facade (photo: Mondini, 2015)

is the most distinctive item to be found in the processions held for the Muḥarram celebrations in many Shiʻi cities, including in India. Its origins apparently lie in the *ʻalam* which Ḥusayn's brother ʻAbbās carried in the Battle of Kerbala (Allan 2012, p. 121). As far as I am aware, only one of the three (considerably damaged) standards in the mausoleum has ever been studied in any detail: first published by Allan (p. 132), this is an item of Indian or Iranian craftsmanship which presumably dates from the seventeenth century. While it is impossible to trace the history of these three *ʻalam* and define their place in the context we are investigating,[29] not least in the light of their current use in *ʻurs* celebrations, they may well reflect a degree of 'Shiʻization' (pp. 121-138) – possibly at a later date – not just of the site but of the ritual practices performed at the mausoleum to this day.

29   Allan notes that increasing immigration from Iran no doubt led to the importation of Persian customs and objects into the Deccan; and it is reasonable to assume that the flow of objects also went in the opposite direction (2012, p. 131).

Although the elements identified so far do not constitute irrefutable proof of Aḥmad Šāh I's conversion to Shi'a Islam, they certainly suggest that the mausoleum represents a unique monument and one of crucial importance for any study of the history and religion of the Deccan.

In order to clarify some of the doubts which have emerged in the course of the analysis, an in-depth investigation ought to be conducted of the inscriptions on the walls of the mausoleum of Aḥmad Šāh I, which Yazdani identifies as passages from the writing of Ni'matullāh himself (1995, pp. 117-128). These texts should first of all be compared to the inscriptions from the Chaukhandi, the nearby *dargāh* dedicated to Khalīlullāh Kirmānī, of which only a partial study has been made by Yazdani (1995, pp. 141-146). What is once again surprising, in the case of the complex dedicated to the local representatives of the Ni'matullāhiyya order, is the presence of 'Alī's name, combined with that of the Prophet, on the grand arch marking the entrance: the name occurs both in the inscriptions within the medallions on the extrados of the arch (fig. 10) and at the end of an epigraphic band featuring the *ayyat al-kursi*, followed by the addition 'Allāh, Muḥammad, 'Alī' (fig. 9). It would therefore be useful to establish first of all whether the inscriptions are original and coeval to the *dargāh* itself – as would seem to the be the case – and whether they offer any further clues (Mondini forthcoming); and, secondly, whether in this case too the choice of mentioning the fourth caliph so often, according to what is usually a Shi'i practice, merely reflects a desire to emphasize a descent from 'Alī, as suggested by most of the studies mentioned in the present contribution.

One last term of comparison that might help shed light on the figure of Aḥmad Šāh I and his relation to the Ni'matullāhiyya order is the mausoleum of Ni'matullāh in Kirmān, Iran, which was presumably commissioned by the Bahmanī ruler (Golombek, Wilder 1988a, pp. 394-395; 1988b, pp. 401-402). This funerary complex, which has been dated to 1436, was considerably enlarged and modified over the centuries. The original structure, which may plausibly be assigned to Aḥmad Šāh I, featured a sophisticated programme of decorative inscriptions. Later alterations notwithstanding, it would be useful and interesting to investigate possible affinities between the two structures, from an architectural perspective as well as in terms of decorative inscriptions.

In the light of the elements highlighted so far, and of what we know about mutual stylistic influences among Islamic funerary monuments in the Deccan and about the symbols and language they share (Mondini 2009, pp. 513-529), we may now consider whether and in what way the decorations and inscriptions in the mausoleum attributed to Aḥmad Šāh I contribute to defining the ruler's political and religious orientation. On the one hand, the systematic building of funerary monuments, which constitutes a striking development in the Indian context, would appear to have traced a new geography, stemming from the merging of political and sacred geog-

raphy – the latter being radically conditioned by political dynamics, which it in turn influenced and shaped. On the other hand, the creation of these monuments would appear to have legitimised and consolidated dynastic and political modes of expression.

Regardless of whether Aḥmad Šāh I is to be regarded as a 'Shi'i' or 'Sunni' sovereign, genealogy clearly emerges as a crucial element in the definition of his political and religious identity. The iconographic programme of the ruler's tomb foreshadows the more famous Mughal miniatures portraying sovereigns as Timur's descendants and showing their investiture at the hands of either Timur himself or Sufi shaykhs. The iconography of the mausoleum, however, goes even further: it establishes an official space within which the sovereign – that is, his body – is 'surmounted' by the *silsila* both of his spiritual masters and of the twelve imams. It is as though the ruler, through his very presence and (now) everlasting charisma, were closing that chain by symbolically presenting himself as the descendant of these figures, and at the same time as a political and spiritual guide. The ruler is both comforted and supported by the figures mentioned in the inscriptions and symbolically invested with the authority of those who came before him. This double symbolic significance of the space recalls those 'visual strategies' of propaganda which later became widespread throughout the Subcontinent. The mausoleum thus paved the way for the instrumental use which the successors of Aḥmad Šāh I were to make of their predecessor's title of *walī*. This brings to mind the strategic use of art for propaganda purposes made by the aforementioned Mughals (1526-1857); or, again, the double symbolic significance of the sculptures of rulers installed in the pavilions of Tamil Nadu temples from the sixteenth century onwards, where the deity displayed during festivals on the one hand supported and legitimised the line of sovereigns portrayed as devotees, and on the other was itself part of the sovereign's genealogy (Branfoot 2007, pp. 225-240).

The analysis conducted so far therefore suggests that the figure of the ruler-saint and his legitimation were no longer exclusively supported – as had been the case in the previous capital, Gulbarga – by a constant interplay, extending beyond the ruler's death, between the mausoleum of the sovereign and the *dargāh*, as the seat of religious power and symbol of the union and reciprocal investiture between religious and political authority. In the light of the double role, political and spiritual, acquired by Aḥmad Šāh I, his final resting place – from which he continued to operate for the good of his subjects and especially his devotees – was intended to powerfully convey the ruler's authority, as well as the distinguishing traits of his identity. The decorations stand as an enduring testimony to the sovereign's role and to his unique qualities as an elect. The decorative programme designed for these purposes would appear to revolve around the use of a consciously striking language, although its various parts play on an underlying ambiguity. Aḥmad Šāh I, the *walī* and friend of God, is at the same

time a disciple; and although he apparently embraces the teachings of the Niʿmatullāhiyya – the lower walls of the mausoleum display the writing of Niʿmatullāh himself – and maintains the Sunni beliefs of his predecessors, he now inhabits a mausoleum that, precisely by virtue of an epigraphic programme whose content finds no parallels in the Deccan, comes across as Shiʿi in the eyes of many art historians.

In the light of the data which have been collected, it is certainly difficult to unreservedly accept the thesis of Aḥmad Šāh I's adoption of Shiʿa Islam. However, the idea commonly found in studies on the Deccan, according to which Aḥmad Šāh I never publicly advertised his adherence to this religious current, would seem to waver in the face of a decorative programme such as that of the mausoleum. Perhaps, the impression one gets when crossing the threshold of the ruler's monument is not of a positive statement of adherence to a given religious persuasion, but rather of an ability to merge the visual languages typically employed in Shiʿi and Sufi (Sunni?) contexts: it is as though the sovereign had wished to address each of his subjects in a language he could understand. No doubt, we do not know to what extent visitors to the mausoleum and devotees of the ruler-saint were aware of the discursive power of the decorations. In any case, the ambiguity one finds in the source would appear to extend from the figure of Aḥmad Šāh I – and his body – to his burial place, which through its decorative programme has become an everlasting testimony to the identity of his sovereign, and possibly of his kingdom too.

Moving towards a conclusion, we can expect further clues to emerge through future investigations and comparisons with the above-mentioned buildings related to the mausoleum, in terms of patronage or style, and from a detailed analysis of the sources. For the time being, the decorative programme just illustrated is best regarded as evidence for the attempt to find a – perhaps precarious – balance between the different components of the kingdom which shaped much of Bahmanī history and was destined to play an even more prominent role in subsequent dynastic phases.

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