
Ali Maryam and the Amin al-Dowleh Timcheh: A Misattribution

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

Although the builder of the Amin al-Dowleh Timcheh—one of Kashan's most significant Qajar-period monuments—remains unknown, Seyfollah Aminian attributed its construction, along with several other important historic buildings in Kashan, to Ali Maryam without presenting any documentary evidence. The publication of this claim in *Asar Journal* caused Ali Maryam to be widely recognized as the architect of the Timcheh and several other distinct Qajar houses in Kashan. However, this reputation lacked a reliable historical foundation and distorted the scholarly understanding of Qajar architecture in Kashan. To address the need to correct these misconceptions, this study aims to examine the competing views regarding the builders of these buildings. Alongside that, this study introduces Ali Maryam and reviews the buildings attributed to him in Kashan. Drawing upon historical documents, oral accounts, and critical analyses, this study evaluates the claim that Ali Maryam is the builder of the Amin al-Dowleh Timcheh.

The Amin al-Dowleh Timcheh

Kashan is one of the most important historical cities in Iran and contains numerous valuable monuments from different historical periods. Among them, the Kashan Bazaar complex is one of the most significant monuments of the Islamic period in Iran. In addition to its several-kilometer-long main bazaar axis, it encompasses dozens of valuable historical structures. The Amin al-Dowleh Timcheh is the most magnificent timcheh in the Kashan Bazaar and one of the outstanding monuments of the Qajar era in the city. It was constructed in (1868–1870 CE) by the order of Farrokh Khan Amin al-Dowleh (1813-1871 CE). This monumental architectural work consists of a grand domed central hall, an entrance vestibule, and numerous chambers arranged on three levels, including shops, upper rooms, and basement spaces. Several European travelers, Qajar-era historians from Kashan, and Hasan Naraghi during the Pahlavi period praised the artistic and architectural excellence of this remarkable building.

Ali Maryam

One of the major challenges in the architectural history of Kashan is that the builders of many of its most important monuments—including Kashan's renowned historic houses such as the Borujerdi, the Tabatabaei, the Abbasian, and the Ameri houses—have remained unknown. Likewise, the architects of major structures within the bazaar, including its timchehs and particularly the Amin al-Dowleh Timcheh, have not been verified with certainty. Nevertheless, some writers have attributed these

buildings to Ali Maryam. Mohammad Ali Memarian, better known as Ali Maryam, son of Mohammad Sadeq, was a Qajar-period master builder who died in CE 1931. A limited number of works, attributed to him, have survived.

Assessing the Attribution of the Amin al-Dowleh Timcheh to Ali Maryam

1. Examining views based on oral traditions

Aminian was the first to identify Ali Maryam as the builder of the Amin al-Dowleh Timcheh, relying solely on an oral tradition. He also attributed the Tabatabaei House, the Borujerdi House, and the Amin al-Dowleh Timcheh to Ali Maryam, although he presented no supporting evidence. The architect, Akbar Helli, who conducted extensive research on the oral history of Kashan's architecture, argued that Ali Maryam lacked the expertise required to construct such outstanding buildings and that these monuments predated his active professional life. Interestingly, after Helli presented this view, Aminian himself withdrew his earlier claim that Ali Maryam had built the Timcheh and the famous historical houses of Kashan.

2. Evaluating the architectural works attributed to Ali Maryam

Another criterion for assessment is the architectural quality of the buildings attributed to Ali Maryam—namely, the Saleh Beyk Water Reservoir, the Mausoleum of Seyyed Mohammad Alavi Borujerdi, and the rasmibandi decoration of the Golcheghaneh shrine. Field investigations of these three monuments indicated that they possessed only limited architectural and artistic significance. This stands in marked contrast to the hundreds of monumental Qajar-period buildings in Kashan, which display refined architectural elements and sophisticated decorative features. By comparison, the buildings attributed to Ali Maryam exhibit none of these distinctive characteristics and contain no noteworthy architectural ornamentation.

3. Examining Ali Maryam's lifetime and the construction date of the Amin al-Dowleh Timcheh

Unlike plenty of unreliable information that concerned Ali Maryam, largely based on oral traditions, the date of his death is documented and unequivocal. Indeed, the only surviving written evidence relating directly to Ali Maryam is his gravestone, which records the year of his death as CE 1931. For a better understanding of the subject, it is useful to compare the chronology of Ali Maryam's life with that of the construction date of the Amin al-Dowleh Timcheh, which was completed in 1868 CE. Ali Maryam died in 1931 CE, approximately sixty-five years after the completion of the Timcheh. Although his exact birth date is unknown, oral traditions generally suggested that he lived between eighty and eighty-five years, placing his birth around 1848-1853 CE. If this estimate were correct, he would be about fifteen years old when the construction of the Amin al-Dowleh Timcheh began. Even if it were assumed that Ali Maryam lived to around ninety years of age, he would still be only in his early twenties during its construction. It, thus, seems highly unlikely that this building could have been designed by Ali Maryam, in his early twenties—a building which, according to Zarabi, was unparalleled in Iran and in which "master builders of extraordinary skill, like the legendary Sinimmar, erected a single roof that leaves all observers astonished."

4. Reconciling the different accounts: The actual relationship between Ali Maryam and the Amin al-Dowleh Timcheh

Bayza'i, who had personally met Ali Maryam, writes that he had worked under the master builder responsible for the Amin al-Dowleh caravanserai. It is likely that Bayza'i obtained this information directly from Ali Maryam himself. This account is consistent with Ali Maryam's age and resolves the historical inconsistencies discussed above. Although no definitive conclusion can be reached, this interpretation offers a plausible explanation for the widespread belief that Ali Maryam was the builder of the Amin al-Dowleh Timcheh. Furthermore, according to some oral investigations, the principal architect or builder of the Amin al-Dowleh Timcheh was Ramadan Ali Tupchi. No reliable documentary evidence concerning Tupchi or his works has survived, except that he is generally identified as the father of Master Ja'far Mi'mar.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the following points are emphasized:

1. The claim that the Amin al-Dowleh Timcheh was built by Ali Maryam has been rejected by specialists in the field, and even the individual who originally advanced this attribution subsequently withdrew his claim.

2. No reliable historical source has identified or confirmed Ali Maryam as the architect of the Timcheh.

3. The buildings attributed to Ali Maryam are relatively ordinary structures and are by no means comparable to the architectural masterpiece represented by the Amin al-Dowleh Timcheh.

4. From a historical perspective, it is highly improbable that Ali Maryam was of sufficient age and professional standing to have been entrusted with the construction of such a monumental building.

5. The same considerations apply, to varying degrees, to the attribution of several of Kashan's well-known historic houses to Ali Maryam. For the reasons discussed above, he cannot reasonably be regarded as their builder.

6. Nevertheless, it remains entirely possible that, as Bayza'i records, Ali Maryam served as an apprentice to the builder of the Timcheh during his adolescence or early adulthood or that he later participated in restoration work on the building.

7. The alternative claim that Ramadan Ali Tupchi was the architect of the Timcheh cannot be dismissed outright; however, it requires further investigation should additional documentary evidence or historical corroboration become available.

Keywords: Amin al-Dowleh Timcheh of Kashan, Ali Maryam, Qajar-period architecture, Kashan Bazaar, architectural attribution