

VERSIFIERS AUTOGRAPHS ON HISTORICAL TOMBS OF SINDH PAKISTAN: A CASE STUDY FROM QADER BUX JA QUBA MONUMENT CLUSTER

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ABSTRACT

The historical cemeteries and tombs of Sindh, Pakistan including the Makli Necropolis and the Chaukhandi Tombs preserve a remarkable corpus of epigraphic material in the form of Qur'anic verses, Persian poetry, elegiac inscriptions, and commemorative texts. As the Makli Necropolis has received considerable scholarly attention, the wider funerary landscape of Sindh preserves numerous additional tomb complexes bearing rich epigraphic traditions. Sites such as the Chaukhandi Tombs, the Necropolis of Satyoon-jo-Asthan, Kalhora and Talpur Mir's, tomb clusters contain significant versifiers' autographs in Arabic, Persian, and occasionally Sindhi languages. The case study is brought here from Qader Bux-ja-Quba Talpur period tomb clusters.

Generally, these versifiers' autographs constitute an important dimension of Islamic funerary and folk romance art in South Asia. Among this holistic region, this report examines the historical development, stylistic features, linguistic diversity, religious symbolism, and socio-political implications of tomb inscriptions across Sindh.

The paper comprehends that the versifier's autographs provide an authentic chronology of multiple cultural features mainly associated with funerary and folk art preserved in architectural entity as is documented from the historical tombs of Sindh Pakistan.

Key Words: Tomb architecture, Folk art, Fresco, Secco, Versifiers, Sindh region

Introduction

Sindh region of Pakistan has a rich cultural depository as human started their first steps lodging and roaming since Paleolithic period i.e. Early Stone Age and continued surviving onwards crossing through the medieval period of 8th to 19th Centuries ACE. Within this time frame, many kingdoms occurred and it was the golden phase when Mughals started their rule covering and integrating entire South Asia. During Mughal era numerous local dynasties occurred and co-existed continually till British Raj. The amalgamated effect can be visualized

explicitly in art and architecture of medieval period in Sindh. Particularly, during the Kalhora (1700-1783), Talpur (1783-1843) and British Raj (1843-1947) celebrating rich wall paintings featuring folk romances, floral motifs, geometric patterns, inscriptions, and sometimes architectural representations like mosques and others. Often, these include signatures or poetic inscriptions "versifiers' autographs" in Arabic, Persian and/or Khudabadi Sindhi scripts, offering insight into artists, patrons, and cultural context. The Talpur period is last phase 1783-1947 ACE of the recent history of Sindh which has

substantially merged the British architectural features and followed strongly the Kalhora Period. Among other essential cultural aspects of Talpur period; the architecture stands prominent which combines and continues the Mughal and Kalhora period features and includes British elements as well. Pondering upon further details; the Talpur succeeded Kalhora's; and divided Sindh as per family setup. Later on Talpurs were defeated by British Raj who kept them as show piece only for situation if local(s) show rivalry the Mir's can be decorated in front line. The British Raj on one hand shattered local rulers and on the other hand influenced on the built heritage which can be seen in most of the historical cities throughout Sindh. The monuments like tombs and mosques did not accept this influence at greater level, consequently, the South Asian architectural character still dominates. Most of the monuments nowadays are at the brink of destruction and Qader Bux ja Quba is one of them. This cluster of monuments is a royal cemetery of Talpur rulers where their family members and notables are buried. The graveyard is still active but historical tombs are left alone and aloof of attention.

The emphasis of present study is on Qader Bux ja Quba and when the monuments examined closely; some names of individuals who visited the given tomb(s) were observed increasing the analytical curiosity as there were several other names along with some sort of messages having with the definite dates written at various places/spots on walls of the tomb mainly from interior side which authenticated their visit in a very similar sagacity as in the modern practice.

In this paper the focus is placed on the tombs and paintings from interior side of the tombs containing a typical occurrence of the two types of names (a) writers who wrote the verses and created the paintings and (b) visitors who visited the tombs.

The cultural and heritage significance of versifiers' autographs provide irreplaceable data on the original and real artists, their patrons, dates, and ecological background. In the contemporary times, these artworks and inscriptions are endangered due to neglect,

renovations, and environmental factors, necessitating urgent documentation and conservation.

Historical Background of Sindh's Funerary and folk Epigraphy

Islamic epigraphic traditions in Sindh developed under successive dynasties, including the Sammas, Arghuns, Tarkhans, Mughals and other local influential families. According to Ahmed Nabi Khan (1980), the Makli The tombs of rulers and nobles often include elaborate Quranic verses alongside Persian elegies. Documentation shows that Makli's inscriptions record names, genealogies, dates, titles, and devotional invocations, thereby serving as primary historical brochures (Lashari 2018). Similarly, the Chaukhandi tombs reflect tribal identities and warrior culture, with inscriptions that combine stylized calligraphy and symbolic motifs (Ibrahim 2003). The Tombs of the Talpur Mir's in Hyderabad Sindh represent late 18th-19th century funerary architecture where inscriptions reflect Mughal-influenced Persian culture (Khan 1980).

During the last phase of Mughal rule; the Kalhora and Talpur dynasties significantly influenced Sindh's distinctive architecture, particularly through their mural traditions, which blend Islamic, Mughal, Rajput, and regional Indian styles (Kingrani, 2012; Kalhoro, 2020). These murals feature motifs such as folk romances (e.g., *Suhni-Mehar*, *Sasui-Punhun*, *Laila-Majnun*), hunting scenes, floral patterns, and geometric designs (Kingrani, 2012). Paintings on interior tomb walls often include poetic verses in Khudabadi and Persian scripts. These inscriptions identify painters, provide dates, and sometimes function as autographs of artists or patrons. For instance, the tomb of Gahno Khan Gopang (1891 CE) features an inscription by painter Gahi Khan, detailing his name, date, and expenses (Rs. 300), alongside depictions of folk romances and hunting scenes (Kalhoro, 2020).

Common script styles include Khudabadi Sindhi and Persian scripts, sometimes combining names and commemorative lines (Kingrani, 2012).

Tombs like that of Chakar Khan Khuhawar also include such inscriptions (Kalhor, 2020).

Popular themes in these murals include romantic tales such as Suhni-Mehar, Sasui-Punhun, Laila-Majnun, Moomal-Rano, Umar-Marvi, and Noori-Jam Tamachi. These narratives are prominently featured across tombs from the Kalhora (1701–1783) and Talpur (1783–1843) periods, especially in the Jamali tombs in Larkana and Qamber Shahdadt, as well as in Dadu and Sanghar districts (Kingrani, 2012; Kalhor, 2020).

Another major theme involves hunting, animal combat, and battle scenes. These murals depict deer, leopards, wild boars, falconry, and nobles on horseback wielding swords, spears, or firearms. Some tombs also feature animal combat, such as leopards attacking bulls or humans fighting wild beasts, reflecting motifs inspired by external sources like Jodhpur painting or Mesopotamian Gilgamesh references (Kingrani, 2012).

Scenes of daily life, including dancing, cooking, churning, music, sports, and domestic activities offer cultural insights into Sindhi society during that era (Kingrani, 2012). Floral, geometric, and arabesque motifs are observed in royal and elite tombs, which often prefer non-figural decoration. These include floral patterns (lotus, sunflower, rose, chrysanthemum, lily, cypress trees, muskmelon, watermelon, mango), geometric and tile designs, arabesques, star and inlay motifs, ideal for tombs of rulers (Kingrani, 2012). Figural imagery is frequently avoided in such tombs (Kingrani, 2012).

Murals also include representations of mosques, typically three-domed structures with aisles, nave, and cusped arches. Tombs depict sacred Islamic sites like Makkah (Ka'ba) and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, and the mihrab (prayer niche) motif sometimes evolves into stylized mosque imagery (Kingrani, 2012; Kalhor, 2020). The wall painting traditions of medieval Sindh, particularly under the Kalhora and Talpur dynasties, are a rare visual heritage in Islamic South Asia. Murals depict folk romances, floral patterns, hunting scenes, and architectural motifs, many preserved in tombs across Larkana, Shahdadt, and Dadu districts (Kingrani, 2012).

These paintings were executed using traditional mural techniques, primarily **fresco** and **secco** styles. Fresco (*buon fresco*) involves applying pigments on freshly laid wet lime plaster, chemically binding the pigment with the plaster as it dries, creating durable imagery (Ntasi, Rossi, Alberico, & Tomeo, 2024; Martyka, 2025).

Secco, or *fresco-secco*, involves painting on dry plaster with pigments mixed with organic binders like egg yolk, casein, or glue. This method allows more time for detailing but is less durable, as the paint rests on the surface rather than being absorbed (Ntasi et al., 2024).

In Sindh's medieval tomb architecture; both fresco and secco styles have been used depending on region, material availability, and intended longevity. For instance, the tombs of Mian Noor Muhammad Kalhor and Gahno Khan Gopang feature extensive mural work that appears to use fresco-secco, given signs of paint flaking and organic binders in analysis (Kalhor, 2020; Kingrani, 2016). The hot, arid climate of Sindh may have also influenced preference for dry-painting (*secco*) techniques, offering more control in harsh environments. There is much similarities in both painting types but the fresco pigment used natural earth while secco carries natural or organic pigments. Both paintings are used for decorative, religious, and historic folk romances and floral motifs. Both techniques share a purpose in commemorative and religious art, aiming to immortalize local narratives like *Sohni-Mehar*, *Sassi-Punhun*, and symbolic religious imagery (Kalhor, 2021). The basic and identifiable differences among Fresco and Secco paintings is defined in the table provided below.

Assessing the Differentiation of Fresco vs. Secco in Tomb Murals

The distinction between **fresco** (*buon fresco*) and **secco** (*fresco secco*) techniques in Sindh's tomb murals can be observed through the surface integration and texture of the paintings. Fresco involves applying pigments onto freshly laid wet lime plaster, where the pigments chemically bind with the plaster as it dries, creating an integral and durable layer (Ntasi, Rossi, Alberico, & Tomeo, 2024; Martyka, 2025). The surface of a

buon fresco appears matte, smooth, and well-integrated, with colors embedded into the plaster rather than sitting atop it. For example, the murals in **Shah Baharo's tomb** demonstrate fading over time yet remain well-integrated into the wall, a hallmark of durable buon fresco technique (Kingrani, 2012).

In contrast, **secco painting** is applied on dry plaster using organic binders such as egg tempera, casein, or limewater. This results in a pigment layer that sits atop the surface rather than merging with the wall, which can produce brighter colors but is more prone to flaking,

peeling, and surface wear over time (Ntasi et al., 2024). Many tomb murals across Sindh exhibit signs of surface deterioration, such as raised paint layers or flaking, indicating either original secco application or later secco retouching (Martyka, 2025).

By closely examining the integration of pigment and the durability of the paint layer, scholars can distinguish between fresco and secco techniques, providing insights into the artistic methods and preservation challenges of Sindh's medieval wall paintings.

Aspect	Fresco (Buon Fresco)	Secco (Fresco-Secco)
Application	On wet lime plaster	On dry plaster
Binding Method	Pigment binds chemically with plaster	Pigment adheres via organic binders
Durability	Highly durable, resists peeling	Less durable, prone to flaking
Drying Time	Quick—artist must work fast	Flexible—allows more time and detailing
Climate Suitability	Better in humid climates	More adaptable to dry climates like Sindh
Visual Quality	Matte, softer tones	Richer, more vibrant hues initially

In the following table, a few additional visual analytical features are indicated for further understanding of the students and/or researchers.

Observation Area	Fresco Indicators	Secco Indicators
Surface Texture	Smooth, matte; pigment merged into plaster	Raised paint, potential flaking or surface film
Edge Definition	Softer transitions, subtle edges	Sharp outlines, crisp detailing
Paint Condition	Stable, less deterioration	Visible peeling, wear, or blistering
Color Quality	Muted, earthy tones	Brighter or glossier hues especially in small details

Examples from Sindh can be evaluated as Mian Noor Muhammad Kalhoro's Tomb (Dadu District) has floral and arabesque frescoes suggest dry application, pointing to fresco-secco technique (Kingrani, 2016). Tombs of Admani Lagharis (Qambar-Shahdadkot) has detailed mural scenes and flaking pigments indicate secco-style painting with organic binding agents (Kalhoro, 2020). The Tombs in Shahdadkot and Larkana has use of local pigments and wall

preparation suggests hybrid methods, possibly combining mezzo-fresco and secco styles (Kalhoro, 2021).

This type of painting tradition is documented on the tombs in Sindh, for instances, at the Larkana in the tomb of Ghazi Khan Kalhora, folk story is painted in which a popular folk woman known as "Suhni" is shown preparing butter milk for her cherished person named "Mehtar". Around the painting there are several visitor's signatures.



Fig -1 Paintings showing presence of (a) human and animal figures and (b) writings. (With Thanks Kalhoro 2014)

After providing the examples of versifier signatures from various parts of the Sindh, a similar tradition of autograph from a cluster of monuments known as Qader Bux ja Quba is documented greatly. These autograph are placed by those people who visited the given tombs, hence, providing authenticated history of usage of the tomb monument for several purposes.

Case Study from Qader Bux ja Quba Monument Cluster

Qader Bux-ja-Quba monuments are located in the shade of Rohri hills and are associated with Talpur period 1783-1947 AD. In this cemetery there are numerous monuments, however, only three of them are under focus for present paper.



Fig-2: Cluster of buildings replete with human signatures

These tombs are heavily and lavishly decorated with architectural element and motifs painted in fresco. Within the empty places and or over the paintings human signatures are found in Persian,

Hattki (Hindi) and Sindhi. Majority of signatures are in Persian few examples of translated signatures are provided hereafter.

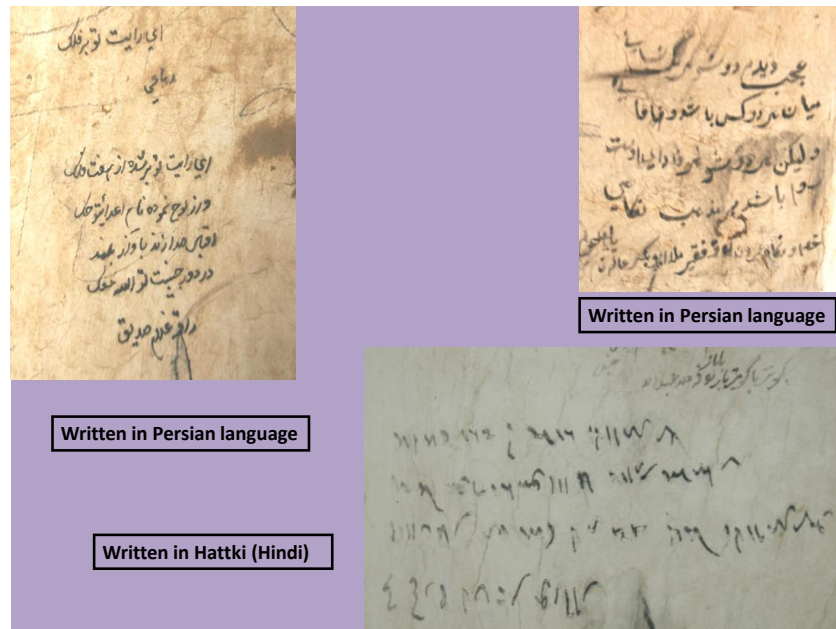


Figure- 3: Persian and Sindhi-Hindi (*Hattki*) script

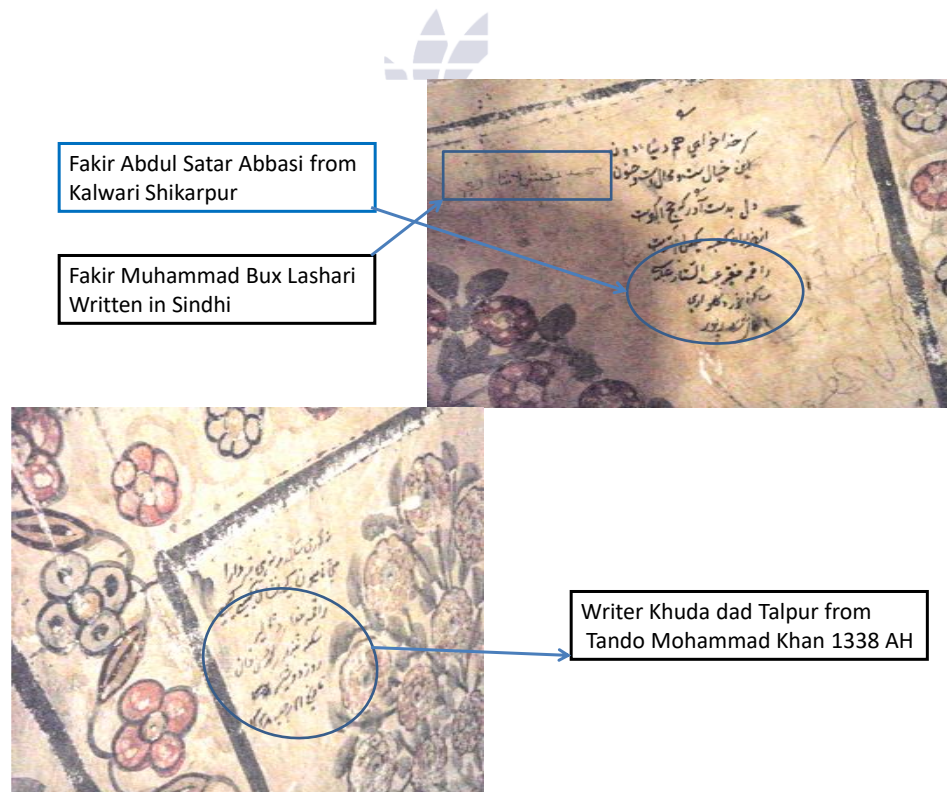


Figure- 4: the names of different writers from different parts of Sindh.

Kazi Shafe Muhammad Son Of Inayatullah

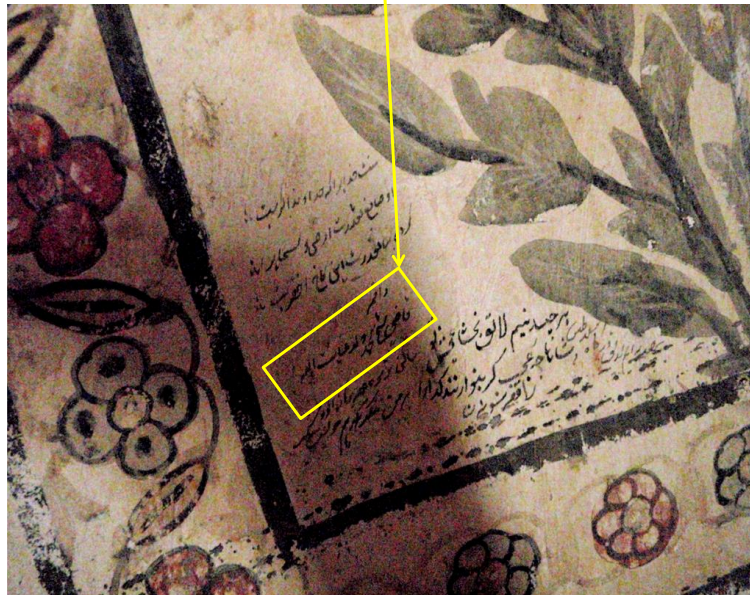
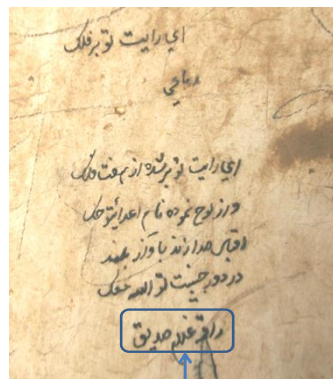
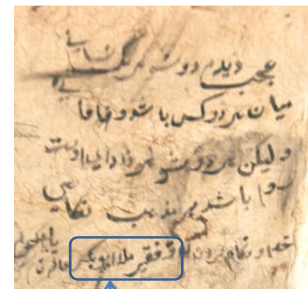


Figure-5: Name of the poet as Qazi Shafe Muhammad son of Inayatullah



Writer Ghulam Sidique

Anonymous in Hattki (Hindi)



Fakir Mula Abu-Bakar

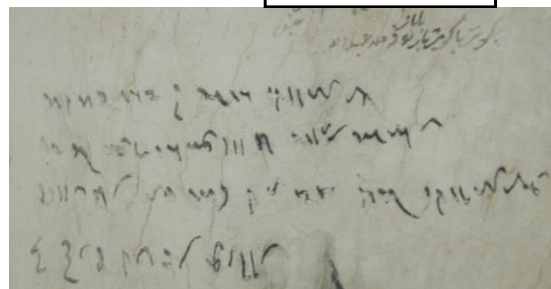


Figure- 6: Autographs painted in Persian and Sindhi-Hindi in *hattki* style

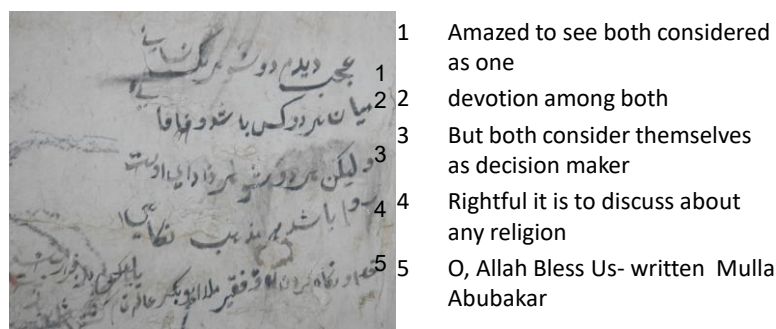


Figure- 7: Poem and name of poet as Mulla Abubakar

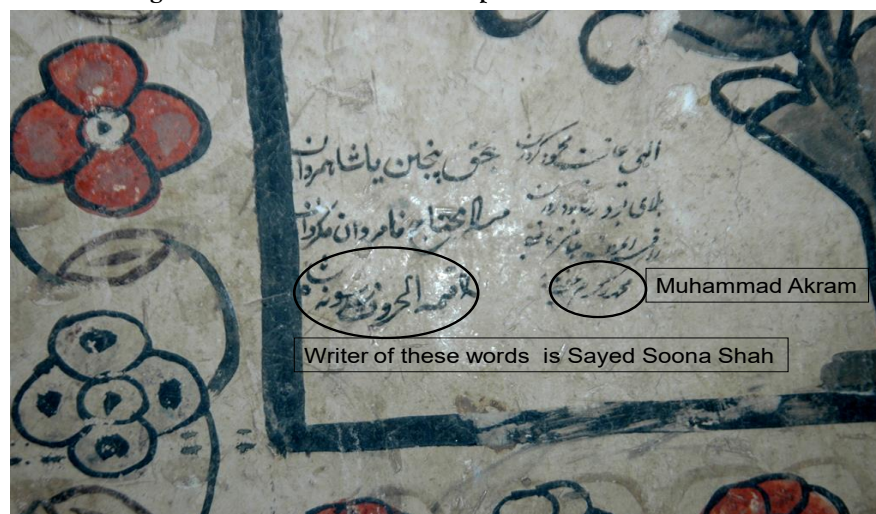


Figure- 8: Autographs of two different writers

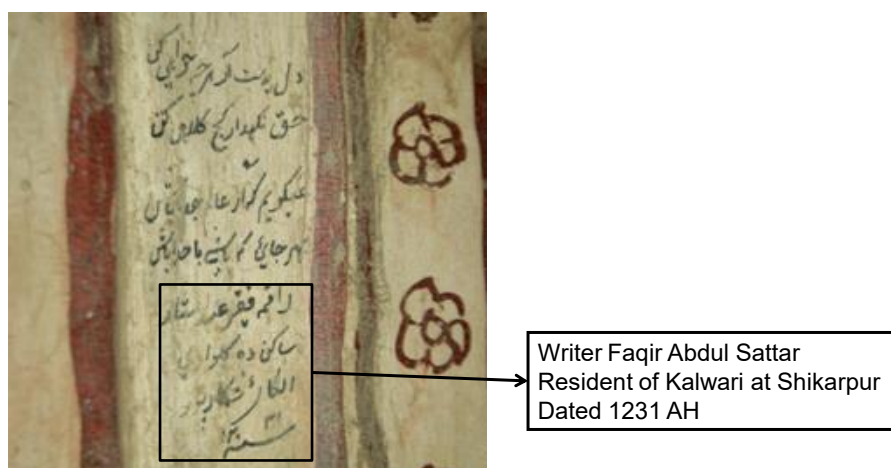
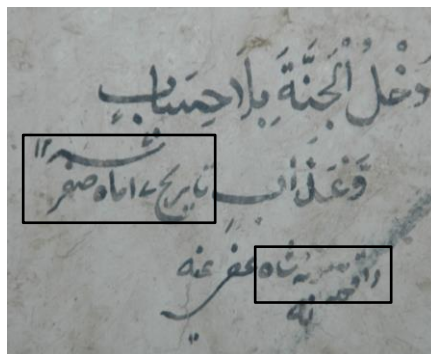


Figure- 9: Another autograph of a writer along with date and his residential address

Dated 17th Safar 1270



Writer Soona Shah

Figure-10: Autograph along with date in Arabic script



Rahmatullah Katoo Shikarpur Qadri

Figure- 11: Autograph of the writer in Sindhi along with date, caste and their residential address

SIGNBOARD

During the investigation, some portion of any given tomb contained several signatures which were written one upon another. These over

signed and mix up signatures looked like a signboard where any visitor has signed their names along with date and address particularly in Sindhi language.

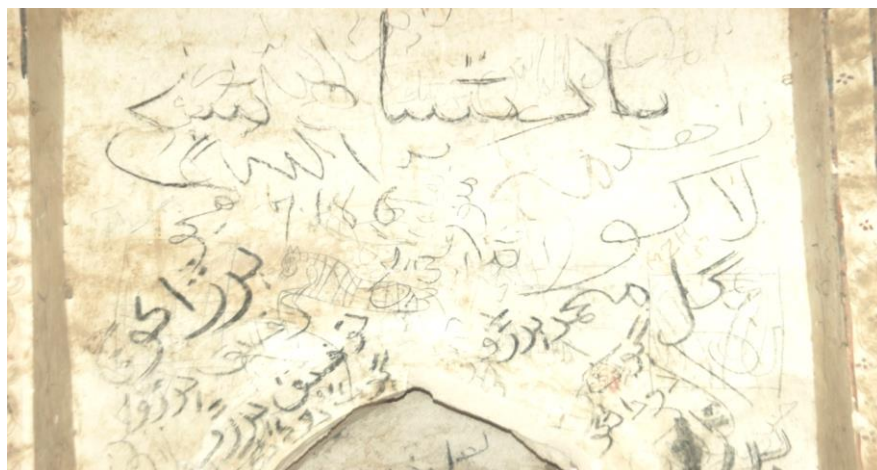


Figure- 12: Autographs of the different visitors along with their caste group(s)

The names, dates and sometime addresses are authentic and provide the name of village – this behavior of visitors is somehow important which suggests not only the time frame but the association of a visitor with different locations. Here village to village interaction system is fundamental for further research.

Linguistic Dimensions in the paintings

Persian served as the courtly and literary language of Sindh from the medieval period onward. Persian mournful and folk couplets that express brevity of life, divine destiny, and remembrance of virtue (Lashari 2018). While Arabic predominates in sacred inscriptions and local Sindhi occasionally appears in later contexts. This linguistic hybridity reflects regional identity within broader Islamic and local traditions (Ibrahim 2003).

Social and Political Significance

Versifiers' autographs functioned as instruments of social representation. Titles such as "Qazi," "Mir," or "Katoher" emphasized rank and lineage. According to Khan (1980), elite tomb inscriptions often included genealogical information to legitimize political authority. The inscriptions served to commemorate valor and clan identity (Ibrahim 2003). Somewhere, the personal identity is placed, for instance in the tombs of Qader Bux-ja- Quba monument cluster. Thus, epigraphy on Sindhi tombs reflects broader social hierarchies and cultural values.

Current State of the Autographs on the Tombs Qader Bux-ja- Quba

These essential documents present in the Qader Bux-ja- Quba cluster of Talpur period, face several problems like:

- ❖ Fading off
- ❖ Dusting
- ❖ Today's visitors
- ❖ Bird feces

Fading off

The tombs are facing conservation problems like cracks, crumbling of the plaster from interior and exterior which effects on the paintings and the human signatures. Another factor which causes the damages to the signatures is extreme heat of summer. As these tombs are located at the base of Rohri hills which increase the summer heat and dry wind; consequently, the tombs become very hot and paintings and signatures effected which sometimes cause their destruction.

Dusting

Majority of the tombs does not have doors and windows when wind blows it bring the smallest dust particles which accumulate on the walls. This process may have started from the time when these tombs are deserted. The continuous accumulation of dust has also created the problems for paintings and human signatures.

Today's visitors

The people still visit Qader Bux ja Quba, they take photo graphs, have fun and write their

names, draw the pictures in case they are unable to write their names. It is observed that these visitors conduct such activities at the places where already signatures are present which cause the damage to earlier signatures. Sometimes, they attempt to destroy them. This deliberate act is dangerous and can be prevented.

Bird feces

The tombs are left unattended since long time which provided ample opportunity for the birds to make their safe habitat. The baits, sparrows and other birds most commonly found having nestled in windows and other places. The baits hang around the dome and shed feces over graves and walls. Their continuous habitats greatly damage the paintings and human signatures.

Conclusion

It is clear that the historical sources of knowledge like the coins, books, archived documents in shape of letters written on the leather, or fabric etc. carry equal importance to understand, analyze and rewrite the chapters of history of given region. Similarly, the human autographs on any type of the physical objects also work as chronological source to comprehend and reconstruct the authentic history. The paintings and carvings are found on the caves, rock shelters, big stone boulder and ruined monuments as tombs and cemeteries is excellent source of rejuvenating the human history and majority of remains are scattered everywhere in South Asia. Sindh is also rich in collection of historical monuments either as a single in cluster shape. Both of these offer significantly several themes for investigations and reconstruction of history of the given region. The present subject of versifier's autograph is brought here as an example for tracing the ignored chapter of history. Such type of autographs as the human signatures placed by either artist themselves and/or visitors personally during their visit of given monument creating an authentic basis and this study as a startup chapter is taken from the Qader Bux-ja-Quba monument cluster.

At Qader Bux Ja Qauba Monument cluster several human signature has been documented.

Majority of them are in the state of threat and can be destroyed sooner or later. The destructive threats are listed in this paper; however, most importantly the tombs may be saved in total as those human signatures are the authentic chapters of history to be unfold.

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