FIGURE 6.1 Gunbad-i Qabus, photographed by Pope
(AFTER POPE 1965A, FIG. 82).
CHAPTER 6

Arthur Upham Pope and the Study of Persian Islamic Architecture

Bernard O’Kane

Under the shadow of the Elburz mountains, facing the vastness of the Asian steppes, there stands in stark majesty a supreme architectural masterpiece, the Gunbad-i Qabus, the tomb tower of Qabus ibn Washmgir. From its spreading plinth to the top of its conical roof, it rises a full 167 feet, with another 35 feet or so underground. It is built of time-defying hard-fired brick, now bronze and golden tan in colour. The interior dome, now turned greenish-blue, is covered with tightly-fitted bricks, in order to fit exactly the inward sloping areas of the walls. On the exterior, ten powerful right-angled flanges project from the circular body, vertically uniting base and roof. Kufic inscription panels between each flange (both at the top and near the bottom of the tower) tell us that it was built by Qabus in 1006–7. Except for these inscription panels and the flanges, the monument is totally bare of ornament.

Qabus was an extraordinary man, ruling Gurgan intermittently from 976 to about 1012. A scholar and patron of scholars, a poet and patron of poets, a calligrapher, astrologer, linguist, chess player and doughty warrior, he was also unreasonably suspicious and, in the end was assassinated by his exasperated nobles. His life was such as to engender a longing for security and repose, as well as defiance of fate—all qualities eloquently expressed in the design of this monument. It owes its power to great height and bleak singularity, to the sheer concentration on simple mass and powerful form which allows no argument or distraction. The structure is stripped clean, a warrior in mortal combat with Fate, as it were, a monarch-poet wrestling with eternity. Solemn, formidable, it makes an affirmation of death and death defied. Is there any monument so expressive, so compelling?

This passage, from the 1965 work by Arthur Upham Pope (1881–1969) entitled *Persian Architecture*,¹ is a good illustration of some of the strengths of Pope's

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¹ Pope 1965A, 86.