THE MADRASA AT ZUZAN: ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE IN EASTERN IRAN ON THE EVE OF THE MONGOL INVASIONS

Not all medieval cities survive into modern times as major urban entities, and when they do not their monuments are often only slowly brought to light. This is particularly true of eastern Iran (fig. 1), where in some cases almost impenetrable mountain valleys have concealed extraordinary buildings for centuries. Two examples are the minaret at Jam and the madrasa at Garjistan, both discovered only recently. In other cases dramatic shifts in systems of irrigation and canalization reduced medieval metropolises to obscure villages. One example is Zuzan, located some sixty kilometers south of Khwaf near the present Iran-Afghan border, where an enormous building overwhelms an otherwise humble mud-brick hamlet (plate 1).
André Godard first described this large building, published a plan (plate 2) and photographs, and read some of the inscriptions. The date 616 (1219) at the end of a band across the back of the qibla iwan (plate 3) enabled him to place the building in the reign of the malik of Zuzan, Qiwam al-Din, Mu’ayyid al-Mulk Abu Bakr ibn ‘Ali al-Zuzani, governor of the area during the reign (1200-20) of the Khwarazmshah ʻAla al-Din Muhammad ibn Tekish. Godard also ascribed artistic importance to the monument’s enormous size and to its decoration, which included the first exterior use of two-color faience.

Godard’s publication has remained the basic study of the building. Donald Wilber included it in his compendium of Ilkhanid architecture, but simply summarized Godard’s comments. J. Michael Rogers has challenged Godard’s dating and his claim that it was a typical twelfth-century Khurasani mosque by arguing that the date could be read saba (seven) instead of sitta mi‘a (six hundred) and that the decoration appeared to him early-fourteenth rather than early-thirteenth century, but he suggested no new patron. Others, however, have gone along with Godard’s dating, and it is indeed correct. The large Kufic band framing the north iwan confirms Godard’s reading of the date. Although no longer extant, its final word [s]itta mi‘a (six hundred) is still visible on his figure 106 (plate 4). The similar bold Kufic band on the south iwan, which Godard made out as “in the month of Rajab,” on closer examination shows a bismillah (plate 5) and the opening words of sura 23, qad aflaha al-mu’minin al-dh[ina] ... (plate 6), and ends with fi shahr rabi‘ al-awwal sana khams ‘ashr wa..., “in the month of Rabi‘ I of the year fifteen and ...” (plate 7). Rabi‘ I corresponds to June 1218.