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Extended Abstract

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Pleasant Time: Methods of Chronogram in the Oldest Cemetery of Shiraz, Dar al-Salaam

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Introduction

The chronogram remains a relatively understudied genre in Persian literary history. It refers to the transformation of numbers—particularly dates—into letters, words, or phrases based on the "abjad system", and vice versa. This practice reflects a distinctive intersection of literary creativity and numerical symbolism, historically used to record notable events such as births, deaths, coronations, or the construction of monuments.

While Kasa'i Marvazi is credited with the earliest numeric chronogram, Masod Sa'd Salman is generally regarded as the first to systematically develop the genre. Chronogram writing began to appear intermittently in the sixth century AH, solidified its position by the eighth century, and reached its peak during the Safavid period. However, it saw a decline in use following the Constitutional Revolution.

Islamic views on death and the sanctity of burial spaces contributed to the emergence of poetic gravestone inscriptions that blend spirituality with literary artistry. The historical cemetery of Dār al-Salām in Shiraz houses a large collection of such inscriptions. The high concentration of chronograms by celebrated poets from the Fars region underscores the literary significance of this form and calls for a dedicated scholarly exploration.

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Purpose, Methodology and Review of Literature

The present study seeks to analyze the established conventions of chronogram composition, identify innovative and lesser-known subtypes, examine the thematic diversity within these chronograms, and investigate the underlying reasons for their prevalence in the Dār al-Salām cemetery. To this end, a multi-year investigation was undertaken, combining direct field research with secondary, library-based sources. The study involved the examination of a substantial number of gravestone inscriptions located at the site.

A total of 228 gravestone inscriptions, comprising approximately 1,500 lines of verse dating from the 11th to the 14th centuries AH, were transcribed and analyzed. From this corpus, 45 verses—each exemplifying a distinct approach to chronogram —were selected for detailed scrutiny.

In light of the findings, and in view of the discrepancies between these local specimens and conventional typologies, the article proposes a revised framework for categorization. Due to space limitations and the absence of a standardized numbering system for the tombs, only selected excerpts are cited within the text. Each excerpt has been assigned a unique identifier, with corresponding images appended via hyperlinks for verification. A survey of the existing scholarship on chronogram and the Dār al-Salām cemetery indicates that no prior research has addressed this intersection in a comprehensive and systematic manner.

Discussion

The gravestone inscriptions of Dār al-Salām predominantly follow the fragment form in Persian poetry and generally adhere to a tripartite structure: introduction, eulogy, and chronogram. The introductory section typically comprises verses inspired by Qur'anic themes, meditations on the transience of worldly life, and admonitions against material attachment. The middle section consists of praise for the deceased, often highlighting their moral virtues and social standing. The final section is reserved for the chronogram indicating the year of death.

While the classical typologies of chronogram composition remain largely relevant, this study proposes a refined classification based on close textual analysis of the material:

1. **Numerical Method**: Traditionally referred to as the "simple" style, this method involves direct use of numeric figures. Given its straightforwardness, the term "numerical" is more accurate. This approach gained popularity during the late Qajar and early Pahlavi periods due to its ease of use. It includes four subcategories: lunar year, solar year, mixed format, and numerical full-hemistich.
2. **Lexical Method**: In this approach, a single word or a cluster of words is placed at the end of the piece, with their combined abjad value equaling the year in question. Since poets are constrained by this format, they often resort to using words containing the letter *ghayn* (غ), which has the highest abjad value (1000). Consequently, most lexical chronograms are derived from the root *gh-f-r* (غ–ف–ر), meaning "forgiveness."
3. **Poetic Method**: Here, a complete hemistich or couplet is crafted such that its abjad total corresponds to the desired year. The flexibility of this format allows for richer poetic expression, often including elements such as: (1) the name or profession of the deceased, (2) the cause of death, (3) use of figurative language, (4) invocation of an Imam sharing the deceased's name, and (5) references to the deceased's age or gender.

4. **Concealed Method**: Also known in classical poetics as the *moamma* or *lugaz* (puzzle), this method encodes the chronogram using hidden or indirect calculations. It has four subtypes: concealed hemistich with subtraction, concealed word with subtraction, concealed hemistich with addition, and concealed word with addition. This method shows the highest frequency in the corpus, owing to its flexibility in vocabulary and the creative leeway it grants the poet in adjusting numerical values.

Across all forms, a wide range of thematic motifs enrich these chronograms: references to the name, title, or pen-name of the deceased, cause of death, place of origin, and profession. More sophisticated examples—often composed by skilled poets—exhibit rhetorical devices such as poetic quotation, allusion, ambiguity, paronomasia, repetition, anaphora, and synonymy.

Conclusion

The primary contribution of this study lies in the identification, transcription, and introduction of 45 selected chronogram verses from a corpus of 228 gravestone inscriptions. Each of these verses exemplifies a distinct compositional method previously undocumented in scholarly sources, thereby enriching the corpus of Persian literature.

The analysis of chronogram genres within the Dār al-Salām cemetery yields several significant observations:

1. During the Qajar period, the presence of poets proficient in chronogram composition, particularly in Shiraz, led to an increased production of such chronograms. However, following the Constitutional Revolution and the subsequent reevaluation of Persian poetic principles, the practice declined markedly.
2. The *concealed* method demonstrates the highest frequency among all types, attributable to the greater creative freedom it affords the poets. This method's allowance for the addition or subtraction of letters, combined with Qajar poets' preference for crafting elaborate chronograms, explains its predominance.
3. The *poetic* method ranks second in frequency. Its relative rarity compared to the concealed style is explained by two opposing factors: the poets' aspiration for refined, sophisticated chronograms (which complicates composition) versus the greater lexical flexibility it offers (which facilitates it).
4. The *numerical* method ranks third, primarily due to limited engagement by Qajar poets. Its highest occurrence is noted during the Pahlavi era, a period characterized by an overall decline in chronogram composition.
5. Finally, the *lexical* method appears least frequently, owing largely to the inherent difficulty of encapsulating the target year within a single word.

Keywords: Chronogram, Abjad letters, Gravestone inscription, Dār al-Salām Cemetery of Shiraz.

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