

# THE ISLAMIC CEMETERY ALTACH المقبرة الإسلامية في مدينة ألتاخ

Project History

# Vorarlberg: Land of Many



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Dornbirn, April 2013  
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Print: BUCHER Hohenems

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This brochure was published to mark the exhibition "Innenansicht Südost – Erkundungen islamischer Glaubensräume" (A Southeast Interior View: Exploring Islamic Sites of Belief), which ran from 9 April to 29 June 2013 at the Vorarlberg Architecture Institute (VAI).  
[www.v-a-i-at](http://www.v-a-i-at)

In the past 150 years, Vorarlberg has become a new home for many and varied groups of immigrants: among them have been Italian-speaking and German-speaking migrants from Trentino and South Tyrol as well as migrants from Austrian states where the Alemannic dialect is not spoken. Others came to Vorarlberg as "Gastarbeiter" (migrant workers). Arriving from Serbia, Bosnia, Croatia or Turkey, they spoke various languages and had different religious beliefs. The list is by no means exhaustive. It is the history of newcomers finding their way, settling down and becoming part of established structures and, in a parallel process, it is the history of change. The growing diversity of Vorarlberg – both as a state and a society – is therefore not a new story. We can

draw on our experience. And we are not the only ones to live through and shape such transformations. We share this history with many other European regions and countries.

A more recent event in this history, which was shaped by people too, is the establishment of the first Islamic cemetery in Vorarlberg, in Altach in June 2012. It is open to members of all the Islamic communities living in any of Vorarlberg's rural and urban districts. The opening was preceded by a process lasting several years and involved many years of people working together towards a common goal that transcended religious and institutional boundaries. This brochure tells about this cooperation – an example that it's possible.

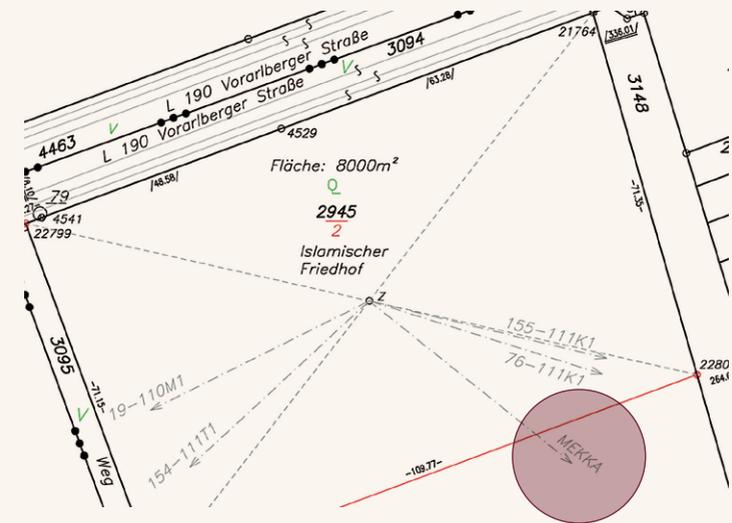
# 1\_Why does Vorarlberg need a burial site for Muslims?

Because the people of the Muslim population group are getting older and the number of those who wish to be buried in Vorarlberg according to the rules of their religion is growing..

In 2011, approximately 38.000 Muslims were living in Vorarlberg. Making up 10% of the total residential population, they constituted the second largest religious group after the Catholics. Muslims make up 6% of the Austrian population. They came as immigrants, starting in the 1960s: Turkish and Bosnian migrant workers, refugees of the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s and from Chechnya in recent years or people with different migration backgrounds from countries in North Africa and south-east Asia.

Migrants mostly constitute a younger segment of the population than the resident population. As they settle down more permanently in their host country, their age structure, however, approaches that of long-term residents. First-generation migrant workers in Vorarlberg are approaching retirement age or have already retired. The number of people over sixty with a migration background is growing. Some return to their country of origin when they

retire; the vast majority, however, do not. Even if they do return to their country of origin, these elderly people do not stay because their children and grandchildren have often acquired Austrian citizenship and bought houses and flats here. These developments form the backdrop to the establishment of the first Islamic burial site in Vorarlberg.



## The Cemetery

**The Islamic Cemetery Altschachen is open to members of all Islamic communities living in any of Vorarlberg's rural and urban districts who wish to be buried according to Islamic rites. The cemetery comprises burial areas for approximately 700 graves, a facility for ritual washing, a covered area for taking leave of the deceased and a small prayer room. The burial areas have been laid out so that the deceased can be buried according to the ritually correct alignment of their bodies with Mecca. In the prayer room the art installation "Schindel-Mihrab" ("Shingle Mihrab") shows the direction of prayer towards Mecca. The carpet was hand-woven by women in Sarajevo.**

**The cemetery falls under the jurisdiction of:** the municipality of Altschachen

**Funding:** Vorarlberg municipalities, State of Vorarlberg, donations from the Islamic Communities of Vorarlberg, burial and grave fees and charges

**Architect:** DI Bernardo Bader, Dornbirn  
[www.bernardobader.com](http://www.bernardobader.com)

**Local construction supervisor:** Thomas Marte (master builder), Dornbirn

**"Kunst am Bau" ("Art within architecture") / installation Prayer room:** Azra Akšamija, [www.mit.edu/~azra/](http://www.mit.edu/~azra/)

**The cemetery is operated and maintained by:** the municipality of Altschachen  
[www.altach.at/buergerservice/bestattung/](http://www.altach.at/buergerservice/bestattung/)  
[islamischer-friedhof-altach](http://islamischer-friedhof-altach)

Discussion with representatives of Vorarlberg's Islamic communities at the completed cemetery, April 2012. Photo: N. Walter.



## 2\_Where did Muslims in Vorarlberg used to be buried?

At individual municipal cemeteries – most of the deceased were, however, repatriated. Ritually correct Islamic burials have not been possible in Vorarlberg until now..

In an Islamic burial, it is religiously important for the grave to be facing Mecca and for the dead to rest in a community of Muslims. This rule of burying people of the same religious denominations together on one site is also shared by other faiths. From the end of the nineteenth century, this resulted in the establishment of municipal cemeteries in multireligious European towns and cities with demarcated burial areas for Catholics, Protestants, Jews etc. In the past few years, this model has been used in individual Austrian cities (Vienna, Linz, Innsbruck, Graz etc.) to establish Islamic burial sites at or through the extension of existing cemeteries.

The first independent Islamic cemetery was opened in Vienna in 2008. One reason was to ease the situation of the Islamic burial grounds at Vienna's Central Cemetery in view of the increasing number of funerals. The Viennese burial site is denominational and operated by the Islamic Faith Community in Austria (IGGiÖ). In contrast, the Altach cemetery is a municipal cemetery – operated by Altach on behalf of the other Vorarlberg municipalities – that is open to Muslims from all of the state's municipalities.



Survey of the building site in 2007: imams are helping to determine the correct position of the burial areas in the direction of Mecca. Private photo.

## The Islamic Religion in Vorarlberg

The Islamic religion in Vorarlberg is organized around community associations formed according to countries of origin (Turkey, Bosnia, Chechnya etc.) and religious denominations (Sunni, Alevi). These communities maintain the mosques and assembly rooms and attend to many of the believers' religious needs. In Austria, the relationship between the state and the Islamic religion is regulated in such a way that Islam is one of the 14 religious denominations (churches) recognized by the state, and Islamic Alevism is one of the 11 registered religious communities. The Islamic Community in Austria (IGGiÖ) is recognized by the state as the official representative of Islam in Austria. Its representative in Vorarlberg is the Islamic Community Bregenz. The official representative of the Islamic Alevi is the Alevi Religious Community of Austria (IAGÖ). Working together with these organizations, the state regulates miscellaneous matters, such as religious education, the denominational school system, military pastoral care etc.

Further information on Islam in Vorarlberg: [www.okay-line.at/Modul Wissen](http://www.okay-line.at/Modul_Wissen).



Outer wall with star ornaments, April 2012  
(The octagonal star is an old and frequently used ornament of Islamic art and architecture). Photo: N. Walter.

## Funeral and burial site requirements according to the Islamic understanding of faith

### **Facing Mecca**

Graves must face Mecca so that the deceased are ready for prayer on the Day of Resurrection and are united together, even in death, with other Muslims who prostrate themselves in prayer towards Mecca.

### **No mixed-faith burial plots**

Every Muslim is supposed to live and also be buried within the umma (the Islamic religious community). In principle, mixed-faith burials or burials, for example, in a Christian cemetery are therefore a violation of this commandment. Besides their own cemeteries, burial areas for Muslims in communal cemeteries are also suitable places of burial.

### **Only burials in the ground**

Only burials in the ground are permitted so that the whole person may be resurrected. People for whom a burial in the ground is not possible because – at their time of death – their bodies were destroyed through accidents or wars are considered to be witnesses of the Faith, for whom there is a dispensation.

### **Eternal rest**

As a matter of principle, a grave should never be disturbed. Normally, the burial plot cannot be vacated because the deceased remains here to await resurrection on the Day of Judgement. This is the reason why cemeteries should not be relocated. Due to the lack of cemetery sites, particularly in urban centres, there is, however, Islamic legal opinion – even in Islamic countries like Turkey – which, in emergency cases, permits a further Muslim burial in an Islamic grave. This only applies if the remains of the person previously buried there are no longer expected to be found and if the person to be buried is also a Muslim. The time before a grave may be re-used thereby depends on climatic and geographical conditions.

### **Cemeteries**

Traditionally, Islamic cemeteries should be situated outside of settlements (Islamic and Jewish burial practices are similar in this point and as well as in the need for burials in the ground and for burial plots not to be vacated). In large cities, such as Istanbul or Ankara, there are, however, cemeteries surrounded by residential areas as a result of urban expansion.

Source: Elisabeth Dörler, Eine Begräbnisstätte für Muslime und Musliminnen in Vorarlberg, 2004.

### 3\_Why did the debate about burial options for Muslims in Vorarlberg result in an independent cemetery?

Because Muslims live in almost all of Vorarlberg's municipalities, and a solution was needed that was beneficial to everyone..

According to the last census in 2001, Muslims live in 93 of the 96 municipalities. Legally, burial is a communal matter. Every municipality has to offer its inhabitants a burial option. It was assumed that, as the death rate in the Muslim population group grew, the need for ritually correct burial options in Vorarlberg would also increase and that this need would have to be met by many municipalities. The Austrian Islamic Law of 1912 protects the rights of the Muslim population to burials according to Islamic rites and affords the institutions and practices of Islam the same protection as other recognized religious communities. Vorarlberg did not have a Muslim burial ground in a communal cemetery that could provisionally serve as a site for burials according to Islamic rituals. A new solution had to be found that crossed municipal boundaries. The topic of burial grounds for Muslims in existing cemeteries situated in a select number of municipalities offering burials to Muslims from other municipalities was also discussed. Finally, after many years of participatory discussions involving the Vorarlberg Association of Municipalities, the State Government, the Islamic communities and such institutions as the Catholic Church and okay.zusammen

leben/advice center for immigration and integration, a specific solution was found and put into place: a cemetery exclusively for Muslims that is municipally operated and, for the purpose of cooperation between municipalities, open for deceased Muslims from all Vorarlberg municipalities and of all religious denominations of Islam. In 2007, the municipality of Altdorf declared that it would make a special contribution towards the realization of this project by accepting the local government trusteeship of the project. Even after the opening of the Islamic cemetery in Altdorf it will still be possible for Muslims in Vorarlberg to be buried in their municipality of residence. There will not, however, be any facilities for burials according to Islamic rituals.



Aerial view of the building site in 2011.

## Critical voices in the debate

There was little public criticism of the cemetery project during the years of planning and construction. If there was any criticism, it was in reaction to reports in the media or at public information meetings and mostly focused on the following points:

- The construction of a cemetery for Muslims: one side interpreted this as an attempt by Muslims to segregate themselves from Christians; the other side interpreted this as attempts by the Christian majority society to segregate Muslims.
- The remoteness of the burial grounds: some people argued that this was characteristic of the social marginalization of Muslims and would reinforce this.
- Additional space requirements due to the religious requirements for burials in the ground.

*Islamische Glaubensgemeinschaft in Österreich*  
*Islamische Religionsgemeinde Bregenz für Vorarlberg und Tirol*



und

**Initiativgruppe „Islamischer Friedhof“**

Amt der Vorarlberger Landesregierung  
z.H. Herrn Dr. Herbert SAUSGRUBER  
Landeshauptmann  
Landhaus  
A-6901 Bregenz

Bregenz, 23. August 2004

**Antrag - Islamischer Friedhof in Vorarlberg**

Sehr geehrter Herr Dr. Sausgruber!

Das Projekt „Islamischer Friedhof in Vorarlberg“ ist ein Anliegen der Muslime seit Jahrzehnten. Dass es nun an Aktualität gewonnen hat, ist angesichts der Tatsache, dass in Vorarlberg 29.334 Muslime leben (laut Volkszählung 2001). Ein für die Vorarlberger Verhältnisse beachtlicher Anteil (8,36 Prozent).

Seit über 100 Jahren ist Vorarlberg ein Einwanderungsland. Seit nunmehr über 40 Jahren leben auch Muslime im Lande. Viele haben sich für Vorarlberg als zweite Heimat entschieden. Die Einbürgerungen nahmen in den letzten 10 Jahren stetig zu. Wohnungen wurden gekauft, Häuser gebaut, Geschäfte errichtet.

Wir denken, dass es viele Gründe gibt, die für einen islamischen Friedhof in Vorarlberg sprechen. Zwei wollen wir hier anführen:

**1. Paragraph 6 des Islam-Gesetzes von 1912.**

„Die Religionsgesellschaft der Anhänger des Islams genießt als solche sowie hinsichtlich ihrer Religionsdiener denselben gesetzlichen Schutz wie andere gesetzlich anerkannte Religionsgesellschaften. Auch die Lehren des Islams, seine **Einrichtungen** und Gebräuche genießen diesen Schutz, insoweit sie nicht mit den Staatsgesetzen in Widerspruch stehen.“

Mit diesen **Einrichtungen** sind neben Krankenhäusern und Schulen auch Friedhöfe gemeint.

**2. Das Grundrecht nach 40 Jahren Leben und Arbeiten in diesem Land auch nach dem Tod hier begraben zu werden, und zwar wie es der Islam für seine Gläubigen vorsieht.**

**3. Als letzten Schritt der Integration auch nach dem Tode hier begraben werden zu können.**

Muslimen haben - wie bei allen anderen Religionen - bestimmte Riten, die mit der Bestattung der Verstorbenen zusammenhängen. Nirgends wo anderes als in den Religionen werden die religiösen Pflichten von der Mehrheit der Menschen ernst genommen und gepflegt wie die Riten der Bestattung. Sie werden quasi sakramental behandelt.

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Glaubensgemeinschaft  
in Österreich

Islamische Religions-  
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für Vorarlberg und Tirol

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Die IGGiÖ - Islamische Glaubensgemeinschaft in Österreich und ihre regionale IRG - Islamische Religionsgemeinde Bregenz für Vorarlberg und Tirol, als staatlich anerkannte Religionsgesellschaft und offizielle Vertretung der Muslime in der Republik Österreich begehren die Errichtung eines Islamischen Friedhofes nach Konkretisierung der speziellen Begebenheiten für Gräber nach islamischem Recht, um hier islamische Beerdigungen zu ermöglichen.

Daher stellen wir, die **IGGiÖ, IRG Bregenz für Vorarlberg und Tirol** mit der **Initiativgruppe, welche sich aus Österreichisch - Türkischer Islamischer Bund (ATIB), Österreichische Islamische Föderation (AIF), Islamische Kulturzentren (VIKZ) und Alevitische Kulturgemeinde** zusammensetzt, den gemeinsamen Antrag zur Errichtung zumindest eines Islamischen Friedhofes auf Vorarlberger Boden.

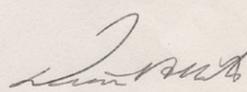
Wir ersuchen höflichst, dem Antrag zu entsprechen. Für Detailabklärungen und -gespräche über weitere Prozedere stehen wir jederzeit zur Verfügung.

Mit freundlichen Grüßen

IGGiÖ, IRG Bregenz  
für Vorarlberg und Tirol

  
Abdi TAŞDÖĞEN  
Vorsitzender der IRG Bregenz  
Mitglied des Obersten Rates der IGGiÖ

Initiativgruppe  
Islamischer Friedhof

  
Attila DINCER  
Sprecher der Initiativgruppe

Islamic Faith Community in Austria  
Islamic Religious Community Bregenz (Vorarlberg and Tyrol)  
and the  
**Initiative group “Islamic Cemetery”**

Amt der Vorarlberger Landesregierung  
z.H. Herrn Dr. Herbert SAUSGRUBER  
Landeshauptmann  
Landhaus  
A-6901 Bregenz

Bregenz, 23 August 2004

**Application: Islamic Cemetery in Vorarlberg**

Dear Dr. Sausgruber

The “Islamic Cemetery in Vorarlberg” project has been a concern of Muslims for decades. It has become even more relevant due to the fact that 29,334 Muslims are living in Vorarlberg (2001 census). This is a considerable number (8.36 percent) given the size of Vorarlberg.

Vorarlberg has been an immigration state for over 100 years. Muslims have also been living here for more than 40 years. Many of them decided to adopt Vorarlberg as their second home. During the past ten years, naturalization figures have been continuously increasing. Muslims have bought flats, built houses and established businesses.

We think that there are many arguments that can be made in favour of an Islamic cemetery in Vorarlberg, of which we would like to cite two:

**1. Section 6 of the Law on Islam of 1912:**

“The religious community of the adherents of Islam shall, both as regards the community as such and religious worship and religious servants, enjoy the same legal protection as is granted to other legally recognised religious communities. The doctrines of Islam, its **institutions** and customs shall enjoy the same protection too, unless they are in contradiction to state law.”

“**Institutions**” refers to hospitals and schools as well as cemeteries.

**2. The fundamental right to be buried in this country – according to rituals prescribed by Islam for people of the Islamic faith – after having lived and worked here for 40 years.**

**3.** As a final step of **integration**: the option of being buried here.

Muslims – like representatives of other religions too – have specific funeral rites for the deceased. In no other area than that of religion are religious duties, including funeral rites, taken seriously and cultivated by the majority of people. These customs are treated sacramentally, so to speak.

The Islamic Faith Community in Austria (IGGiÖ) and its regional Islamic Religious Community Bregenz (Vorarlberg and Tyrol), IRG, as an officially recognized religious community and official representative of Muslims in the Republic of Austria, request that an Islamic cemetery be built – in accordance with the specific requirements for graves prescribed by Islamic law – for the holding of Islamic funerals on such a site.

Accordingly, we, i.e. **the IGGiÖ, IRG Bregenz (Vorarlberg and Tyrol)** together with the initiative group that comprises the **Austrian-Turkish Islamic Union (ATIB)**, the **Austrian Islamic Federation (AIF)**, **Islamic Cultural Centres (VIKZ)** and the **Alevi Religious and Cultural Community**, submit our joint application for the construction of at least one Islamic cemetery on Vorarlberg soil.

We kindly request that you accept our application. We would be happy to provide you with more details and to inform you about further steps at your convenience.

Sincerely

IGGiÖ, IRG Bregenz  
(Vorarlberg and Tyrol)

Abdi TAŞDÖĞEN  
Head of IRG Bregenz  
Member *of the Oberste Rat* of the IGGiÖ

Initiative group  
“Islamic Cemetery”

Attila DINCER  
Spokesman of the initiative group

## 4\_How did the Islamic Cemetery Altach come about??

The opening was preceded by a process lasting several years, in which many people worked out and implemented a solution that transcended religious and institutional boundaries.

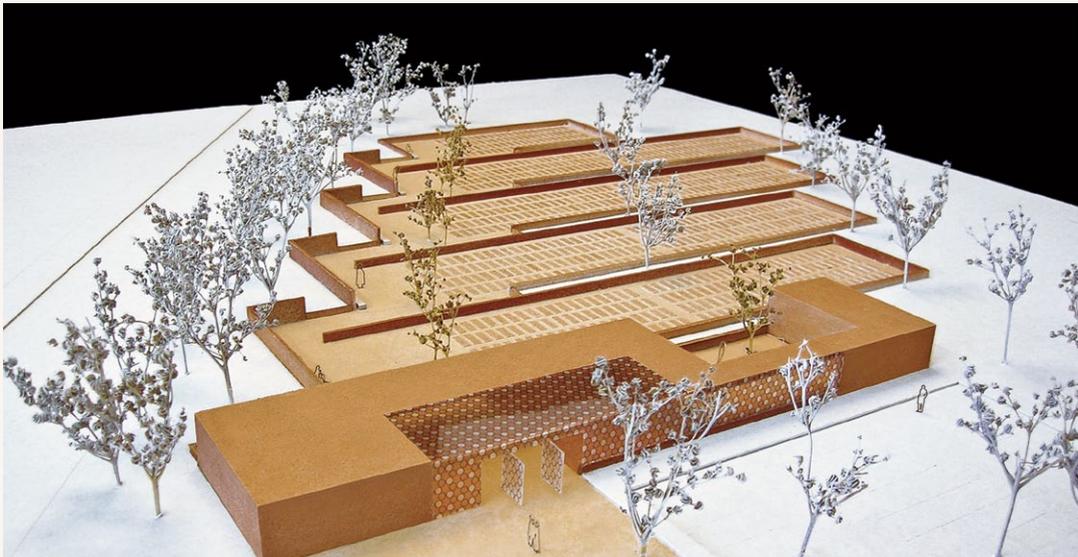


Photo: model of the cemetery submitted by Bernardo Bader architectural office for the architectural competition, 2007.

### Autumn 2003

Islamic communities and immigrant associations in Vorarlberg joined forces to discuss the establishment of burial facilities for Muslims and founded the initiative group “Islamic Cemetery” (Initiativgruppe Islamischer Friedhof). okay.zusammen leben, the advice center for immigration and integration, commissioned Elisabeth

Dörler, expert in Islamic affairs in Vorarlberg and official representative for Islamic Affairs of the Catholic Church of Vorarlberg, with the study “A Burial Site for Muslims in Vorarlberg.” The study was meant to provide the basis for a decision-making process and was published in autumn 2004.

### August 2004

The Islamic Religious Community Bregenz of the Islamic Community in Austria (IG-GiÖ) and the initiative group “Islamic Cemetery” put forward a motion to the Vorarlberg State Government for the construction of a cemetery. Since cemeteries fall under the jurisdiction of local authorities, the Vorarlberg Association of Municipalities took charge of this matter.

### November 2004 to October 2005

The Vorarlberg Association of Municipalities initiated a study group to formulate a “position paper recommending a burial site for Muslim men and women in Vorarlberg.”

### 2006

Decision process of the municipalities concerning the location of a first burial site: the municipality of Altach proposed the Schotterried 1 plot of land along the L 190 road between Hohenems and Götzis as an option for the construction of a single site. On 28 November 2006, Altach council unanimously decided to sell this plot to the Vorarlberg Association of Municipalities for the construction of an Islamic cemetery. In June 2008, the Association of Municipalities acquired the 8,500 m<sup>2</sup> plot.

### September 2007

Following an architectural competition by invitation, the Bernardo Bader architectural office in Dornbirn was commissioned with the planning of the site. In the following years, the architectural office was supported in the planning and implementation phases by a working group of citizens with expert knowledge (working group “Construction” / “Arbeitsgruppe Bau”) who dealt with specific questions relating to the construction of an Islamic

cemetery. Imams of Islamic communities in Vorarlberg provided support in questions of ritual. Azra Akšamija, a Bosnian-born Austrian architect and artist, was commissioned with the design of the small prayer room.

### 2008 to 2010

Detailed planning, application for the building permit and preparation of the construction site: a cemetery was to be built for approximately 700 graves, including a washroom for ritual washing, a covered area for taking leave of the deceased and a small prayer room.

### 2010

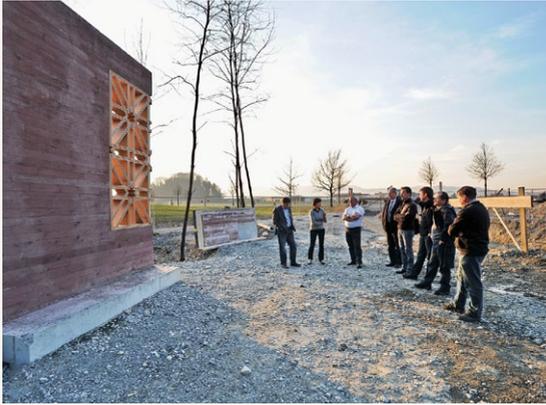
The municipality of Altach assumed official trusteeship for the cemetery, where Muslim citizens from all of Vorarlberg’s municipalities and of all Islamic denominations can be buried. Since 2012, SILA funeral home in Hohenems – which has organized the repatriation of deceased Muslims for years – has been in charge of administering the cemetery.

### 2011

Start of construction work.

### 2. June 2012

Opening of the cemetery.



Left: inspection of the sample wall (concrete and star ornamentation), March 2011. Photo: N. Walter.

Right: one of the numerous meetings of the architect with the municipality's representatives in charge of construction and with the members of the working group "Construction," December 2010. Private photo.

## Persons who participated in the decision-making and construction process

Members of the initiative group "Islamic Cemetery," who in 2004 – together with the Islamic Religious Community Bregenz of the Islamic Community in Austria (IG-GiÖ) – proposed a motion concerning the construction of a burial site for Muslims:

- Austrian-Turkish Islamic Union (ATIB), represented by Mustafa Paçalı
- Austrian Islamic Federation (AIF), represented by Abdi Taşdoğan
- Association of Islamic Cultural Centres (VIKZ), represented by Ekrem Tarım
- Alevi Religious and Cultural Community, represented by Abuzer Şaşkın

- Bosnian Islamic Community, represented by Hüseyin Begić
- Representatives of the Arab and North African community
- Institute for Intercultural Affairs (INKA), represented by Attila Dincer (spokesman of the initiative group)
- Atatürk Thought Association (ADD), represented by Ahmet İnan

Members of the study group, who in 2004/2005 – on behalf of the Vorarlberg Association of Municipalities – formulated the "position paper recommending a burial site for Muslim men and women in Vorarlberg":

- Othmar Müller (Vorarlberg Association of Municipalities)
- Hugo Rogginer (market town of Hard)
- Wolfgang Bösch (market town of Lustenau)
- Edgar Lecher (City of Dornbirn)
- Johannes Schneeberger (City of Feldkirch)
- Marianne Kofler (State of Vorarlberg)
- Abdi Taşdoğan (Islamic Community in Austria, IGGiÖ)
- Attila Dincer (initiative group "Islamic Cemetery")
- Elisabeth Dörler (Catholic Church of Vorarlberg)

- Eva Grabherr (okay.zusammenleben/advice center for immigration and integration)

Members of the working group "Construction," who supported the architects during the planning, implementation and construction phases:

- Attila Dincer
- Eva Grabherr
- Baki Kaya
- Jusuf Mesić
- Nuri Sarıgül

Local support through the municipality of Altach:

- Gottfried Brändle, mayor
- Klaus Ender, cemetery administration
- Rudolf Fend, building authorities

## 5\_The architecture of the burial site

was planned by the Vorarlberg architecture firm Bernardo Bader. The prayer room was designed by the Bosnian-born Austrian architect and artist Azra Akšamija.



A central motif for the conceptual design of the cemetery was the interfaith idea of the “first garden.” The creation of a garden is the clear demarcation of a piece of land from the surrounding wilderness. In Altach, a delicate network of walls of varying heights frames the burial areas and the buildings. The “finger-shaped” burial areas embed the site in the pastoral landscape.

The required rooms (including a ritual washroom, a covered area for taking leave of the deceased, a small prayer room) were also designed using the wall motif. They flank the head of the burial areas in the form of a sixth “finger,” which encloses the south side of the facility. The cemetery is entered from here. The large opening in the sidewall segment at the head of the cemetery, whose ornamentation repeats the motif of the octagonal Islamic star using wood lathing, allows for the interplay of light

and shade in the assembly area, where the bereaved take their leave of the deceased.

The aim of the design was to create open and clearly laid out grounds and buildings that are pragmatically integrated into the land form using minimal, but consciously chosen symbolism.

Azra Akšamija created the “Schindel-Mihrab” (“Shingle Mihrab”) for the kiblah wall in the prayer room. The kiblah wall marks the direction of prayers towards the Ka’bah in Mecca. In mosques, it is usually designed as a niche in the wall indicating the direction of Mecca (Arabic: mihrab). The title of the art installation refers to this. The “Schindel-Mihrab” creates a space that unites cultures through references to the different cultural backgrounds of the people praying.

People entering the room first see the kiblah – a wall of wooden shingles. This is a reference to the local architectural traditions of Vorarlberg, in which the

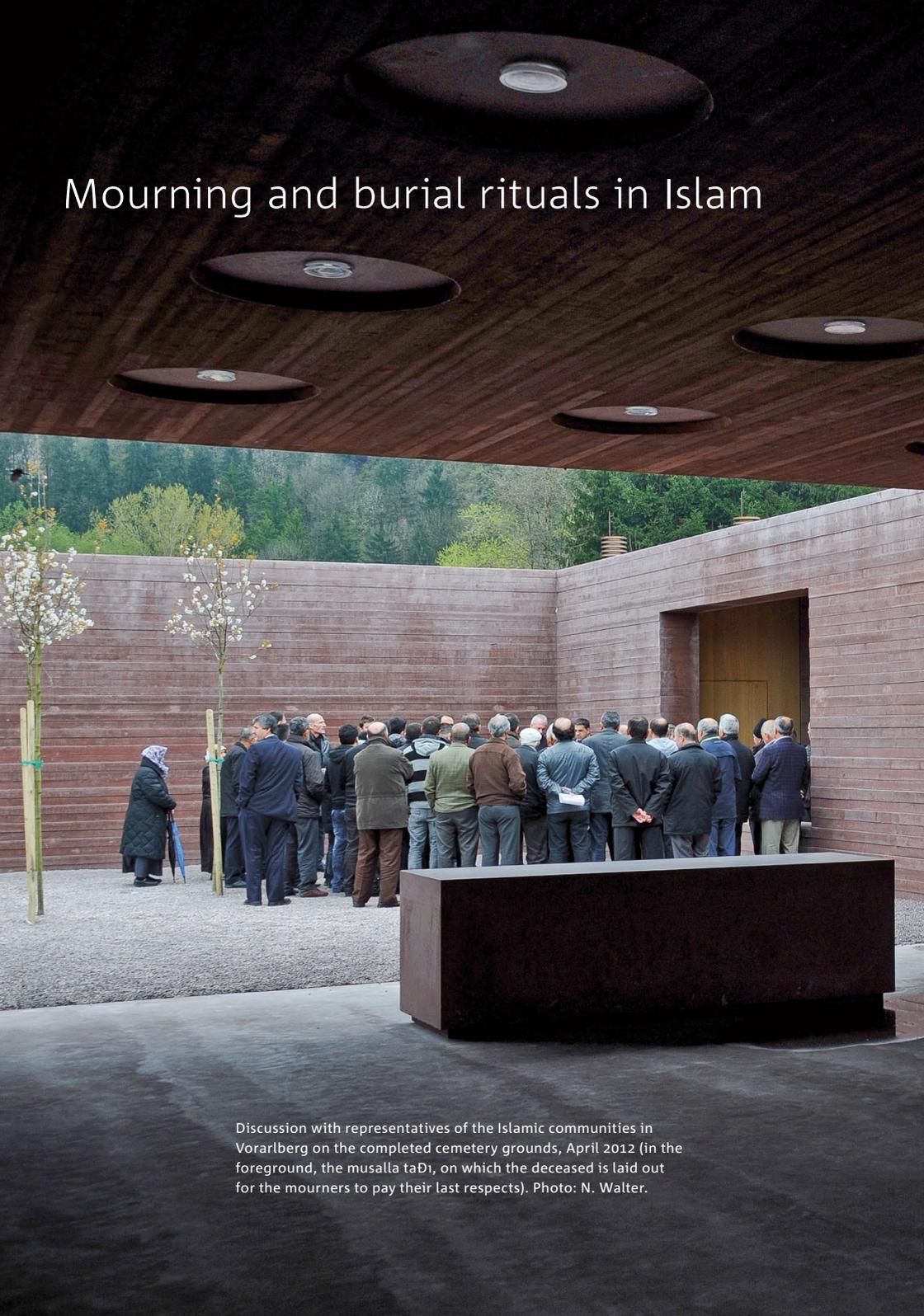
wooden shingle was and still is a popular building material. As they move about the room, the pattern of the shingle wall appears animated. In the position of prayer towards Mecca, the image becomes still; this supports the focus on prayer. In this position, the inscriptions “Allah” and “Muhammad” in Kufic, one of the oldest Arabic scripts, can be discerned at eye level. The different layers of the stainless steel mesh curtains carrying the shingles are mounted in such a manner that they abstractly reference the niche form as well as specific decorative elements of the mihrab in Ottoman mosques called muqarnas. The carpet was hand-woven in a weaving mill in Sarajevo, Bosnia. The changing and different shades of colour signify the rows of prayers (Arabic: saff).

Left: one of the five “finger-shaped” burial areas facing towards the southeast and Mecca; the photo was taken on the day of the opening (2 June 2012).  
Photo: N. Walter.

Right: the prayer room with the “Shingle Mihrab”; the photograph was taken on the day of the opening (2 June 2012).  
Photo: N. Walter.



# Mourning and burial rituals in Islam



Discussion with representatives of the Islamic communities in Vorarlberg on the completed cemetery grounds, April 2012 (in the foreground, the musalla taDi, on which the deceased is laid out for the mourners to pay their last respects). Photo: N. Walter.

Right: room for the ritual washing of the deceased; the photograph was taken on the day of the opening (2 June 2012). Photo: N. Walter.



## Isn't an Islamic funeral very loud and emotional?

Loud lamentation after a death is taboo in Islam. Muslims, as do Christians, believe in paradise. It would be unseemly to communicate despair through such commotion as if it were all over. On the contrary, believers are meant to behave quietly and reservedly as they pay their final respects to the deceased and comfort the bereaved. There is no music at an Islamic funeral. Sometimes, the deceased is accompanied by praises to God spoken rhythmically by the congregation. The prayer for the dead is recited at the cemetery. It is very short and simple. The prayer is said standing and in orderly rows. There is no call to prayers before the prayer for the dead.

## What actually happens at the washing of the body?

In Islam, cleanliness is part of belief. That is why, out of respect for the deceased, a thorough and reverent ritual cleansing of the body should preferably take place immediately after the onset of death and before the body is wrapped in shrouds. The washing of the body may only be carried out by specially trained personnel in a room solely used for this purpose. The congregation of mourners is not present. Everything is kept perfectly clean. In Islam, the burial should take place as quickly as possible.

## Is the deceased buried in a coffin?

The deceased are not buried in coffins in the Islamic world, where the climate and soil conditions are often quite different than those in Europe. There are Muslim legal scholars who argue that the use of coffins in Europe is permissible because of the damp soil conditions. That is why Muslims in Austria are buried in coffins and in accordance with Austrian burial regulations. The direction of the graves is important. The deceased should be lying on their right side with their face turned towards Mecca. This is much easier to achieve and do in a more acceptable manner at a Muslim cemetery or burial ground.

## What about visiting graves?

Even the smallest sign of a cult of the dead is foreign to Islam. That means that funerals are very simple. Graves are kept plain. It is not common to frequently visit the cemetery. The reason is that Muslims are meant to trust in the well-being of the deceased in the afterlife, to let go and not to make a "pilgrimage" to the grave. The bereaved primarily remember the dead in silent prayer or by reciting the Koran and care for them by making denotations to the needy.

Source: information for residents living in the neighbourhood of the Islamic cemetery in Vienna published in 2005 by the Islamic Faith Community in Austria (IGGIÖ) on the occasion of the establishment of the Islamic cemetery in Vienna.

THE ISLAMIC CEMETERY ALTACH المقبرة الإسلامية في مدينة ألتاخ