

Architectural Heritage of Central Asia: Mosques and Madrasas of The Timur And Timurid Era

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ABSTRACT

The article is dedicated to the architectural heritage of Central Asia, with a focus on mosques and madrasas built during the Timur and Timurid era. The study covers the main architectural styles and their development under the influence of historical and cultural factors. It examines how Timur's reign contributed to the dissemination of new architectural ideas, shaping unique features such as majestic domes, intricate mosaics, and rich ornamentation. Special attention is given to the functional aspects of the buildings and their roles in education and religion, highlighting the importance of madrasas as centers of knowledge and cultural life. The architectural heritage of Timur and the Timurids reflects the interaction of various cultural traditions, including Islamic, Persian, and local contexts. The architecture of this period serves as a symbol of the region's cultural identity, influencing contemporary perceptions of its historical legacy.

Keywords: Mosques, madrasas, cultural identity, style, ornamentation.

INTRODUCTION

The architectural heritage of Central Asia, particularly the mosques and madrasas built during the Timurid era, represents a unique synthesis of cultural traditions that reflect the complex history of the region. During this period, spanning the 14th to 15th centuries, architecture

became an important means of political and cultural self-identification, showcasing the power and ambitions of rulers. The construction of majestic buildings adorned with intricate ornaments and unique domes not only served religious and educational purposes but also became a symbol of cultural exchange between

Islamic, Persian, and local contexts.

From Transoxiana, Timur's armies launched victorious campaigns into various countries, reaching as far west as Anatolia and as far east as India. Timur aimed to make his capital the finest city in the world. Exceptional artists and craftsmen were brought to Samarkand from the conquered lands. The monumental structures from Timur's time still testify to the grand construction efforts that took place in Samarkand and other cities five centuries ago.

Timur was not only a great conqueror but also an outstanding builder. Each time he destroyed a city standing in the path of his army, he would bring back artisans to construct his royal city of Samarkand. "There were sculptors, stonemasons, and plasterers from Azerbaijan, Isfahan, and Delhi; mosaicists from Shiraz; weavers, glassblowers, and potters from Damascus — so many that the city could not accommodate them all." In the few brief moments when he was not on a military campaign, he was busy overseeing his construction projects. Perhaps the most striking aspect of Timur's monuments is their grandeur. They stand as a testament to a man who made the earth tremble in his time, as confirmed by an Arabic proverb inscribed on one of his buildings: "If you want to learn about us, study our buildings."

During the era of Timur, Maverannahr became a center not only for military conquests but also for cultural flourishing. With ambitious goals in mind, Timur sought to transform Samarkand into the finest city in the world, which helped attract outstanding artists and craftsmen from conquered territories. This created a unique synergy of various cultures and traditions, reflected in the architectural masterpieces of that time. The majestic mosques, madrasas, and palaces built in Samarkand and other cities continue to impress with their craftsmanship and scale. These structures served not only as symbols of Timur's power but also as testaments to the grand construction projects that shaped the architectural heritage of the region for centuries to come. Studying the architecture of Timur's era allows for a deeper understanding of not only its cultural and historical contexts but also the role that architecture played in shaping the identity of Central Asia.

Although Timur focused his architectural efforts on Samarkand, he also constructed buildings in other cities, such as Shahrissabz, where he built the magnificent Ak-Saray (White Palace), and

Turkestan, where he erected a mosque and mausoleum in honor of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, a renowned poet and Sufi sheikh. The first of these structures was almost completely destroyed by the Uzbeks in the sixteenth century, but its ruins still remain. The second has been preserved in fairly good condition and is reported to still function as a "holy place," where devoted Muslims make periodic pilgrimages, although this is, of course, not encouraged by the Soviet government. Now, let's take a closer look at each of them:

1. The Ak-Saray in Shahrissabz is a white palace that, although partially destroyed, still impresses with its scale.
2. The Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi in Turkestan is a preserved holy site where pilgrims come. Despite restrictions from the Soviet government in the past, today the government does not prohibit visits to this significant site, and pilgrimage continues.

However, perhaps the most impressive architecture that has survived from this period can be considered the buildings in Samarkand. Timur filled his capital with both secular and religious monuments, as well as numerous gardens with stone walls and floors adorned with intricate patterns, and palaces furnished with gold, silk, and carpets. Most of these structures have not survived to this day. For example, his magnificent four-story palace is described by Babur in his memoirs. Nevertheless, several significant buildings have survived and can still be seen today.

He focused primarily on construction in Samarkand, his capital, where he erected magnificent buildings and gardens filled with exquisite patterns and rich decorations. Samarkand became a center of culture and art, where both secular and religious monuments were built. Although many of Timur's constructions have not survived, some significant structures continue to impress with their grandeur even today.

Despite the rich research legacy, many aspects of the architectural heritage of this period remain insufficiently studied. In particular, there is a need for a deep analysis of the interaction between architecture and the social and educational functions of madrasas, as well as an assessment of their role in shaping the cultural identity of the region.

Clavijo emphasizes throughout his diary the wealth of the cities in Timur's realm, the luxury of the ruler's palaces, the precious adornments of the

mosques erected at his command, the might of the fortresses and castles, and the variety of building types (palaces, mosques, mausoleums, baths, inns). Regarding the city of Tabriz, he reports that "in this city there are very large buildings and mosques, decorated in an astonishing manner with tiles and ceramics, azure and gold of Greek craftsmanship, and many beautiful glasses."

"Moreover, there were beautiful and rich mosques in this city, and there were also baths, the most magnificent, I think, that could possibly exist in the world." Regarding the city of Sultaniyya, Clavijo reports that "many canals run through it, and it has many well-decorated squares and streets where various goods are sold. There are also large inns where merchants who come there stay." After crossing the Amu Darya, Clavijo notes in his diary that one day they stopped for lunch "at the foot of a high mountain, where a beautiful house was built in a cross shape, adorned with very fine work from bricks, with many patterns and designs, and decorated with multicolored tiles." About the city of Kesh, from which Timur originated, Clavijo states that "in this city there were many large houses and mosques, especially one mosque built by Tamurbek [i.e., Timur], which was not yet completed." "This mosque and its chapels are very rich and magnificently decorated with gold, lapis lazuli, and tiles." Regarding Samarkand, he writes that "it is slightly larger than the city of Seville," "so abundant and wealthy is this city, and the land surrounding it, that one cannot help but be amazed." In Samarkand itself, the entrance door to the garden where Timur received his envoys "was very wide and tall, superbly decorated with gold, lapis lazuli, and tiles." "This garden had high and beautiful gates made of brick and adorned with tiles, lapis lazuli, and gold in various styles," Clavijo notes about one of the residences. Thus, the Spanish envoy constantly emphasizes the beauty and grandeur of Timur's buildings, the luxury of their decoration, in which the main role is played, judging by the numerous mentions, by tiles adorned with gold and lapis lazuli.

For the analysis of the architectural heritage of the Timurid state, Clavijo's records were used as one of the additional historical sources. Although his diary contains valuable descriptions of cities and architectural objects, other sources were also drawn upon for a more comprehensive understanding, including archaeological data, works by contemporary historians, and studies in art history. This allowed for a more complete picture of the material culture and architectural

heritage of that time. Clavijo's diary was chosen because of its detailed descriptions of cities, architectural objects, and cultural practices, which provide deeper insights into the material culture of this period. It should be noted that the research is based on Clavijo's subjective observations, which may affect the interpretation of the data. There are also preserved examples of buildings erected by subsequent rulers of the Timurids. As mentioned earlier, although they did not share their predecessor's passion for territorial expansion, they inherited his love for beautiful architecture. Interestingly, one of the main builders of the Timurids was Gawhar Shad, the wife of Shah Rukh, who was responsible for the magnificent mosque in Mashhad (built between 1405 and 1418) and the complex of mosque, madrasa, and mausoleum in Herat (1417-1437). Unfortunately, these structures are mostly in ruins today, largely due to wars and earthquakes over the past two centuries. It can be imagined that the shift of the Timurid capital to Herat also moved the architectural focus from Samarkand to this city. Nevertheless, the Timurids continued to build in the capital of their founder, especially Ulugh Beg, who was the governor of the city under his father Shah Rukh.

The architectural heritage of the Timurids represents a unique blend of cultural influences and historical events that shaped the region in the 15th century. One of the key figures of this period was Gawhar Shad, the wife of Shah Rukh, who played a significant role in the construction of magnificent structures such as the mosque in Mashhad and the complex in Herat. Her contribution highlights the importance of women's involvement in architecture, demonstrating that women could have a notable impact on the cultural development of their time.

The transition of the capital from Samarkand to Herat was an important event that reflected changes in centers of power and cultural influence. The shift of focus to Herat, along with the ongoing construction in Samarkand, highlights the dynamism and multifaceted nature of Timurid architectural heritage.

However, history was not without its destructions. Wars and earthquakes caused significant damage to architectural monuments, serving as a reminder of the fragility of cultural heritage. These events testify to how historical circumstances can impact the preservation and transformation of architecture.

Samarkand is home to numerous architectural monuments from the Timurid era, and it is

practically impossible to cover them all in a single article. However, several key structures stand out for their grandeur. Among them, the mausoleum of Gur-Emir, the Bibi-Khanym Mosque, and the Shah-i-Zinda mausoleum complex are particularly significant. Although the latter began construction before Timur's reign, it was he who made a substantial contribution to its modern appearance. Additionally, it is worth mentioning two outstanding examples of architecture created after Timur's death: the Ulugh Beg Madrasah and Observatory.

Gur-i-Amir ("Tomb of the Great Prince") is a mausoleum originally intended for the burial of Timur's beloved grandson, Muhammad Sultan (1375-1403), who was interred there after his death in one of Timur's campaigns. This complex also houses the remains of Timur himself, as well as several other family members, including Umar Sheikh, Miran Shah, Pir Muhammad, Shah Rukh, and Ulugh Beg. Timur was the principal builder of this structure, and the initial complex, except for the mausoleum, was likely completed by 1401. The mausoleum itself was finished in 1404. According to the account of Clavijo, when Timur returned from a campaign and found the mausoleum to be too low in his estimation, he ordered it to be rebuilt in ten days. Clavijo reports: "Without delay, restoration began, and work continued day and night... The chapel was completely rebuilt within the designated ten days, and it was remarkable how such a great building could be erected and completed in such a short time." Whether the reconstruction was indeed completed in such a brief period remains a matter of debate. Later, Ulugh Beg also worked on the mausoleum, adding the eastern gallery in 1424.

The original complex included three buildings grouped around a square courtyard: the mausoleum (to the south), a madrasah (to the east), and a khanqah (to the west). The northern side of the courtyard contained the entrance portal. At each corner of the courtyard stood a minaret. "The significance of this complex lies in the fact that it represents some of the earliest surviving evidence of ensemble planning, which became so popular during the Timurid period and later." The only parts of the complex that remain intact are the mausoleum, the entrance portal, and one of the minarets. Excavations have revealed the foundations of the madrasah, but not enough remains to reconstruct the plan of the khanqah. It appears that the madrasah, being the earliest

example from the Timurid period, "had a central courtyard with two axial iwans and a niche facade, from which one could access student cells. Large rooms, lecture halls, and likely a small mosque were located in the four corners." As mentioned, the entrance portal still stands. It is adorned with tiles (some of which have been restored) and muqarnas elements that demonstrate Iranian influence. This is not surprising, as the architect, Muhammad ibn Mahmud al-Banna al-Isfahani, hailed from Isfahan.

The Gur-Emir Mausoleum in Samarkand is an outstanding example of Islamic architecture, characterized by elements such as its octagonal shape, dome, and rich decorative embellishments. The mausoleum truly impresses with its size and intricate details. The exterior, adorned with glazed tiles, inscriptions, and geometric patterns, reflects the high level of craftsmanship of that era. An important aspect of the architecture is the interplay of light and color, creating an atmosphere of grandeur and sanctity.

The gallery added by Ulugh Beg also emphasizes the significance of this place as a center of science and culture during the Timurid period. The ribbed dome you mentioned is indeed a characteristic element of the architecture of that time and symbolizes the connection between the earthly and the heavenly.

The Bibi Khanum Mosque ("Old Queen") was named after Timur's beloved wife, Saray Mulk Khanum, the daughter of a puppet Chagatai khan whom Timur and Husayn installed in 1364 to legitimize their conquests in Transoxania. It is correctly referred to as Masjid-i Jami' (the congregational mosque), but it took on the name of Timur's wife. Timur built it with funds he brought from India and is said to have used 95 Indian elephants to transport building materials from the quarries. Construction began in 1398-1399, and upon completion, it became "one of the most colossal monuments ever built in the Islamic world." Apparently, as with the Gur-i Amir, Timur ordered partial restoration of the mosque in 1404-1405, but it remains unclear what exactly was restored and why. Clavijo reports that since the amir was in poor health at that time, "he was carried on a litter to this place every morning, and he spent most of the day there overseeing the work." Opposite the entrance, a madrasa and a mausoleum were built, which are now mostly in ruins, constructed by the queen herself. The Masjid-i Shah in Isfahan, Iran, as well as some

Mughal mosques in India, appear to have copied its basic form.

The decoration of the mosque, which originally covered all visible surfaces, is rich and diverse, including Kufic patterns and girihs made from glazed bricks in the hazarbaft technique, mosaic faience, tiles embedded in brick and stone, marble and terracotta inlays, as well as tile work known as "haft rangi." A band of inscriptions separates the upper and lower parts of the wall of the iwan of the main sanctuary. The iwan itself was originally framed by a spiral molding made of light blue tiles. All three domes, now in varying states of disrepair, were originally covered with light blue tiles in the muqarnas zone. The domes were adorned with inscriptions in the hazarbaft technique, with the smaller ones in verses and the larger one in Kufic style. Parts of the latter are still visible. Inside, the dome spaces were decorated with painted plaster and gilded papier-mâché, both materials featuring shades of blue and gold; little of the latter has survived to this day. Above the iwan of the sanctuary is an inscription made from carved unglazed terracotta. Both this inscription and the one above the entrance portal, of which little can be discerned, are attributed to the construction of the mosque "by the Great Sultan, the pillar of state and religion, Amir Timur Gurkan..."

The decoration of the mosque represents an outstanding example of Islamic art and architecture, where every detail carries deep symbolism and cultural significance. The use of diverse techniques, such as glazed tiles, terracotta carving, and gilding, creates a harmonious blend of aesthetics and spirituality. Despite the loss of some elements, the surviving fragments continue to inspire and captivate, reflecting the grandeur and craftsmanship of their creators. The mosque remains an important historical monument that attracts the attention of both researchers and tourists, preserving the memory of its rich cultural heritage.

Shakhi Zinda ("The Living King") is a complex of sixteen buildings originally built in honor of Kusam ibn Abbas, presumably a cousin of Muhammad himself, who came to preach Islam in Samarkand in 676 AD. There are several legends about him: some say he was beheaded by the local inhabitants, after which he "picked up his severed head and plunged into a well, from which he will one day reappear." A prophecy, believed to date back to the 14th century, predicted that he would rise and save Samarkand if the Russians attacked the city; however, in 1868, Kusam did not show any activity

to help, which forever undermined his reputation. Another legend tells that "he was not killed but, escaping from the infidels, entered a cliff that miraculously opened before him and closed after his entrance."

Once Islam was established in Transoxania, this place soon became a holy sanctuary and a site of pilgrimage for the faithful. Ibn Battuta describes it as follows: "Beyond Samarkand lies the tomb of Kusam ibn Abbas. The inhabitants of Samarkand come to visit it every Sunday and Thursday night. The Tatars also come to visit it, bringing vows and offering cows, sheep, dirhams, and dinars [coins]." In addition to Kusam ibn Abbas, the Shah-i-Zinda complex also contains the remains of several other members of the Timur family who either died before the construction of the Gur-i Amir or were deemed too lowly to be buried there. Since the complex is too vast to document fully here, we will focus only on some of its general features.

Шахи-Зинда расположен на холме Афрасийаб, месте Самарканда до монгольского завоевания, к северу от современного города. Вход в комплекс представляет собой массивные ворота-иван. A long staircase, 70 meters in length, leads to the summit of the complex, where the tomb of the Living King is located. On both sides of the staircase are mausoleums with others buried here. These tombs are grouped into three ensembles: one at the entrance gates, another halfway along the passage, and the third clustered around the tomb of Kusam at the top of the hill.

Excavations have revealed remnants of the old city of Samarkand below ground level, indicating that before this area was used as a cemetery, it primarily housed residential and commercial buildings. However, even at that time, religious structures already existed on this site. Certainly, during the early Islamic period, a temple dedicated to Kusam was built, which soon became a center for worship at this location. The earliest surviving structures of the complex, including the minaret next to Kusam's mausoleum, were constructed in the 11th century. By the 12th century, this site was exclusively used as a cemetery. Much of the original complex that developed around Kusam's tomb was destroyed by the Mongols when they plundered Samarkand in 1221, although they spared the Living King from this desecration.

In the 14th century, interest in the "cult of saints" was revived, leading to further construction on this site, and a new Shah-i-Zinda emerged here. Part of the earlier complex has been preserved within the

mausoleum that contains Kusam, while the rest dates back to 1334-1335 and around 1460. Construction at this site continued throughout the 14th century and into the following century, with Timur merely continuing this tradition. Since then, especially in the 18th and 19th centuries, new structures have been added to the complex.

Many of the same features seen in the monuments built by Timur and his successors are evident in Shah-i-Zinda. Blue domes, some smooth and some ribbed, adorn many of the buildings. Tile inscriptions in Kufic script, similar to those found on the Gur-i-Amir and the Bibi-Khanym Mosque, wrap around the drums of many domes. The facades and entrance iwans of the mausoleums are decorated with a wide variety of ornamentation, including muqarnas, glazed brick and tile masonry, mosaics, and glazed terracotta. Horizontal and vertical bands with inscriptions utilize both Kufic and *sulṭānī* scripts. Indeed, some of the most exquisite decorations in Central Asia can be seen in this complex. Various patterns are employed, including floral and plant motifs, stars, and geometric designs. The interior decoration of some buildings is also quite ornate, featuring "mosaic panels with fine gilding on the glaze, others with landscapes (flowers, shrubs, streams, trees with birds, clouds), showcasing remarkable Chinese influence that can also be found in stylized dragons and phoenixes in wall ornaments." In the words of a Soviet writer: "Not sorrow, but reconciliation and tranquility emanate from this city of the dead with its freshness and intensity of colors and unexpected perspectives and combinations of forms."

The Ulugh Beg Madrasah is located on the Registan, a large square that Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of India, described in 1888 as "the greatest public square in the world." "I know of nothing in the East that could compare with it in massive simplicity and grandeur," he wrote, "and nothing in Europe, perhaps only on a modest scale, could even attempt to compete with St. Mark's Square in Venice. No European spectacle can truly be adequately compared to this, as we cannot point to an open space in any Western city that is surrounded on three sides by Gothic cathedrals of the highest order."

As Curzon noted, the square is today bordered on three sides by madrasahs. The first of these is the Ulugh Beg Madrasah, built between 1417 and 1421. The other two were constructed later to replace the *khanqah* and *caravanserai* that were

established under Ulugh Beg. The Shir-Dor Madrasah is essentially a copy of the Ulugh Beg Madrasah and was built between 1619 and 1635, while the Tillya-Kari Madrasah was constructed between 1646 and 1659. "Shir-Dor" means "Lion Holders," referring to the tigers depicted on the facade. "Tillya-Kari" translates to "Embroidered with Gold," alluding to the abundance of gold in this building. Since these last two constructions date from after the Timurids, we will focus here on the Ulugh Beg Madrasah.

It is perhaps fitting that Ulugh Beg, more of a scholar than a military or religious leader, left an educational institution as his primary contribution to the architecture of Samarkand. Indeed, it stands as the most prominent example of such buildings from the early Timurid period. "As a work of architecture, it is unique in its complexity and ambition. It ranks among the finest works of this period."

It is interesting to note the inscription that Ulugh Beg placed above the portal leading to the mosque. This may reflect his desire to link religion and science, a desire that ultimately led to his downfall: "This mosque has been built to remind one of Paradise... it contains teachers of true sciences, useful for religion, under the guidance of the greatest of sultans..." By the time of the Soviet era, the madrasah was in a dilapidated state. Since then, the severely leaning northeastern minaret has been propped up, and the mosaic on the main arch has largely been restored.

The architectural heritage of Central Asia, represented by mosques and madrasahs from the Timurid era, is a vivid testament to the grandeur and cultural diversity of this region. These structures not only reflect high achievements in architecture and art but also serve as important centers of education and religion. The influence of Islamic culture, along with interactions with other civilizations of that time, has made them unique examples of architectural style.

The preservation and study of these monuments are of immense significance for understanding the historical context and cultural identity of Central Asia. In light of modern challenges related to globalization and urbanization, it is essential not only to maintain the physical integrity of these sites but also to pass on their values to future generations. The architectural heritage of the Timurids continues to inspire researchers, architects, and art enthusiasts, serving as a bridge between the past and the present, as well as a

symbol of the rich cultural legacy of the region.

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