

# Epigraphic restorations of Timurid architectural heritage

After its Independence in 1991, Uzbekistan, one of the five<sup>1</sup> post-Soviet Central Asian republics, was looking for a common framework to shape the discourse on nation-building and nation-branding. The great emperor Timur (1336-1405), one of the very few mortals to give their name to an acclaimed architectural style, was branded as the epitome of Uzbek national identity. While the alluring persona of Timur played the role of a symbol, the production of meaning was created by Timurid architectural artefacts. As a result, the surviving Timurid monuments were hastily restored for the celebrations of Timur's 660th birthday in 1996. In the period between the Uzbek Independence in 1991 and 2001, when the architectural centre of Samarqand was put on the UNESCO World Heritage List, some of the Timurid monuments were actually rebuilt, not restored. In this analysis, I discuss the epigraphic additions to two key Timurid monuments in Samarqand. The restorations are treated as a power tool used for the production and acceptance of history.

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## Amir Timur and the Timurid legacy

Timur (rule 1370-1405) was a nomadic conqueror whose empire stretched from Anatolia to India in the late fourteenth century. The architectural monuments of the Timurid empire, situated mainly in present day Uzbekistan, are regarded as masterpieces of medieval Islamic architecture. Throughout his reign, Timur utilised and exploited the cultural and artistic resources of his vast empire for the beautification of his two capitals Samarqand and Shahr-i Sabz.

It was only after 1991, when the Independence of Uzbekistan was proclaimed, that articles and books on Timur started reappearing. After the break with the Soviet Union, Uzbekistan drastically rejected the Marxist-Leninist communist legacy and substituted it with the Timurid cult. In 1993 the horse statue of Amir Timur replaced the monument of Karl Marx in the heart of the Uzbek capital Tashkent. The main square of the New City – Revolution Square – was renamed Amir Timur Square.

Following an initiative of the Uzbek president Karimov, UNESCO took a decision to celebrate the 660th anniversary of Amir Timur in 1996. The celebrations were crowned by the opening of the new yurt-shaped museum of Timur, erected very close to the Amir Timur Square. Further, the international conference *Amir Temur and His Place in World History* took place in Tashkent on 23-26 October 1996. In his opening speech, president Karimov said: "Amir Temur became part of world history not only as an outstanding military leader and statesman who had created a powerful prosperous

state; he transformed his capital – Samarkand – into one of the cultural and scientific centres of the world. Magnificent monuments of architecture, the true pearls of folk arts, craftsmanship and culture, remain to be perfect decorations of our cities and towns."

The powerful personality of Timur and his megalomaniac architectural ambitions, fostering state legitimation, have made him a popular figure among post-Soviet political elites. Following the trend to revise the national historiography in Central Asia, the Timurid cult has likewise been used for new historical identification in the post-Soviet era.

## What happened to the Timurid monuments?

The restorations of Timurid monuments had already begun in the Soviet period. As early as the 1950s Uzbekistan was portrayed as the cradle of cultured socialism across Central Asia. The Timurid architectural legacy was used to sustain these claims during the Khrushchev era (1953-1964) and the Brezhnev era (1964-1982). International delegations and flocks of tourists from neighbouring Soviet republics attested their socialist solidarity by paying tribute to the Timurid heritage until the late 1980s.

The ruins of Timurid mosques, mausoleums and Islamic schools (*madrasas*) in the Uzbek cities of Samarqand, Shahr-i Sabz and Bukhara were extensively studied by the Soviet scholars Ratiia, Voronina, Rempel, Bulatov, Pugachenkova and Mankovskaya, to name a few. Here, I would like to

analyse two examples from Samarqand: the main sanctuary of the Bibi Khanum Mosque (1398-1405), erected as a glorious testimony to Timur's victory over Delhi; and the main portal of the Timurid dynastic mausoleum Gur-i Amir, commissioned by Timur's grandson Ulugh Beg in the 1420s.

The Bibi Khanum Mosque (fig. 1) was the most ambitious architectural project of the Timurid period. The building was conceived as the first Islamic monument with three domed sanctuaries – the main one with the prayer niche (*mihrab*) to the west and two smaller ones to the north and to the south. The Bibi Khanum Mosque was comprehensively studied by Ratiia in the 1940s. Ratiia drew up the first restoration plans based on its ruins and produced reconstruction watercolours in his book published in 1950.<sup>2</sup> According to his drawings, however, the main sanctuary façade stood higher than the dome, which conflicts with Timur's fifteenth century historiographer Yazdi's exclamation:<sup>3</sup> "The dome would rank supreme were it not for the sky itself; and so would the arch of the *iwān*<sup>4</sup> were it not for the Milky Way." Furthermore, in the earliest photographs of Samarqand, taken by Kozlovsky (1890s), Vvedensky (1894-1897) and Prokudin-Gorsky (1907), the latter after the devastating earthquake in 1897, the dome was indeed higher than the arch of the *iwān*. Given the giant proportions of the Bibi Khanum sanctuary, the dome was undoubtedly meant to surpass the height of the smaller side mosques and be visible above all other buildings. However, the restorations undertaken during the Soviet and post-Soviet period dramatically changed this concept.

The renowned Soviet archaeologist and architect Pugachenkova finalised the restoration plans for the Bibi Khanum Mosque at the beginning of the 1950s. Further archaeological research was performed by Mankovskaya in 1967. The subsequent restoration project in the 1990s was led by the architect Krukov; Asanov was the construction engineer. By the end of the 1990s the main sanctuary and the two side mosques had been completely rebuilt and their epigraphic programmes were anew executed. Islamic epigraphic programmes can be regarded as architectural discourses that reflect the contemporary social, political and religious contexts. Unfortunately, during the modern colossal restorations in Samarqand, some epigraphic programmes of key Timurid monuments were completely redesigned. Between 1991-1996, a band of inscriptions, presumably suggested by Ratiia, was added to the main sanctuary *iwān* of the Bibi Khanum Mosque (fig. 2), and additional octagonal segments were placed on the meagre remains of the two framing towers (*guldasta*). These two alterations elongated the overall proportions of the *iwān* and entirely obstructed the view of the rebuilt turquoise dome. The new epigraphic band on the main sanctuary at Bibi Khanum reveals Surat Al-Baqarah (The Cow), Aya 127/128. The text reads:

*And when Abraham, and Ishmael with him, raised up the foundations of the House: 'Our Lord, receive this from us; Thou art the All-hearing, the All-knowing; and, our Lord, make us submissive to Thee, and of our seed a nation submissive to Thee; show us our holy rites, and turn towards us; surely Thou turnest, and art All-compassionate.'*<sup>5</sup>

Fig. 1 (inset): Bibi Khanum Mosque, Samarqand, present view after restorations 1991-1996.

Fig. 2 (main image): Inscription main sanctuary Bibi Khanum Mosque, present view after restorations.

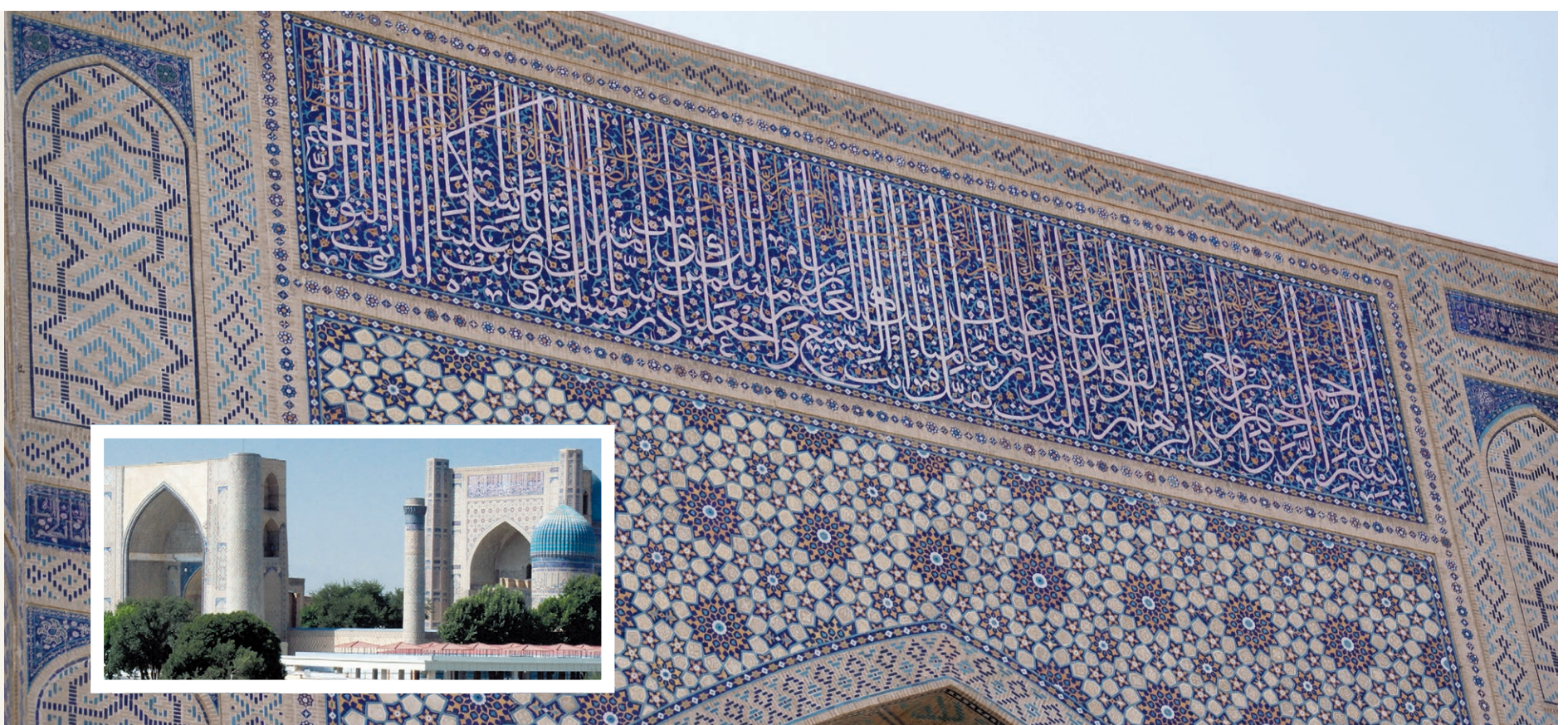






Fig. 3 (left): Sanctuary Kalan Mosque, Bukhara, inscription main sanctuary after restorations.

Fig. 4 (right): Sanctuary Kalan Mosque, Bukhara, main sanctuary prior to epigraphic restorations 1980s. (Aga Khan archive)



It is very interesting to note that exactly the same text can be found above the entrance to the Gok Gunbad Mosque in Shahr-i Sabz, initially commissioned by Timur's grandson Ulugh Beg (1435-1436) and rebuilt after 1980. Another example is the main sanctuary of the Shaybanid Kalan Mosque in Bukhara (completed around 1514); the Surat Al-Baqarah sanctuary inscription was only added after 1987 (fig. 3 and 4). The present Koranic epigraphy of the exterior and interior of Bibi-Khanum, Gok Gunbad and other Timurid monuments, was designed by the Uzbek calligrapher Saliev. It might be possible that during the restoration campaigns similar calligraphic templates were reused for these three completely different monuments stemming from three consecutive centuries.

In analogous restoration campaigns, inscriptions were added to the main entrance of the Timurid dynastic mausoleum Gur-i Amir. Again, the earliest photographs of the gateway by Vvedensky (1894-1897) and Prokudin-Gorsky (1911) (fig. 5) reveal only the damaged *muqarnas*<sup>6</sup> vault. Very detailed drawings of this vault were also published in a lavishly illustrated Russian imperial edition on Gur-i Amir (1905).<sup>7</sup> In 1943 the Uzbek government took a decision to restore the Gur-i Amir ensemble, consisting of Timur's mausoleum to the south, a madrasa to the east and a Sufi lodge (*khanaqah*) to the west. At the beginning of the 1950s the whole courtyard was refurbished under the architectural guidance of Notkin. Although the main efforts went into the preservation of the famous ribbed dome, the entrance portal underwent a complete makeover. Notkin drew up the plans for the stabilization of the tilted left pylon and tried to preserve the contour of the arch. The *iwan* was finished off with yellow brickwork complementing the remains of the *muqarnas* vault.

When I saw the portal for the first time in September 2006, Notkin's 1950s restoration had remained intact (fig. 6). Recently, I was very surprised to see present day photos of the Gur-i Amir entrance (fig. 7), which clearly show that the whole surface has been tiled and an inscription has been added above the archway. The Koranic text depicts Surat 'Ali 'Imran (The House of Imran), Aya 104. The text reads:

*Let there be one nation of you, calling to good, and bidding to honour, and forbidding dishonour; Those are the prosperers.*<sup>8</sup>

Almost 20 years after Uzbek Independence, it was perhaps decided that Notkin's bare brickwork was not impressive enough for the international tourists and local pilgrims visiting the site. In the period after the UNESCO listing in 2001, the Gur-i Amir exterior was partially adorned with newly designed Koranic epigraphy.

The two new epigraphic bands at Bibi Khanum and Gur-i Amir are absent from the earliest photographs taken by Prokudin-Gorsky (1870s and 1900s), Friedrich Sarre (published in 1901) and Ernst Cohn-Wiener (published in 1930). Since the architectural fabric of the buildings was considerably damaged by several devastating earthquakes and military activity, it is impossible to reconstruct with absolute certainty the original

architecture of these monuments. Furthermore, there are no surviving plans or drawings that might shed more light on their original design. This is why, the earliest photographs and lithographs, from the second half of the nineteenth century, could be regarded as objective evidence revealing the state of the Timurid monuments prior to their subsequent restorations by the Soviet and post-Soviet elites.

**Why were the inscriptions added?**

I suspect that the artistic reasons were overshadowed by a political move to manifest the process of Uzbek nation-building initiated after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Both texts transcribed above underline the concept of a *nation*. After the Uzbek Independence in 1991, the Timurid myth became the key to the process of Uzbek state formation. The Turkic steppe conqueror Timur, previously 'Uzbekified', became the undisputed national hero. Throughout the last two decades, Timur has enjoyed a mass appeal among the Uzbek general public in a predominantly Muslim nation with nomadic roots. Timurid architecture, in turn, is used to boost the Uzbek population's sense of belonging and pride throughout the construction of an ethno-national identity.

Since Independence, the Uzbek government has been using the Timurid heritage for state-branding. Uzbekistan is presented to the world as the cradle of Timurid civilization and as an important cultural hub along the Silk Road. The Timurid monuments in Samarqand and Shahr-i Sabz are depicted on all state-issued tourist brochures and projected

onto large screens during state-sponsored Uzbek cultural events across Europe and the US. The authenticity of these monuments is not questioned. The legitimacy of their exquisite decoration and epigraphic programmes are branded as perfectly preserved Uzbek architectural heritage.

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**All images taken by the author (2006), unless otherwise specified.**

**Notes**

- 1 Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan.
- 2 Sh. E. Ratiia. 1950. *Mechet Bibi-Khanym*. Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatelstvo arkhitektury i gradostroitelstva.
- 3 In 1426-1427 Yazdi completed the biography of Timur.
- 4 A large vaulted hall with an arch opening on one side, usually overlooking a rectangular courtyard.
- 5 *The Koran*. Translated with an Introduction by Arthur J. Arberry. Oxford: Oxford University Press, reissued 2008, p. 16.
- 6 A system of projecting niches used for zones of transition and for architectural decoration in Islamic architecture.
- 7 *Les mosquées de Samarcande*. Fascicule 1 Gour-Emir. St. Pétersbourg: Commission Impériale Archéologique, 1905.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 59.

Fig. 5 (left): Entrance portal Gur-i Amir, photograph by Prokudin-Gorsky 1911. (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LOT 10338, no. 92)

Fig. 6 (top right): Entrance portal Gur-i Amir after restorations in the 1950s.

Fig. 7 (below right): Entrance portal Gur-i Amir, after epigraphic restorations. (Courtesy creative commons Flickr)

