

Tilework on 12th to 14th century funerary monuments in Urgench (Gurganj)

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All photographs were taken by the author in 2006, unless otherwise indicated

1 General view of the Il Arslan Mausoleum, the Tekish Mausoleum, the minaret and the Tura Beg Khanum Mausoleum, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan

BETWEEN THE CASPIAN and the Aral Sea, ensconced in the delta region of the Amu Darya (ancient Oxus River), and isolated from other regions by the surrounding deserts, lies the oasis of Khwarazm (ancient Choresmia). Throughout its history Khwarazm was accessible only by long and hazardous caravan routes across the formidable Kara Kum and Kyzyl Kum deserts or the dangerous, lifeless Ust-Urt plateau. Today the province is divided between the territories of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

Gurganj, called Jurjāniyya by the Arabs and later Urgench by the Mongols and Turks, was the second most important city in Khwarazm (situated in present-day northwestern Turkmenistan). At the turn of the last millennium, it superseded the city of Kath as capital of the territory, remaining for the next four centuries one of the most important cities of Central Asia. Surviving tilework on the extant funerary monuments of the city (1) provides eloquent witness of Khwarazm's rich artistic tradition.

The collapse of the native Iranian dynasties under Turkish political and military pressure was followed by waves of migration of Turkic peoples from the outer steppes.¹ As a result, the original Iranian element was gradually submerged by Turkish (and later Turkish-Mongol) ethnic groups,² marking the beginning of the ethnic and linguistic Turkicisation of the Khwarazmian population.³ The city became the regional centre and a transit place for the southbound caravan trade arriving from north and west. Trans-Eurasian trade across the Oguz steppe territories was mainly controlled by nomadic Turkic peoples, who were attracted not only by urban commodities but also by the winter pasture on the shores of the Amu Darya.⁴

In the second quarter of the 12th century, under the Turkic Khwarazm-Shāh Atsīz (ruled 521-2/1127-8–551/1156), the province became the centre of a vast empire which extended, at the beginning of the 13th century, from the borders of India to those of Anatolia. At that

time Gurganj was among the most prosperous cities of the Islamic Empire. The Persian historian for the Mongols, 'Alā al-Dīn Juwaynī (623/1226–681/1283), wrote of the city that “before the vicissitudes of fortune”, i.e., before its near total destruction by the Mongols, “it was the site of the throne of the Sultans of the world and the dwelling-place of the celebrities of mankind; its corners supported the shoulders of the great men of the age, and its environs were receptacles for the rareties of time; its mansions were resplendent with every kind of lofty idea, and its regions and districts were so many rose-gardens through the presence of men of quality, great *shaikhs* being assembled in one place with the Sultans of the age.”⁵

Following the conquest of northern China, Mongol armies reached the steppe regions of Khwarazm in 617/1220. Chingiz Khan's sons, Jochi, Chaghatai and Ögedei, laid siege to Gurganj and, in spite of its heroic and prolonged resistance, conquered and razed it to the ground in Safar 618/27 March–24 April 1221.⁶ “Khorazm, which was the centre of battling men and the venue of banqueting women, on whose threshold Fate laid her head and which the phoenix of Fortune made its nest, became the abode of the jackal and the haunt of the owl and kite.”⁷ The fate of Gurganj is said to have been worse than that of other cities taken by the Mongols⁸ and little survived the near total destruction. Writing in 657–658/1259–1260, Abū 'Amr al-Jūzjānī, historian of the Indian dynasties, noted that only two edifices remained intact, the so-called “old palace”, Kūshk-i Akhchak (?), and the “tomb of Sultan Takash”.⁹ The latter seems to have survived along with another mausoleum in the near vicinity, the so-called Il Arslan Mausoleum, while nothing is apparently extant of the “old palace”. Both mausolea were erected over the graves of rulers or venerated religious figures. The particular reverence accorded to them not only assured the survival of the sanctuaries over the passage of time but gave rise to their popular association with holy figures and their legends.



2 The Il Arslan Mausoleum, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan



4 Detail of the carved brick panels of the principal façade, Il Arslan Mausoleum, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan



3 Detail of the principal façade, Il Arslan Mausoleum, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan

Of these the Il Arslan Mausoleum is the oldest standing monument in Gurganj, dated to the twelfth century (2).¹⁰ The mausoleum is said to possibly house the tomb of the Khwarazm-shāh Il Arslan b. Atsīz (reigned 551/1156–567/1172), but is popularly ascribed to one of the most

celebrated theologians and exegetists of Islam, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (543/1149–606/1209),¹¹ who, however, died in Herāt, where his tomb is still venerated.¹²

The tomb has a cuboidal structure of baked brick similar to the earliest extant Islamic mausoleum in Central Asia, the early 10th century mausoleum of the Samanids in Bukhara, but instead of a hemispherical dome it has a

¹ Bosworth, 1968, p. 9.

² Bosworth, 1968, p. 141. Bosworth, 1996, p. 180.

³ Sachau, 1873, pp. 471ff. Bosworth, “Kh”ārazm”, *EI*² IV, pp. 1060b.

⁴ Bosworth, 1968, p. 7.

⁵ Juvaynī, ed. Qazvini, tr. Boyle, p. 123.

⁶ Barthold, “Čaghatay Khān”, *EI*² II, pp. 2a.

⁷ Juvaynī, ed. Qazvini, tr. Boyle, pp. 127f.

⁸ Barthold, 1958, p. 436.

⁹ Barthold, 1958, p. 436, quoting from Jūzjānī, *Tabakāt-i Nāsiri*, pp. 281, 1100.

¹⁰ Pugachenkova, 2000, p. 522. Pilyavskiy, V. I., and Armarchuk, E. A., quoted by Mamedov and Muradov, 2001, p. 46, nt. 57, and p. 97. Soustiel and Porter, 2003, p. 37.

¹¹ Pugachenkova, 2000, p. 523. Sayan, 1999, pp. 141ff.

¹² Masson and Pugachenkova, tr. Rogers, 1978, p. 132. Anawati, “Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī”, *EI*² II, p. 751b.

faceted conical roof of a type also known in northern Turkistan, Transoxiana and Iran. The 11th century mausoleum of Babaji Khatūn near Taraz in southern Kazakhstan also has a faceted roof and represents a prototype of this kind of funerary construction.

Emphasis is placed on the development of the imposing principal façade, or *pīshṭāq*, which is equally divided into three raised rectangular frames enclosing lancet arch-shaped apertures and set within a surrounding frame (3). The latter, the tympana and pediments are adorned with a rich decorative scheme carved in high relief into bisque brick panels, with an epigraphic frieze containing a pious aphorism in flowing, cursive script set against foliate spirals bearing large fleshy palmettes in profile running around the frame (4). Profusely carved vegetal motifs adorn the tympana and pediments, displaying early versions of an arabesque pattern known as “giriḥ” (literally, knotted or interlaced) co-ordinated with interlaced sinuous tendrils bearing bifurcating lanceolate leaves.

The decorative scheme of the dome is carried out in a tiling technique executed in monochrome turquoise glazed brick tiles set against bisque brickwork, forming geometric rectilinear patterns that create a continuous interplay of textures in contrasted colours.¹³ The entire dome is thus faced with a patterning of graduated superimposed bands formed of large contiguous diamond-shaped motifs, enclosing smaller geometric motifs. Only the imprint remains of a rectangular tile frieze that once girded the upper edge of the drum.

The second mausoleum, dating to circa 1200, is ascribed on historical grounds to Sultan ‘Alā’ al-Dīn Tekish (reigned 568/1172–596/1199), Il Arslan’s son and successor (5).¹⁴ Popularly it is known as the mausoleum of shaykh Sharaf, locally referred to as Sharap-baba,¹⁵ who, however, died in the 14th century and is buried in Nukhūr.¹⁶ Like the nearby Il Arslan Mausoleum it has a cuboidal base surmounted by a cylindrical drum with trilobate arcades topped by a pyramidal dome (6). Elaborate intersecting arches forming stalactites, or *muqarnas*, adorn the upper section of the central arch-shaped projecting portal niche over the entrance to the tomb.

Sections of the brickwork are enlivened with turquoise glazed bricks interspersed with cobalt-blue glazed bricks. Originally the dome was extensively clad in a revetment of bricks coated with turquoise, the large upper section completely encased to form an intricate overall chevron pattern. The lower section of the drum is embellished with a broad band of contiguous diamond-shaped motifs, punctuated at the centre. The most striking feature of the mausoleum is the monumental continuous Qur’anic (XXVIII 88) epigraphic band which runs horizontally around the drum just above the finely executed arcades. A thick glossy turquoise glaze covers the frieze tiles, which are moulded in relief to feature a clear cursive script enlivened with floral compositions. The tiles are made up of superimposed sections that compose the upper and lower parts of the handsomely rendered letters. A raised horizontal border containing an interlaced foliate diaper pattern frames the upper and lower tier of the tiles so as to enclose the main field above and below (7).

Examples of polychrome underglaze and overglaze enamel painted tiles, so-called *mīnā’ī*, which were produced from the mid 12th and early 13th centuries, were



5 The Tekish Mausoleum, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan



6 The roof of the Tekish Mausoleum, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan



7 Detail of the frieze tiles with epigraphic band circumscribing the drum, Tekish Mausoleum, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan

also excavated at Urgench. An eight-pointed wall tile, which on account of its figural decoration possibly once embellished a secular structure, features a rider on horseback painted in delicate colours heightened with gold leaf, standing out against a white ground (8).

In 2000, two cenotaphs, a larger one with a small version in parallel position by its side, were excavated next to the mausoleum of Sultan Tekish (9). While the tile revetment of the smaller cenotaph is no longer extant, the large two-tier cenotaph is encased with glazed tiles. These enable the large cenotaph to be dated to the 14th century, demonstrating that the sanctity, or *baraka*, emanating from the mausoleum’s occupant long continued to render it a desirable burial place.

Covered with a white slip, the tiles are decorated in the



8 Eight-pointed wall tile decorated in the *mīnāʿī* technique, Handicraft Museum, Konya Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan

cuerta seca technique whereby each surface is enclosed by a manganese line of paint with an added greasy substance that vanishes in the firing, thus preventing contiguous colours from spilling over into each other. The ensuing surfaces are enlivened with glowing apple green, cinnabar red, turquoise, manganese purple and black set against a cobalt-blue ground and under a transparent colourless glaze. All sides of the cenotaph are decorated with epigraphic friezes in fluid cursive script reserved in white set against a cobalt-blue background (10, 11). Sadly only a few years after the site was excavated the fragile tilework was already in an advanced state of dilapidation (12).

In 628/1231 the Mongol conquerors founded the city of Urgench not far from the ruins of Gurganj.¹⁷ The northern part of Khwarazm, which included Urgench, was integrated into the lands of the Golden Horde Khans, who controlled southern Russia and the Turkic (Oghuz-Qipchaq) steppes, for a hundred and forty years. In the aftermath of the Mongol invasion building activity was brought to a halt for almost a century. But with the promotion of trade under the *pax mongolica*, building works resumed in the early 14th century. At this time Urgench again became a populous and thriving commercial centre, not least because of its strategic location on one of the main arteries of the trade routes stretching across the steppes from the Volga to Transoxiania and Khurasan

¹³In Persian this technique is referred to as *hazarbaḡ*, or “thousand-weave”, and elsewhere as *bannāʿī*, or “builder’s technique”; cf. Golombek and Wilber, 1988, p. 128.

¹⁴Pugachenkova, 2000, pp. 523f. Sayan, 1999, pp. 146ff. Soustiel and Porter, 2003, pp. 26, 36. According to Ibn al-Athīr, however, Sultan Tekish constructed his grave in the great *madrasa* which was also built by him. Cf. Barthold, 1968, p. 361, nt. 3.

¹⁵Mamedov and Muradov, 2001, p. 63.

¹⁶Masson and Pugachenkova, tr. Rogers, 1978, p. 132.

¹⁷Barthold, 1958, p. 457.



9 Two cenotaphs excavated next to the mausoleum of Sultan Tekish, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan (photograph, 2001)



10 Larger cenotaph decorated with *cuerta seca* tiles, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan (photograph, 2001)



11 Larger cenotaph decorated with *cuerta seca* tiles, side view, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan (photograph, 2001)



12 Larger cenotaph decorated with *cuerta seca* tiles, side view, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan



13 Mausoleum of Najm al-Dīn Kubrā facing the Sultan Ali Mausoleum, dated 16th century or later, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan

and on into China.¹⁸ According to the travelogue of the famous Moorish traveller Ibn Battuta, who visited Urgench in 735/1335, it was the largest and most important city of the Turks, with fine mosques and other public buildings.¹⁹

One of the few buildings to survive beyond the post-Mongol period is the third extant mausoleum attributed to the great shaykh Najm al-Dīn Kubrā, founder of the Sūfī Kubrawī order. The ensemble lies on the northern outskirts of the town of Kunya Urgench, about one kilometre from the ancient site (13). According to legend, despite knowing of the Mongol advance, the revered Sūfī shaykh chose to share the fate of his fellow citizens “in good and evil fortune”, remaining in Urgench to perish in about 618/1221 during the Mongol capture of the town.²⁰ He is believed to have been buried at the site of his dervish hospice, or *khānaqāh*,²¹ where his mausoleum was built in the 1330s,²² said to have been a site of active worship even in the late 19th century.²³

According to a dedicatory inscription on the façade, the mausoleum was reconstructed under Qutlugh Timur b. Najm al-Dīn, the former vizier of Ghiyāth al-Dīn Muhammad Özbek (713/1313–742/1341), eighth khan of the Golden Horde, who, when he became too powerful, was sent to be Batu’id governor of Khwarazm in 721/1321, a position he held until 736/1336.²⁴ The province developed particularly during that period and the cultural and intellectual life that re-emerged was described by the historian ‘Abd al-Razzāq Samarqandī (died 887/1482) in his history of the Timurids, *Matla’ al-sa’dayn*, as “the rendez-vous of the most distinguished figures of the world”.²⁵ The construction of monuments also proceeded at a vigorous rate under the patronage of Qutlugh Timur, an activity in which he was joined by his wife Tura Beg Khanum (circa 712/1312–741/1341), the daughter of the Golden Horde khan Özbek. She is said to have rebuilt the Friday mosque, and next to it the sixty metre high



14 Portal façade, Mausoleum of Najm al-Dīn Kubrā, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan



15 *Muqarnas*-cornice, Mausoleum of Najm al-Dīn Kubrā, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan



16 Underglaze-painted low-relief tilework decoration on the side of the portal, Mausoleum of Najm al-Dīn Kubrā, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan



17 Underglaze-painted low-relief tilework of tympanum over door, Mausoleum of Najm al-Dīn Kubrā, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan

minaret named after her husband,²⁶ and is also credited with patronage of the *khānaqāh* of shaykh Najm al-Dīn al-Kubrā.

Ibn Battuta was a visitor to this site and also lodged in *khānaqāhs*, well known for their open hospitality, which he referred to as *zāwīyas*.²⁷ *Khānaqāhs* also served as burial

places, a fact which enabled them to attract more pious pilgrims.²⁸ The sanctuary has four rooms. The central chamber contains the tomb while the other rooms were probably intended for communal life and religious rites as well as for hospitality.²⁹

A hemispherical dome crowns the mausoleum. The main façade of the *pīshṭāq* is framed by a lancet arch (14) and surmounted by a *muqarnas*-cornice (15). Both the façade and the cenotaph of the shaykh in the mausoleum (see below), are generously decorated with closely related tilework. The frit body ceramic tiles are moulded in low relief, reserved in white on a cobalt-blue ground, with the decorative scheme outlined in black, partially enlivened by turquoise, and covered with a brilliant colourless transparent glaze.

The outer façade is framed by a continuous pious epigraphic frieze in monumental *thuluth*. A second band runs horizontally across the head of the pediment and identifies Qutlugh Timur as the patron of the renovation works.³⁰ Both inscriptions are reserved in white on a cobalt-blue ground. The *muqarnas*-cornice is studded with arch-shaped ceramic tiles painted with arabesques in black under a transparent turquoise glaze alternating with carved terracotta tiles (15).

Elaborate tilework decoration inside the portico and on the soffit of the portal arch serves to enhance the interest of the projecting portal (16). The magnificent tympanum above the entrance to the mausoleum is composed of hexagonal tiles enlivened with an all-over lattice of intertwining stemmed lanceolate leaves forming a “*girih*” arabesque pattern (17). The tympanum is framed by an epigraphic frieze with a Qur’anic inscription executed in finely plaited Kufic.

A further epigraphic frieze expressing pious wishes frames the door, and is supported on either side of the base by a pair of tiles with chinoiserie floral decoration comprising interlaced cartouches with lotus and peony blossoms (18).

A photograph published by Pilyavkiy in 1938 shows the tomb comprising a substantial cuboidal pedestal with engaged angle colonnettes surmounted by a pair of twinned

¹⁸ Fedorov-Davydov, 2001, p. 48.

¹⁹ Ibn Battuta, tr. Gibb, pp. 541ff.

²⁰ Barthold, 1958, p. 436.

²¹ Algar, “Kubrā Shaykh Abu’l-Djannāb Ahmad b. ‘Umar Nadjm al-Dīn”, *EI*² V, pp. 300a.

²² Pugachenkova, 1981, p. 92.

²³ Barthold, 1958, p. 436, nt. 4, quoted Smirnov, E., *Dervishizm v Turkestanye*, Tashkent, 1898, p. 18.

²⁴ Spuler, 1965, p. 301.

²⁵ ‘Abd al-Razzāq Samarqandī, *Matla‘ al-sa‘dayn*, 2 vols, ed. Muhammad al-Shafī‘, Lahore, 1360–1368/1941–1949. Bosworth, “Kh^wārazm”, *EI*² IV, pp. 1060b.

²⁶ Pugachenkova, 2000, p. 529.

²⁷ Ibn Battuta, tr. Gibb, pp. 541ff.

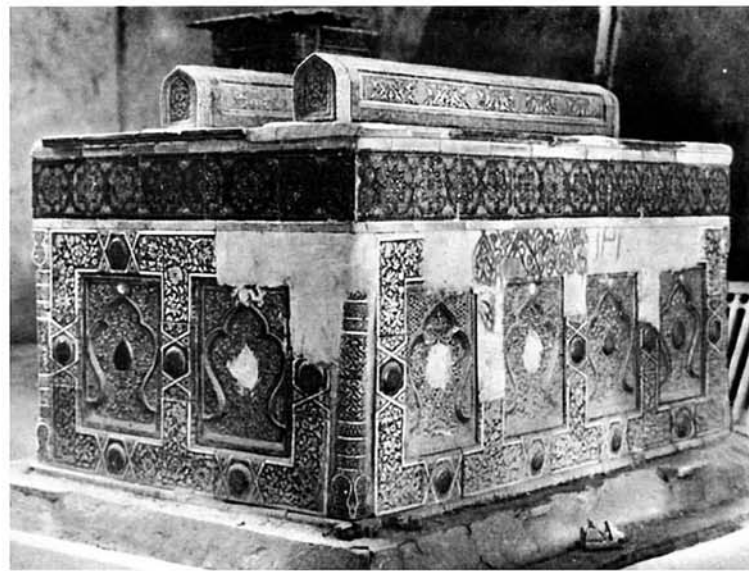
²⁸ Chabbi, “Khānkāh”, *EI*² IV, p. 1025a.

²⁹ Pugachenkova, 2000, pp. 529f.

³⁰ Mamedov and Muradov, 2001, p. 52f, after a translation by N. Khalimova.



18 Underglaze-painted low-relief tile panels flanking either side of the portal, Mausoleum of Najm al-Dīn Kubrā, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan



19 The tomb of Najm al-Dīn Kubrā, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan (photograph by Pilyavkiy, 1938)



20 The tomb of Najm al-Dīn Kubrā, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan (photograph, 2001)

cenotaphs (19).³¹ It suffered severe damage when the dome collapsed in 1950 and only fragments remain (20–25).³² The latter are still elaborately sheathed with remnants of underglaze-painted tile panels of the same type as featured on the façade. In front of the tomb stands a small cuboidal fragment which is said to mark the site of entombment of the decapitated head of the martyred shaykh (21–23).³³

Very similar to the above is the tomb of sayyid ‘Alā’ al-Dīn, located in a small mausoleum in Khiva, the third Khwarazmian capital after Urgench and Kath (26). The chronograms on both arch-shaped ends of the cenotaphs identify the occupant and give the date of his death as 704/1305. Datable to the first quarter of the 14th cen-



21 Small cuboidal fragment with underglaze-painted low-relief tilework in front of the tomb of Najm al-Dīn Kubrā, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan (photograph, 2001)



22 Detail of the cuboidal fragment with underglaze-painted low-relief tilework in front of the tomb of Najm al-Dīn Kubrā, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan



23 Detail of the cuboidal fragment with underglaze-painted low-relief tilework in front of the tomb of Najm al-Dīn Kubrā, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan



24 Fragment of the arch-shaped end of the double cenotaph with underglaze-painted low-relief tilework, tomb of Najm al-Dīn Kubrā, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan

tury, the tilework of this tomb thus probably represents one of the earliest extant examples of Khwarazmian low-relief tiles underglaze-painted in white on a cobalt-blue ground, outlined in black, and partially enlivened by turquoise and, unusually, celadon green.³⁴ In all probability the well-known masters from Urgench were involved in its production.³⁵

Among the objects assembled in the Handicraft Museum in the city of Kunya Urgench is a cenotaph, the arched end panel of which features a striking eight-pointed tile, which was discovered in a burial chamber below the foundation of the Piriyaṛ Wālī Mausoleum located fifteen metres to the west of the Najm al-Dīn Kubrā Mausoleum.³⁶ Underglaze-painted in black, cobalt-blue and green on a white ground, highlighted with red and gold leaf, it is notable for its subject with a bird in flight set against a floral background (27). The use of a figural motif in the decoration of a cenotaph is unusual though possibly explained by the Turkic context. Related tilework was excavated in the cities of the Golden Horde, Saray Berke.³⁷ It can also be seen on the horizontal surfaces of the three-tier cenotaph of Quthām b. ‘Abbās, dated 14th century³⁸

³¹ Sayan, 1999, p. 469, fig. 325, after Pilyavkiy, Vladimir Ivanovich, *Ūrgench i Mizdahkan*, Moscow, 1938. Further tomb fragments are published on pp. 469–71, figs. 326–329.

³² Mamedov and Muradov, 2001, p. 50.

³³ Mamedov and Muradov, 2001, p. 50.

³⁴ Pugachenkova, 1981, p. 92. Yet another extant example of comparable tilework can be found on the revetment of a cenotaph in the mausoleum of Muzlum Khan Sūlū at Mizdahkan, southwest of Nukus, Karakalpakstan, Uzbekistan.

³⁵ Pugachenkova, 1981, p. 92.

³⁶ The mausoleum was completely reconstructed in 1989. Cf. Mamedov and Muradov, 2001, p. 50.

³⁷ Cf. the 14th century ceramic fragments unearthed at the site of Selitrennoe, now in the Astrakhan Historic Architectural Museum. Fyodorov-Davydov, 1984, pp. 60f, fig. 28, and 2001, p. 129, pl. 71, p. 131, pl. 79, p. 141, cat. no. 42, p. 156, cat. no. 52.

³⁸ Dated 735/1334–1335 by Nemtseva (tr., with additions, Rogers and Yāsīn, 1977, p. 58) and second half of the 14th century by Pugachenkova (1975, p. 15).



25 Fragment of the double cenotaph with underglaze-painted low-relief tilework, tomb of Najm al-Dīn Kubrā, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan



26 Tomb of sayyid 'Alā' al-Dīn, Khiva, Khwarazm, Uzbekistan (photograph, 2001)

(28), and on a section of the tile panelling at the portal of the mausoleum of Shād-i Mulūk Āqā (20 Jumādā II 773/December 29th 1372)³⁹ at the Shāh-i Zindā ensemble outside the walls of Samarqand.

Located to the southwest of both the Il Arslan Mausoleum and the Tekish Mausoleum, the fourth extant mausoleum in Urgench is not only the largest monument but also the city's architectural masterpiece, important for its lavish display of mosaic-faience revetment, *kāshī-yi mu'arraḡ-qārī* (29). It is associated with the name of Tura Beg Khanum, who died in circa 1341 and whose tomb is mentioned by Ibn Battuta in his travelogue.⁴⁰ She is revered as a local saint, especially as protector of women, and until the 20th century the mausoleum was a centre of mass pilgrimage.⁴¹ In reality, however, it may have served as family mausoleum for the local Sūfī rulers, a minor dynasty of Turkicised Mongol Qongrats, who had become independent of the Golden Horde overlordship.⁴²

In 773–774/1372–1373 Timur-i Lang, also known as Tamerlane (reigned 771/1370–807/1405), started campaigns against Khwarazm. These culminated in the sack of Urgench 789–790/1387–1388, which saw the last Sūfī representative, Sulaiman Sūfī, defeated, his entire family put to death, and Urgench plundered and razed except for the mosques and minarets.⁴³ In the absence of dedica-



27 Polychrome painted eight-pointed tile on cenotaph, Handicraft Museum, Konya Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan



28 Detail of the horizontal surface of the three-tier cenotaph of Outham b. 'Abbās, Shāh-i Zindā ensemble, Samarqand, Uzbekistan (photograph, 2001)

tory plaques or inscriptions, this event offers a *terminus ante quem* for the dating of the mausoleum. Precise dating is made even more difficult by the fact that the building is notable for a number of architectural features, such as the double dome, the magnified *pīshṭāq* and the mosaic-faience revetments,⁴⁴ the impulse of which is considered to originate in Iran,⁴⁵ and to have spread through Iranian craftsmen specialised in mosaic-faience who were carried off to Samarqand by Timur after his conquests.⁴⁶

In spite of these uncertainties, the date most frequently



29 Side view of the Mausoleum of Tura Beg Khanum, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan

proposed for the mausoleum is the 1370s.⁴⁷ If this is correct, its exceptionally intricate mosaic-faience revetment would represent the earliest and finest extant example of the labour-intensive, time-consuming and costly technique of tile mosaic on a grand scale.

No expense was spared in the rich decorative veneer of the mausoleum of Tura Beg Khanum. The polychromatic revetment composition assembled from closely fitted tiny individual pieces of monochrome-glaze tiles, mosaic-faience, in a large variety of vibrant colours, is laboriously cut to shape and size to form larger tiles (34). The thick coloured glazes comprise a vast palette of colours including white, cobalt-blue, turquoise, black, amber, celadon green, dark green, pale yellow, saffron, reddish orange, and red cinnabar, enlivened with touches of unfired gold leaf.

The ornamental revetment of the exterior is elaborated by *muqarnas* vaults, composed of a series of niches encrusted with jewel-like mosaic tile panels (30, 31). An elaborate version adorns the upper section of the arch-shaped portal niche. Each of the stalactites features cartouches with pious inscriptions and floral compositions (33, 36). A large circular medallion in mosaic-faience with pious words, sadly now in a poor state of preservation, is emblematised above the entrance in the portal niche (36).

It is of note that the same ornamental device is used on the portal above the entrance of the mausoleum of the Sūfī shaykh Abū Saʿīd ibn Abī'l Khayr Mayhanī (357/967–440/1049),⁴⁸ built at his hometown Mayhana

(Meana) between Abiverd and the oasis of Sarakhs in northern Khorasan, popularly referred to as Meana Baba (37–40).⁴⁹ Constructed in the 11th century, the mauso-

³⁹ Soustiel and Porter, 2003, p. 99, bottom.

⁴⁰ Bosworth, “Kh̲w̲ārazm”, *EI*² IV, pp. 1060b.

⁴¹ Mamedov and Muradov, 2001, p. 73.

⁴² Masson and Pugachenkova, tr. Rogers, 1978, p. 124. Manz, 1989, p. 11. It is believed to entomb the two princes, Husayn, the founder of the line, and Yūsuf Sūfī (died 781/1379).

⁴³ Barthold, 1956, p. 61. Bosworth, “Ürgenč”, *EI*² X, p. 892b.

⁴⁴ Golombek and Wilber, 1988, pp. 231–232. Lisa Golombek recently called for a reinvestigation of the dating of the mausoleum in her paper “Re-dating the ‘Turabeg Khanum’ and the Implications for Timurid Architecture” held at a Conference on Konya Urgench in Ashgabat in May 2006.

⁴⁵ Wilber, 1939, pp. 40–47. Adle, “Kāshī”, *EI*² IV, p. 701a. Lane, 1960, p. 10. Noskova, L. M., *Srednevekoye pamjatniki Povolž'ja*, 1976, pp. 25ff, quoted by Fedorov-Davydov, 2001, p. 63. Golombek and Wilber (1988, pp. 125, 231) therefore suggest the participation of Iranian craftsmen specialised in mosaic-faience in the building of the mausoleum.

⁴⁶ Golombek, 1969, p. 13. Fedorov-Davydov, 2001, p. 63.

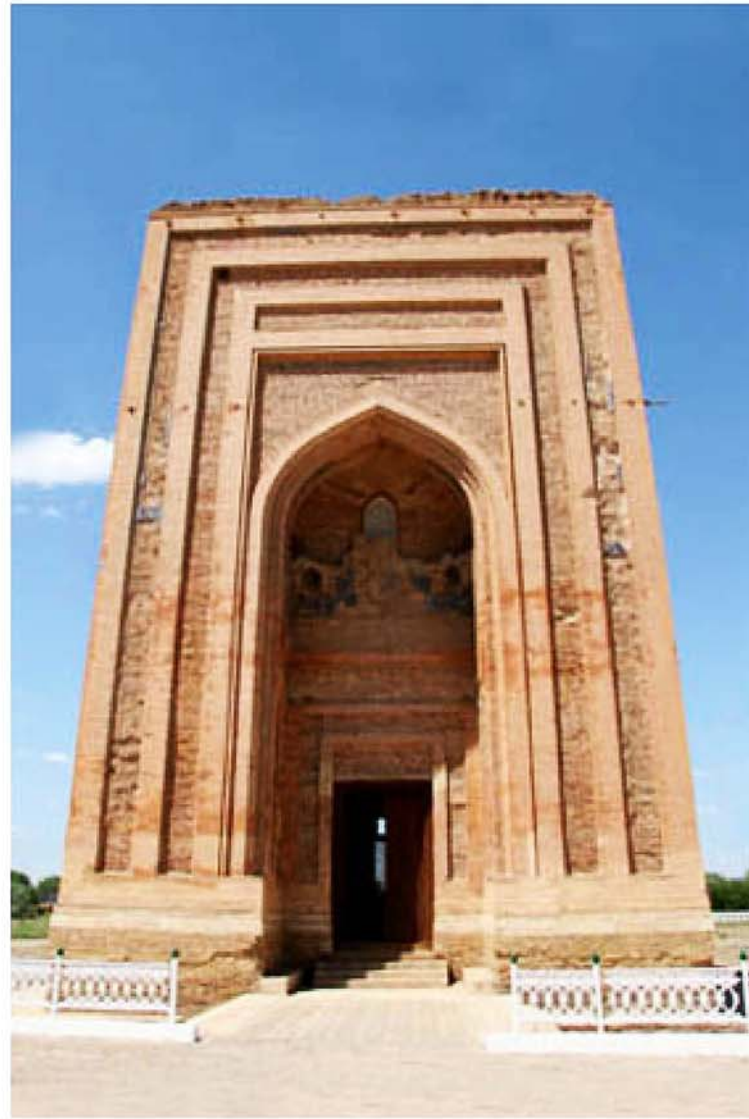
⁴⁷ Pugachenkova (2000, p. 530) dates the mausoleum to the 1360s. Cf. Mamedov and Muradov (2001, p. 76, nts 133–135) for a selection of Russian sources dating to the 1370s, as do Golombek and Wilber (1988, pp. 231–232), as well as Soustiel and Porter (2003, p. 55).

⁴⁸ Barthold, 1958, p. 311. Ritter, “Abū Saʿīd Fadl Allāh b. Abi 'l Khayr”, *EI*⁹ I, p. 145b.

⁴⁹ Albaum and Brentjes, 1978, pp. 56f. Sayan, 1999, pp. 66ff.



30 Detail of exterior vault decorated with mosaic-faience, Mausoleum of Tura Beg Khanum, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan



32 Portal of the Mausoleum of Tura Beg Khanum, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan



31 Exterior *muqarnas* vault decorated with mosaic-faience, Mausoleum of Tura Beg Khanum, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan



33 Mosaic-faience and *cuerda seca* tilework decoration inside the portico, Mausoleum of Tura Beg Khanum, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan



34 Mosaic-faience fragment, probably from the Mausoleum of Tura Beg Khanum, Handicraft Museum, Konya Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan



35 Decorative mosaic-faience band along the arch inside the portico, Mausoleum of Tura Beg Khanum, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan



36 Circular medallion in mosaic-faience above the entrance in the portal niche, Mausoleum of Tura Beg Khanum, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan



37 Mausoleum of Abū Saʿīd ibn Abī 'l Khayr Mayhanī, Mayhana (Meana), northern Khorasan, Turkmenistan (photograph, 2001)



38 Circular medallion in mosaic-faience above the entrance in the portal niche, Mausoleum of Abū Saʿīd ibn Abī 'l Khayr Mayhanī, Mayhana (Meana), northern Khorasan, Turkmenistan (photograph, 2001)



40 Mosaic-faience revetment on the side of the portico, Mausoleum of Abū Saʿīd ibn Abī 'l Khayr Mayhanī, Mayhana (Meana), northern Khorasan, Turkmenistan (photograph, 2001)



39 Epigraphic band in mosaic-faience above the entrance, Mausoleum of Abū Saʿīd ibn Abī 'l Khayr Mayhanī, Mayhana (Meana), northern Khorasan, Turkmenistan (photograph, 2001)



41 Interior dado of Kashan style tiles, Mausoleum of Abū Saʿīd ibn Abī 'l Khayr Mayhanī, Mayhana (Meana), northern Khorasan, Turkmenistan (photograph, 2005)

leum had an interior dado of Kashan style monochrome lustre-painted eight-pointed star tiles, alternating with cross-shaped units. The dado was later concealed from sight by a coating of plaster which was uncovered during restoration works in 2005 when the tiles were removed from the walls (41). In addition, reconstruction carried out in the first half of the 14th century involved extensive use of mosaic-faience in sky blue, cobalt-blue, white and ochre on the entrance façade (37, 39, 40).⁵⁰ Apart from the Tura Beg Khanum Mausoleum, it is the only other 14th century example of this technique on a surviving religious monument in Turkmenistan.

Brickwork, mosaic-faience in combination with polychrome painted tiles, executed in *cuerda seca* , effectively used to imitate tile mosaics at a smaller cost, were employed for near-total wall coverage on the inside and more sparsely on the outside of the Tura Beg Khanum Mausoleum. Much of the exterior decoration is unfortunately lost today.⁵¹ The colour range of the *cuerda seca* tiles is dominated by white, cobalt-blue, turquoise, black, apple green and brick red. Large epigraphic friezes executed in *cuerda seca* once framed the façade of the projecting *pīsh-tāq* (42, 43). An inscription in *thuluth* reserved in white is surmounted in the upper tier by a second smaller inscription in apple green Kufic script on a cobalt-blue

ground. A finely executed tile panel fragment which probably adorned the Tura Beg Khanum Mausoleum is now preserved in the Kunya Urgench Handicraft Museum (44), and a further comparison can be made with the *cuerda seca* panels of the cenotaph excavated near the mausoleum of Sultan Tekish (9–12).

The portal of the mausoleum leads to a domed vestibule, or *dihlīz* , the intrados of which is decorated with suspended *muqarnas* sheathed with tilework (45, 46), flanked on either side by ancillary chambers. Beyond the vestibule lies the large hexagonal central hall for pious visitation and devotion, the *ziyārat khāna* , which partially appears dodecagonal from the exterior (47). Next to the main hall the small adjoining tomb chamber, the *gūr khāna* , which contains a staircase descending into the burial crypt, is also crowned by a cupola. Only a few segments of the now collapsed turquoise, ribbed outer roof shell are extant (49).

The interior shows a highly unusual type of spatial



42 Epigraphic frieze in *cuerda seca* framing the principal façade, Mausoleum of Tura Beg Khanum, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan



43 Epigraphic frieze in *cuerda seca* framing the principal façade, Mausoleum of Tura Beg Khanum, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan



44 Section of an epigraphic frieze in *cuerda seca*, probably from the Mausoleum of Tura Beg Khanum, Handicraft Museum, Konya Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan



45 Detail of domed vestibule with suspended muqarnas with mosaic-faience, Mausoleum of Tura Beg Khanum, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan

composition crowned by a dome (48). Extremely refined mosaic-faience is employed in particular profusion on the inner dome, alluding to the stellar firmament. The semi-circular cupola is entirely covered by a sunburst “giriḥ” angular interlacing strapwork pattern radiating from a large composite rosette at the apex onto the curved surface. The central medallion displays an intricate lobed lattice forming a twelve-petalled rosette (50). From the latter radiates a complex geometric pattern comprising ten-pointed stars combined with smaller polygons with vegetal motifs. In the eyes of the beholder the cupola of the Tura Beg Khanum Mausoleum is thus transformed into a kaleidoscopic vault of heaven with shimmering scattered jewels, or luminary bodies (51). The decoration on the twelve arched panels circumscribing the drum echoes the delicate geometric and foliate pattern seen elsewhere on the mausoleum.

Since the dating of the mausoleum is crucial to any at-

⁵⁰Dated by Pugachenkova to circa 1330-1340. Pugachenkova, 1958, pp. 358-366.

⁵¹Golombek and Wilber (1988, p. 232) surmise that the exterior decoration was never completed.



46 Domed vestibule with suspended *muqarnas* revetted with mosaic-faience, Mausoleum of Tura Beg Khanum, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan



49 Section of the collapsed turquoise, ribbed outer roof shell of the Mausoleum of Tura Beg Khanum, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan



47 View into the hexagonal central hall, Mausoleum of Tura Beg Khanum, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan



48 Interior of the dome decorated with mosaic-faience, Mausoleum of Tura Beg Khanum, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan

tribution of the tilework, and hence to an understanding of whether mosaic faience skills were present in pre-conquest Khwarazm, it is worth asking whether a building project on this scale could realistically have taken place in the years following Timur's destructive campaign of 1387. It seems clear that such a project would only have been possible under a wealthy and powerful patron, and Timur's evident reluctance to allow reconstruction take place in Urgench⁵² does not suggest he was such a patron. In addition, his campaigns were not intended to permanently reinforce his rule over Khwarazm and neighbouring regions such as southeastern Russia, but to destroy his adversary and thereby systematically obliterate his power base.⁵³

Importantly, too, Timur transported the finest craftsmen—including many from Khwarazm⁵⁴—away from the areas in which he led campaigns, to his capital Samarqand and to his second capital and region of birth, Kish (Shahr-i Sabz, “the Verdant City”) in mediaeval Transoxania.⁵⁵ The exodus of these craftsmen would have compounded the difficulties of constructing the mausoleum, covered as it is with such fine mosaic-faience, in the period after the conquest.

Thenceforth little is known of the fate of the city and the entire province is thought to have never fully recovered from the devastation.⁵⁶ The Timurid chronicler, Ibn ‘Arabshāh (791/1392–854/1450), who was himself deported with his family to Samarqand when Timur conquered Damascus in 803/1400–1401, reported that “there used to advance convoys of travellers from Khwarizm making the journey in wagons, securely without terror or fear—a journey of about three months. . . . But now through those places from Khwarizm to the Crimea [. . .] none moves or rests and nothing ranges there but antelopes and camels.”⁵⁷ The mediaeval site of Urgench itself is today a necropolis.

Fortunately, the artistic skills of the Khwarazmian master tile makers and craftsmen almost certainly continued to be exercised when they were transported by Timur to Kish, following the destruction of Urgench.⁵⁸ The Khwarazmian skills were complemented by masters deported from Iran⁵⁹ as well as local master builders. In spite of the hapless burdens of the *corvée*, this coopera-



50 Detail of the interior of the dome decorated with mosaic-faience, Mausoleum of Tura Beg Khanum, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan

⁵² Timur waited until 793/1391 to give permission for any reconstruction to take place in the city, and then on a very limited scale in just one of the city's quarters. Barthold, 1956, p. 61. Bosworth, "Ürgenç", *EI*² X, p. 892b.

⁵³ Spuler, 1965, pp. 134f.

⁵⁴ Masson and Pugachenkova, tr. Rogers, 1978, p. 118.

⁵⁵ Golombek and Wilber, 1988, pp. 35f.

⁵⁶ Pugachenkova, 2000, p. 533. Bregel, 2003, p. 42. Bosworth, "Chorasnia", *EI*, pp. 516f. Bosworth, "Kh^wārazm", *EI*² IV, pp. 1060b. However it is of note that elsewhere Bosworth states "in fact the city soon flourished again" after the Timurid devastations (Bosworth, "Ürgenç", *EI*² X, p. 892b). It is further of interest that in the decades that followed the destructions, Shāh Malik (died 829/1426), the amīr of Timur's son Shāh Rukh, was "particularly noted for his reconstruction of Khwarazm, where he was appointed governor" (Golombek and Wilber, 1988, p. 62), although this refers to the province in general rather than to the city of Urgench.

⁵⁷ Ibn 'Arabshāh, tr. Sanders, 1936, p. 77.

⁵⁸ 'Abd al-Razzāq Samarqandī reported that Timur deported the population of Urgench to Kesh and that the Aq Saray was the work of Khwarazmian craftsmen; cf. Masson and Pugachenkova, tr. Rogers, 1978, pp. 118, 124, nt. 123, 125. Barthold, 1956, p. 60. Pugachenkova, 1981, p. 44. Barthold and Spuler, "Kash", *EI*² IV, pp. 694a. Manz, "Timūr Lang", *EI*² X, pp. 510b. For the discussion on the extent of the involvement of Khwarazmian masters, see Masson and Pugachenkova, tr. Rogers, 1978, pp. 124f. The latter suggest that the Khwarazmian craftsmen worked on the structure of the main part of the palace, of which nothing remains today, and that work on the ceramic revetment began only fifteen years later, by which time the Khwarazmian craftsmen might no longer have been working in their traditional style.

⁵⁹ A cable moulding in mosaic-faience carries the signature of one craftsman, Muhammad-i Yusuf al-Tabrizi. Pugachenkova, 1981, p. 50. Golombek and Wilber, 1988, pp. 273, 275.



51 Detail of the interior of the dome decorated with mosaic-faience, Mausoleum of Tura Beg Khanum, Urgench, Khwarazm, Turkmenistan



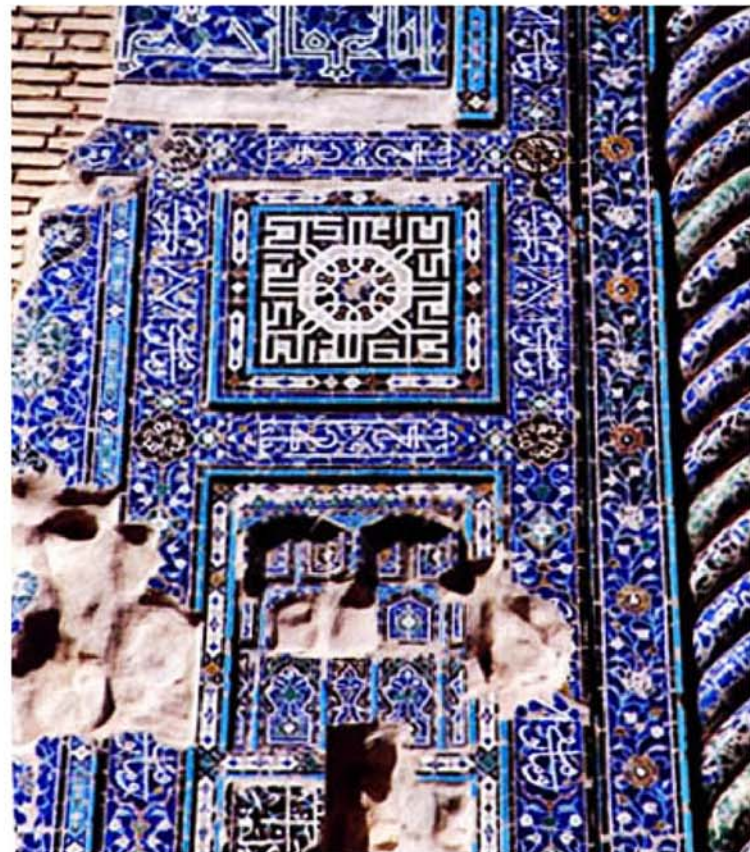
52 Entrance portal, Aq Saray palace, Shahri Sabz, Uzbekistan (photograph, 2001)

tion between specialist craftsmen of different regions bore magnificent fruit, exemplified in Timur's most ambitious project, the monumental palace of Aq Saray (52, 53). Visiting in 807/1404, the ambassador of Henry III of Castile to Timur, Ruy Gonzales de Clavijo, reported that workmen were actively engaged on the task of construction every day for twenty years. He noted too the profusion of glazed tiles, describing their appearance in the archways adjoining the monumental entrance, on the ground, on the body of the building, the reception room and other chambers "in which there were ornamental works in gold and blue, and many other colours, executed with wonderful skill".⁶⁰ The parts of the palace that survive are richly adorned with glazed brickwork, polychrome mosaic-faïence and *cuerda seca* tilework, and remain one of the finest and most ambitious achievements of Timurid workmanship, which might not have been achieved without the assistance of Khwarazmian craftsmen.

Nevertheless, even without further evidence, the extremely fine mosaic-faïence decoration of the mausoleum of Tura Beg Khanum stands as eloquent testimony of Khwarazmian artistic splendour.

Author's note: I should like to thank Jill Tilden and Prof. Dr Claus Peter Haase for their help and insightful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

⁶⁰ Clavijo, 1928, pp. 124f.



53 Detail of mosaic-faïence revetment at entrance portal, Aq Saray palace, Shahri Sabz, Uzbekistan (photograph, 2001)

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