

Carved and Moulded Glazed Tiles in the Shah-I Zinda Complex, Samarqand

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Abstract: The richness, variety, and technical craftsmanship of the decorative revetments of Timurid architecture is highly impressive. The craftsmen brought from different regions to Samarqand established a new art, by combining their style with the local traditions. The Shah-i Zinda Complex presents a group of buildings in which we can clearly follow the combination, change, and development of local traditions, resulting in the formation of the various Timurid styles created by the masters brought from various lands. In this development and formation process, carved and moulded ceramic tiles are among the most striking. This study shows the place of this technique among the Timurid styles, in the synthesis of local and imported traditions, by comparing the carved-moulded and glazed ceramic tiles in buildings within the complex, as well as some contemporaneous ones in the wider region.

Keywords: Shah-i Zinda, Ceramic Revetments, Central Asia, Tilework, Timurid

Resumen: La riqueza, variedad y artesanía técnica de los revestimientos decorativos de la arquitectura del Período Timúrida es muy impresionante. Los artesanos traídos de diferentes regiones a Samarcanda han establecido un nuevo arte al combinar su estilo con las tradiciones locales. El Complejo Shah-i Zinda presenta un grupo de edificios en los que podemos seguir claramente la combinación, el cambio y el desarrollo de las tradiciones locales que dan como resultado la formación de las variaciones del estilo Timurid surgidas por los maestros traídos de varias tierras. En este proceso de desarrollo y formación, las baldosas cerámicas talladas y moldeadas se encuentran entre los ejemplos más llamativos. Este estudio intentará determinar el lugar de esta técnica entre el estilo Timurid en la síntesis de las tradiciones locales e importadas comparando las baldosas cerámicas talladas y moldeadas tanto en los edificios dentro como fuera del complejo que son contemporáneos de estas muestras.

Palabras clave: Shah-i Zinda, Revestimientos cerámicos, Asia Central, Azulejería, Timurid

Timurid architecture covered a large area, but was concentrated mainly in Herat, Khurasan, and Samarkand. A large quantity of the monuments survives to the present mostly intact, allowing for the study of their sophisticated architectural and decorative features. The richness, variety and technical craftsmanship of the decorative revetments is highly impressive, and can be seen on the walls, domes, drums, transitions, portals, entrance iwans, and columns, on both inner and outer façades of the buildings.

The Shah-i Zinda constitutes a set of mausoleums which summarize the evolution of architectural form and decoration in Central Asia in the 14th and 15th centuries (Pugachenkova, 1981: 82-95). Located on the hill of Afrasiab, on the north edge of Samarkand, this necropolis began to form near the tomb of Qusam b. 'Abbas

(11th or 12th century). After the destruction of Samarkand by the Mongols, the necropolis was abandoned, and construction did not resume until the contributions of the Chaghatayid in the mid- 14th century. From 1370 onwards, numerous tombs were added for members of the family of Timur and his principals along the path that descended from Afrasiab to the south. They are all of the same type, with a portal and dome, the differences being in the proportions, the shape of the domes and the distribution of ornaments. This gives complex the ability to present an ideal section for the decorative arts of the Timurid period¹.

1 The tiles of this complex are the subject of my PhD, titled *Semerkant Şah-i Zinde Yapılarında Süsleme* [Decorating of the Shah-i Zinda Complex in Samarqand] (Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli, University Department of Art History) under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Halit Çal.



Figure 1. Qusam b. Abbas Mausoleum, Ziyaratkhana, Detail of the muqarnas

The research on Timurid ceramic revetments has mostly focused on the polychrome glazed techniques of *cuerda seca* (black line) (O’Kane, 2011: 175-203; Mahi, 2017: 36-79; Beyazıt, 2014: 45-70). These tiles can be seen across the Islamic world, from Spain to India, presenting various traces of the movement of craftsmen, techniques and technology, and their study has overshadowed other techniques seen in this period. This article will focus on one of those techniques, carved-moulded and glazed tiles, in one of the most prominent Timurid complexes, and question their place in the “Timurid Style”.

Although they are generally known to be carved, a close and detailed inspection reveals that some of them are also moulded². They are used on almost every surface, including corner columns, arches, window frames, façades and muqarnas. The most common compositions in this technique are palmette-rumi arrangements. Most bands framing the façades are either interlaced cursive branches or inscriptions with vegetal decoration backgrounds. Most of the

2 Details on the study of this technique are included in my PhD thesis. Here they will be referred to as carved-moulded.

time trefoil arch-shaped panels would form a base for these bands. In geometric compositions, the sections are also filled with palmette-rumis. While the most prevalent glaze colour is turquoise, white, and cobalt are also used.

Among 16³ monuments of the complex (Golombek and Wilber, 1988: 233-252), only 6 have carved and moulded tiles in their decorative features⁴; the earliest ones with this technique are dated to 1330s and 1360s, in the Chaghata-yid Period. Among the new buildings that were built after Timur’s rise in 1370 (Manz, 1989: 58), the ones with carved-moulded tiles are dated to the beginning of this construction period. After the two mausoleums dated to the 1370’s, only

3 The number of the buildings may vary in different publications as some researchers tend to count different parts of multi-spaced buildings as separate structures such as Qusam b. Abbas and Tuman Aka mausoleums. We consider these types of smaller complex buildings as singular.

4 These have gone under heavy restorations from the Soviet era onwards. The material addressed in this paper will be the original tiles determined by close inspection of the buildings and archival photographs of late 19th century.



Figure 2. Hodja Ahmad Mausoleum, Framing bands of the façade



Figure 3. Anonymous Mausoleum of 1360, Framing bands of the façade

one more includes carved-moulded tiles, in the 1380s, when the Timurid construction activities more intensely continued. While with the Chaghatayid ones the technique is densely used on the building surfaces, we see a decline with the Timurid ones.

The earliest carved-moulded tiles are seen at the *ziyaratkhana* of the Qusam b. Abbas Mausoleum (Fig. 1). Although the building had construction phases from the 11th to the 15th centuries, the *ziyaratkhana* is dated to 1334-35 (Golombek and Wilber, 1988: 235). The carved-moulded tiles are found on muqarnas, bands framing the windows, an inscription band at the base of the dome, as well as in lines separating the dome decoration into different zones.

At the Hodja Ahmad Mausoleum, dated to c.1350s (Nemtseva, 1977: 65) the carved-moulded tiles are used densely on the outer façade, (Fig. 2) including on inscription border framing the façade, the second thinner inscription border, the colonnettes, arch voussoirs, spandrels, and the inner front surface of the arch.

On the Anonymous tomb, dated to 1360 (Nemtseva, 1977: 65; Golombek and Wilber, 1988: 237)⁵ (Figs. 3-4) the carved-moulded tiles are on the outer façade, on bands frame the façade, on the inner side surfaces of the arch, muqarnas, pediment, and colonnettes. In addition, some fragments remaining on the interior, on the muqarnas, spandrels, and arch voussoirs.

The Tomb of Shad-i Mulk Aqa, dated to 1371 (Golombek and Wilber, 1988: 238)⁶, is the first Timurid building with carved-moulded tiles at the complex (Fig. 5-6). Carved and moulded tiles are seen on the façade corner columns, a band framing the arch, inner side surfaces of the arch, the corner columns of the arch, and on muqarnas. Inside the building a band under the dome and the muqarnas of the tympana also have tiles in this technique.

Another Timurid-era building, the Mausoleum of Amir Husayn b. Tughluk Tekin, is dated to 1376 (Nemtseva, 1977: 67) In this monument

with carved-moulded tiles, we start to see the decline of the surfaces they were used. They are used only for two bands framing the façade, and corner columns of the arch. An interesting detail in this monument is the small fragment of a carved-moulded tile piece in the groove of a sarcophagus base (Fig. 7). It is known that this building was built over an earlier tomb from the pre-Timurid era (Golombek and Wilber, 1988: 240). This fragment may represent a trace from that earlier building.

The Amirzade Mausoleum of 1386 (Nemtseva, 1977: 68) is the last Timurid building with the carved-moulded tiles (Fig. 8), and they are only used on a single band framing the façade and the inner frontal surface of the arch, a small band detail on the side, 2 small panels with inscription and foiled arch composition.

Outside of the Shah-i Zinda Complex, these carved-moulded and glazed tiles are not seen in other Timurid buildings. On the most prominent buildings of the period, where the tile decoration is heavily practiced, cut tile mosaic is the most dominant technique, and this is also valid for other buildings of the era. Later Timurid monuments, in and out of the complex, do not have this type of tiles. At the tomb of Timur there are cut tile mosaics and glazed bricks. At Aq Sarai in Shahrisabz, cut tile mosaics, polychrome glazed tiles, glazed bricks, and underglaze painted tiles survive. The Ahmad Yasawi complex in Turkistan has cut tile mosaics, polychrome glazed tiles, and glazed bricks, but, again, no carved-moulded tiles, and in his study of the Timurid buildings in Khurasan, Bernard O'Kane does not mention the existence of this technique (O'Kane, 1987: 64-71).

However, Chaghatayid monuments, besides the two mentioned in the complex, are mostly decorated in these carved-moulded and glazed tiles. The Mausoleum of Buyan Quli Khan (1358-59) in Bukhara (Soustiel & Porter, 2003: 45-50), has carved-moulded tile revetments, as does the Chaghatayid Tughluq Temur Tomb in Almaliq (1369-70) (Soustiel and Porter, 2003: 51-53).

The Chaghatayid buildings are densely covered with these tiles and present rather sophisticated samples. Although the exact origin of this specific tilework is yet to be precisely determined, it is possible that craftsmen of the region were influenced by three main sources. The few remaining Qarakhanid tiles from the Magok-e Attari Mosque (12th century) (Soustiel and Porter, 2003: 30-31), Chashma-i Ayub Tomb (1208-09) (McClary, 2020: 140-141) and the

5 Golombek and Wilber have the Hegira date of 13 Safar 762 inaccurately converted as 12 December 1361, it should be 23 December 1360.

6 Nemtseva and Shvab, 1970, p. 9 notes that the building was built in 1372 while the death of Shad-i Mulk Aqa is given as 1370-1371. In Nemtseva, 1977, p. 63 the Hegira date of 20 Jumada II 773 was inaccurately converted as December 1372. Pugachenkova, 1981, p. 82 gives 29 November 1372. The correct date is 29 December 1371.



Figure 4. Anonymous Mausoleum of 1360, Interior window spandrel



Figure 5. Mausoleum of Shad-i Mulk Aqa, Façade colonnette base



Figure 6. Mausoleum of Shad-i Mulk Aqa, Detail from the framing bands



Figure 7. Mausoleum of Amir Husayn b. Tughluk Tekin, Tile piece in the groove of a sarcophagus



Figure 8. Amirzade Mausoleum, Detail of the band framing the façade

Vabkent Minaret (1197) (McClary, 2020: 192-193) present earlier examples of this technique. Although the carving style has strong similarities with the Chaghatayid ones, the use of multi-coloured is the main difference, as the Qarakhanids ones use only two colours, instead of three. On the other hand, the unglazed carved terracotta of this period is stylistically similar to the Shah-i Zindah tiles (Knobloch, 2001: 102)⁷. With slightly stylistic differences, a significant number of carved-moulded tiles were excavated in Merv in 2014⁸, dated to Seljuk period. These appear to be the only Seljuk carved-moulded tiles similar to the ones studied here. Lastly, the mostly unglazed carved terracotta tiles of the Ghurids cannot be overlooked when looking for the origins of this technique (Hansen, *et al.*, 2015).

⁷ For further examples of Qarakhanid carved terracotta tiles see McClary, 2020.

⁸ The discoveries of this excavation are unpublished, but they were introduced in various conferences. I would like to thank Prof. Dr. Halit Çal, who was a co-director of the excavation, for letting me examine the photographs of these tiles.

Within the scope of these three sources, it can be concluded that the carved and moulded tiles of Shah-i Zinda are more of a strong tradition of the period continuing into the earliest Timurid years, for a short while and few examples limited to the complex. At the Mausoleum of Shad-i Mulk Aqa the whole surface of the building is completely covered with ceramic tiles, and the use of carved-moulded ones is almost on par with the earlier Chaghatayid buildings, which could be explained by the early date of the building (1371). The decline starts after this, and especially after Timur's first campaign to Herat-Iran in 1380. The introduction of Ilkhanid craftsmen brought from Iran, saw this technique vanish from Timurid buildings completely. However, their existence in the Bursa Yeşil Türbe may present another early Ottoman-Timurid connection/interaction just like the infamous polychrome glazed tiles of the period.

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