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## Remembering the Alisher Navoi Jubilee and the Archaeological Excavations in Samarqand in the Summer of 1941

*Elena Paskaleva*

The 500th anniversary of the cultural patron and literary figure of the later Timurid period Mir Nizām al-Dīn ‘Alī Shīr Navā’ī (844–906 AH/AD1441–1501; at present also Alisher Nava’i, Alisher Navoi, hereafter:) was scheduled for 1941. As early as 1937, a special committee for the Alisher Navoi Jubilee was created in Tashkent. At the same time, another committee was organized under the Soviet Writers’ Union in Moscow, which oversaw preparations for union-level writers’ tributes, commemorative events and publications in Russia. The Tashkent Alisher Navoi Jubilee Committee involved prominent Russian and Uzbek scholars, writers such as Šadr al-Dīn ‘Aynī (1878–1954; hereafter Sad-riddin Ayni), and artists, as well as cultural administrators and political leaders including the then-First Secretary of the Uzbek Communist Party Usman Yusupovich Yusupov (1901–1966).<sup>1</sup> In 1938 the Communist Party of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic (UzSSR) acquired an official approval from the Soviet People’s Commissariat and the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party to celebrate the 500th birthday of the “Great Uzbek poet, Alisher Nava’i” at the end of 1941.<sup>2</sup> However, the actual jubilee was postponed due to the break-out of the Second World War and it subsequently took place in 1948.<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of the celebrations was to offer a new narrative about the progressive potential of the Central Asian peoples and to remind all Soviet citizens

1 During the Soviet period, all Central Asian republics introduced Russianized patronymics and surnames. All names are transliterated from Russian or Uzbek according to the spelling on the cited publications and archival sources.

2 TsGARUz, f. R-837, d. 33, op. 3142, l. 1. All republic-level cultural and academic institutions participated in the jubilee preparation TsGARUz f. R-837, op. 32, d. 1356, ll. 22–23; f. R-2356, op. 1, d. 49, l. 15; “Film’ o Velikom Alishere,” *Pravda Vostoka*, 21 April 1941.

3 Boram Shin, “Inventing a national writer: the Soviet celebration of the 1948 Alisher Navoi jubilee and the writing of Uzbek history,” *International Journal of Asian Studies* 14, no. 2 (2017): 117–142. Also see E. Bertel’s, “Rodonachal’nik uzbekskoi literatury,” *Pravda* 15 May 1948, no. 136 (10877), 3 and Nikolai Tikhonov, “Alisher Navoi, K 500-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia,” *Pravda* May 1948.

that Central Asia had a rich cultural heritage and was not a remote region inhabited by illiterate nomads. In particular the ancient city of Samarqand had a thriving sedentary culture, sophisticated architectural traditions and an influential scientific elite.<sup>4</sup>

The choice of local historical figures was undoubtedly prompted by the Soviet policies of indigenization (*korenizatsiia*) according to which every titular nationality within the Soviet Union should be governed by its own people.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the local Soviet citizens had the right to education and cultural development in their own language. In that aspect the literary legacy of Navoi was branded as formative since his poetic oeuvre was composed in Chaghatay, a language regarded as the precursor of modern Uzbek. According to the Russian orientalist Aleksandr Iur'evich Iakubovskii (1886–1953), the “ingenious Navoi” (*genial'nyi Navoi*)<sup>6</sup> was the cultured predecessor of all Uzbeks. The literary importance of Navoi as the “ancestor” (*rodonachal'nik*)<sup>7</sup> of Uzbek literature and “founder” (*osnovopolozhnik*)<sup>8</sup> of the Uzbek language has been widely examined.<sup>9</sup> My study will focus on the two archaeological expeditions that took place in Samarqand in the summer of 1941 under the aegis of the Alisher Navoi Jubilee, and on the ways in which they have shaped our knowledge and understanding of the Timurids, and their propaganda value for the Soviet regime.

4 Yahya G. Guliamov, “K izucheniiu epokhi Navoi,” in *Velikii Uzbekskii poet*, ed. M.T. Aibek (Tashkent: Izd-vo Akademii Nauk UzSSR, 1948), 1, 12.

5 Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 127.

6 Aleksandr Iu. Iakubovskii, “Cherty obshchestvennoi i kul'turnoi zhizni epokhi Alishera Navoi,” in *Alisher Navoi. Sbornik Statei*, ed. Aleksandr K. Borovkov (Moskva and Leningrad: Izd-vo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1946), 30. Paper read at the first meeting of the Jubilee Committee on 21 March 1940 in Tashkent.

7 Introduction to the volume Borovkov, *Alisher Navoi. Sbornik Statei*, 3.

8 Aleksandr K. Borovkov, “Alisher Navai kak osnovopolozhnik uzbekskogo literaturnogo iazyka,” in *Alisher Navoi. Sbornik Statei*, ed. Aleksandr K. Borovkov (Moskva and Leningrad: Izd-vo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1946), 92–120.

9 Vasilii V. Barthold, *Mir Ali-Shir. A History of the Turkman People. Four Studies on the History of Central Asia*, vol. 3, translated from Russian by V. and T. Minorsky (Leiden: Brill, 1962); Vasilii V. Barthold, “Mir Ali-Shir i politicheskaia zhizn',” in *Raboty po otdel'nym problemam istorii Srednei Azii, Sochineniia*, vol. 2/2 (Moskva: Nauka, 1964), 197–260; Edward A. Allworth, *Uzbek Literary Politics* (London: Mouton, 1964); William Fierman, “Language Development in Soviet Uzbekistan,” in *Sociolinguistic Perspectives on Soviet National Languages. Their Past, Present and Future*, ed. Isabelle T. Kreindler (Berlin, New York, Amsterdam: De Gruyter Mouton, 1985), 205–233, and William Fierman, “Language Planning and National Development: The Uzbek Experience,” *Contributions to the Sociology of Language* 60 (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter Mouton, 1991).

Before I proceed with the archaeological excavations, I would like to point out that the date for the jubilee was not defined by the lunar Hijra or the solar Jalali calendars used in Navoi's lifetime. In 1941 the 500th birthday anniversary was calculated based on the Gregorian year 1441. The Gregorian calendar was introduced on the territories under Soviet-control by a decree of the Council of People's Commissars of the Soviet Union (*Sovnarkom*) in 1918. The calendar was officially adopted by the Uzbek SSR after its proclamation in November 1924. However, double dating in both Hijra and Gregorian formats was still common practice for example in endowment (*waqf*) deeds of the Bukharan SSR (1920–1924), which were officially managed by the central Soviet administration while relying on local Islamic judiciary.<sup>10</sup> By the late 1930s the Gregorian calendar was widely embraced across the Soviet Union. In line with the atheistic propaganda, the choice of the date by the specially appointed Jubilee Committee may have been a clear sign of the ideological break with the Islamic daily routine and prayers under the Soviet regime. The Hijra calendar was used up until the 1930s not only to record time but to organize religious activities throughout the day across Central Asia.

Firstly, I will outline the historical context surrounding the commemorative 500th Jubilee of Alisher Navoi in 1941 and the political narrative that prompted excavations by two archaeological teams in Samarqand.<sup>11</sup> Based on the their findings, kept at several Uzbek museums and archives,<sup>12</sup> I will discuss the opening of the tombs of Timur and Ulugh Beg in the dynastic mausoleum of Gūr-i

10 On the double dating of *waqf*-related documents, please see Philipp Reichmuth, ““Lost in the Revolution”: Bukharan *waqf* and Testimony Documents from the Early Soviet Period,” *Die Welt des Islams* 50, no. 3/4 (2010): 362–396.

11 This essay reflects my ongoing research on the cultural and social history of Timurid architecture carried out within the project “Turks, texts and territory: Imperial ideology and cultural production in Central Eurasia” funded by the Dutch Research Council (NWO).

12 As part of the NWO project, in 2017 and 2018 I worked in the Central State Archive of the Republic of Uzbekistan (TsGARUz). I would like to thank Ms Nina I. Iusupova and Ms Mahbuba E. Ermatova for their patience and continuous support. In 2019 I also carried out research at the Archive of the Department for the Protection and Management of Cultural Monuments of Uzbekistan affiliated with the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Uzbekistan. Currently, the Archive of the Agency for Cultural Heritage under the Ministry of Tourism and Sports of the Republic of Uzbekistan; hereinafter, Archive GlavNPU. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Professor Mavlyuda Yusupova for her help, constant advice and profound kindness.

Here the following abbreviations are used in references to the archival fonds: f. (*fond*), holding; op. (*opis'*), inventory; d. (*delo*), file; l. (*list*), sheet. All translations and transliterations from Russian are mine. In transliterating Uzbek and Russian words, I have generally used a simplified version of the Library of Congress (LOC) system.

Amīr (ca. 1400–1440s) by the first team. Afterwards I will describe the architecture of the China pavilion (*chīnīkhāna*) of Ulugh Beg (ca. 1420s) by using drawings and archaeological reports from 1941 compiled by the second team. Unfortunately, the abundance of archaeological materials excavated around these two Timurid sites have been partially lost due to successive restorations after the Second World War or remain unpublished. The purpose of this article is to present the archaeological findings to the wider public and to contextualize as much as possible the role of the jubilee in promoting not so much the literary figure of Alisher Navoi but in elevating Ulugh Beg as one of the most educated men of his time, a sedentary statesman, scholar and diplomat. Given the limited scope of the text, I analyse exclusively Samarqand in 1941 and not the actual commemorative festivities of the Navoi Jubilee in 1948.

## 1 The 500th Jubilee of Alisher Navoi in 1941

Alisher Navoi was born in Herat in a well-educated family of Turkic chancery scribes, who had long been in the service of the Timurids, the most powerful dynasty that ruled across Central Asia in the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries.<sup>13</sup> Although Navoi spent all his prolific life there and died in the city, Herat was not taken into consideration by the Jubilee Committee as a centre for the celebrations due to the explicit religious narrative and lack of scientific prowess associated with its Timurid patrons, both of these aspects contradicting Soviet ideology. Timur's youngest son Shāhrukh (r. 1409–1447) “became a zealous proponent of Muslim legislation in the administration of the state”<sup>14</sup> and “due to [his] rigorous disposition and as a result of the lack of interest in mathematics and astronomy in [his son] Baysunghur, the exact sciences did not flourish in Herat and did not create any traditions in the city.”<sup>15</sup> The fact, however, that Navoi studied for three years in a Samarqand madrasa, a period regarded by Soviet literary circles as formative for his oeuvre, gave a reason to the Jubilee Committee to analyse the historical importance of Navoi in close connection with the cultural life of the first Timurid capital Samarqand in the second half

13 On the life of Alisher Navoi see Maria Eva Subtelny, “Alī Shīr Navā’ī: Bakhshī and Beg,” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 3/4 (1979): 797–807.

14 (On [Shahrukh] stal revnostnym provodnikom musul'manskogo zakonodatel'stva v upravlenii gosudarstvom) see Guliamov, “K izucheniiu epokhi Navoi,” 11.

15 (*Vsilu rigoristicheskikh nastroyenii Shakhruha i otsustviia interesa k matematike i astronomii u Baisunkara, tochnye nauki ne poluchili rastsвета v Gerate i ne sozdali v nem nikakikh traditsii*), see Iakubovskii, “Cherty obshchestvennoi i kul'turnoi zhizni epokhi Alishera Navoi,” 23.

of the fifteenth century. As stated by the Soviet writer Peter Skosyrev, “it was during these years that the gift for poetry and the general philosophical and political views of Navoi finally took shape.”<sup>16</sup>

Another very important link with Samarqand was the historical figure of Ulugh Beg, the erudite governor and scholar, who ruled the city for forty years (r. 1409–1449) and created a famous observatory there. According to the art historian Yahya Guliamovich Guliamov (1908–1977), “in the field of cultural activity, Ulugh Beg was considered the predecessor of Alisher Navoi.”<sup>17</sup> The plenitude of surviving Timurid monuments, not in Herat,<sup>18</sup> but in Samarqand, a city on the territory of the UzSSR, may have been another reason to initiate archaeological expeditions in Samarqand, specifically organized by the Jubilee Committee as part of the commemorative events.<sup>19</sup> As a result, all archaeological discoveries and architectural finds from 1941 were attributed to the lifetime of Navoi (*epokha Navoi*) and not to their actual patrons—Timur (ca. 1336–1405) and Ulugh Beg (1394–1449) who preceded Navoi by decades.<sup>20</sup> The archaeological evidence collected in 1941 was used to prove that Samarqand was the progress-

- 16 (*Chto imenno v eti gody okonchatel'no oformilis' i poeticheskoe darovanie i obshchefilosofskie i politicheskie vzgliady Navoi*) see Peter Skosyrev, *Alisher Navoi-velikii uzbekskii poet-gumanist xv veka. Stenogramma publichnoi leksii pisatel'ia Petra Skosyreva, pročitannoi 30 iulia 1945 goda v Kruglom zale Doma Soiuzov v Moskve* (Moskva: Pravda, 1945), 7.
- 17 (*Woblasti kul'turnoi deiatel'nosti Ulugbek byl predshestvennikom Alishera Navoi*) see Guliamov, “K izucheniiu epokhi Navoi,” 11.
- 18 Most of the Timurid buildings in Herat were brought down by the British in the late nineteenth century. On Herat in the nineteenth century see Christine Noelle-Karimi, *The Pearl in Its Midst. Herat and the Mapping of Khurasan (15th–19th Centuries)*. *Veröffentlichungen zur Iranistik* 74 (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2014), 143–204.
- 19 Newspaper article by Mikhail E. Masson, “Archeologicheskaiia ekspeditsiia v Samarkande,” *Leninskii Put'*, 27 May 1941, no. 123 (775). TsGARUz, f. R-2773, op. 1, d. 346. Later on in the 1960s and 70s several Uzbek archaeologists and architectural historians such as Galina A. Pugachenkova worked in Afghanistan. Their scholarship remains available largely in Russian. In particular on her expeditions in 1973 and 1974 see Galina A. Pugachenkova, “Arkheologicheskie razvedki v Afghanistane. 1973,” *Moziydan Sado* 11, no. 54 (2012): 13–22 and Galina A. Pugachenkova, “Afghanskaia arkheologicheskaiia ekspeditsiia,” *Moziydan Sado* 3, no. 55 (2012): 12–20. On the work of the Soviet-Afghan Archaeological Expedition, see the collection of archival photographs and reports on the website of the Institute of Archaeology of the Russian Academy of Sciences: <https://www.archaeolog.ru/ru/about/history/expeditions-1943-1970/19691979-gg--rabota-sovetsko-afganskoy-ekspeditsii>.
- 20 Galina A. Pugachenkova wrote her dissertation in 1945 on the architecture of Central Asia in the era of Navoi, see Galina A. Pugachenkova, “Arkhitectura Srednei Azii epokhi Navoi. Kandidatskaia dissertatiia, avtoreferat,” *Bulletin SAGU* 23 (1945), 181. It was published more than a decade later as Galina A. Pugachenkova, *Pamiatniki arkhitektury Srednei Azii epokhi Navoi* (Tashkent: Izd-vo SAGU, 1957).

ive scientific cradle of the Timurid empire associated with the observatory of Ulugh Beg, while Herat was discussed as a literary centre but remained connected to Shāhrukh's legacy of a "staunch guardian of the dogmas of Islam."<sup>21</sup>

Bringing the Alisher Navoi patrimony to Uzbekistan was the major aim of the jubilee. The historical figure of Navoi was celebrated as "the literary patron of Uzbek literature, as a poet and humanist, enlightener, who inspiringly saw through the distance of time a better future for mankind."<sup>22</sup> A whole pantheon of poets and prosaists was carefully crafted around him.<sup>23</sup> In 1939 the Navoi Museum was founded in Tashkent (see Figures 12.1 and 12.2).<sup>24</sup> Its collection presents the history of Uzbek literature as narrated by the Soviet literary critics and historiographers, and visualized by the portraits of Soviet artists who gave an imaginary face to the pantheon of state-approved cultural figures. The continuity of the poetic traditions in Chaghatay and then in Uzbek was carefully constructed and narrated throughout the museum halls.

Although the relation between the literary legacy of Navoi and the architectural opulence of Samarqand is not entirely clear, the aim of the archaeological expeditions initiated by the Jubilee Committee in 1941 was "the study of the monuments of material culture of the fifteenth century" as outlined by the renowned archaeologist Mikhail Evgen'evich Masson (1897–1986) in an article published in the newspaper *Leninskii Put'* from 27 May 1941.<sup>25</sup> All sites mentioned by Masson in that short piece were directly connected to Ulugh Beg and had no relation whatsoever to the literary production of Alisher Navoi. What is more, the places were selected to form a narrative of a forward-thinking civilization that built the most advanced observatory of the fifteenth century across the Islamic world and employed the most talented astronomers of the time such as Qadi Zāda al-Rūmī (1364–1436),<sup>26</sup> who worked together with Ulugh Beg on the celebrated astronomical tables *Zīj-i Sulṭānī* compiled in Samarqand, and

21 (*Shahrukh, kotoryi byl strogim bliustitelem dogm islama*) see Tashmukhammed N. Kary-Niazov, *Astronomicheskaiia shkola Ulugbeka, Izbrannye Trudy* vol. 6 (Tashkent: Akademia Nauk Uzbekskoi SSR, 1967), 88.

22 Nikolai Tikhonov, "Alisher Navoi. K 500-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia," a newspaper article from May 1948. I found the article cut out from the original newspaper in a book from 1945, that is why, I cannot attribute it to a specific newspaper.

23 Aleksandr N. Boldyrev, "Alisher Navoi v rasskazakh sovremennikov," in *Alisher Navoi. Sbornik Statei*, ed. Aleksandr K. Borovkov (Moskva and Leningrad: Izd-vo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1946), 121–152.

24 At present, the museum is known as the National Museum of Literature and it is situated on the Navoi Boulevard 69 in Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

25 Mikhail E. Masson, "Archeologicheskaiia ekspeditsiia v Samarkande," *Leninskii Put'*, 27 May 1941, no 123 (775). TsGARUZ, f. R-2773, op. 1, d. 346.

26 The expeditions envisaged the study of the mausoleum of Qāḍī Zāda al-Rūmī, which was

one of the greatest mathematicians in the Islamic world Giyāth al-Dīn Jamshīd al-Kāshī (d. 1429).<sup>27</sup> In addition, the Navoi Jubilee was used as a tool to prove the sedentary way of life of the progressive branch of the Timurid family, i.e. Ulugh Beg, who created the Registan Square, built suburban luscious gardens and erected a Chinese pavilion.<sup>28</sup> The ultimate evidence for the victorious historical past of the UzSSR was the opening of the crypt of the Gūr-i Amīr Mausoleum that could disperse all doubts that Timur and several of his male descendants, including his son Shāhrukh and in particular his grandson Ulugh Beg, were related by blood and indeed buried in Samarqand. Based on advanced scientific anthropological approaches used to reconstruct the Timurid male line, these discoveries elevated the importance of the city in the eyes of the Soviet intellectuals not only in Uzbekistan but also across Central Asia.

The stakes around the jubilee were very high as all publications and planned events were meant to unify the discourse on the origins of the Uzbek language and more importantly on the cultural potential of the Central Asian proletariat. As part of the Jubilee in 1941, a decision was taken by the local government of the Uzbek Socialist Soviet Republic (UzSSR) under the leadership of Tashmukhamed Niazovich Kary-Niazov (1896–1970), deputy chair of the *Sovmarkom*, to initiate an archaeological expedition to open the graves of Timur and Ulugh Beg at Gūr-i Amīr.<sup>29</sup> Kary-Niazov was appointed as head of the expedition.<sup>30</sup> In his memoirs published in 1967 he describes the opening of the Timurid graves but does not mention Shāhrukh or Herat at all and focuses exclusively on Ulugh Beg.<sup>31</sup>

The archaeological excavations that took place Samarqand in 1941 were clearly meant to discover more about Ulugh Beg than about Navoi. The first team (*pervyi otriad*) that was part of the official governmental expedition was led by the Russian anthropologist Mikhail Mikhailovich Gerasimov (1907–

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believed to be situated in what is at present known as the Double-Dome Mausoleum at the Timurid necropolis of Shāh-i Zinda.

27 His book *Miftāḥ al-ḥisāb* includes an extensive section on “measuring structures and buildings”, which deals with calculations of arches, vaults, cupolas and muqarnas based on geometrical rules, see Yvonne Dold-Samplonius, “Calculating Surface Areas and Volumes in Islamic Architecture,” in *The Enterprise of Science in Islam. New Perspectives*, eds. Jan P. Hogendijk and Abdelhamid I. Sabra (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 235–265.

28 Guliamov, “K izucheniuiu epokhi Navoi,” 12.

29 Kary-Niazov, *Astronomicheskaiia shkola Ulugbeka*, 330.

30 On the expedition see Tashmukhamed N. Kary-Niazov, *Razmyshleniia o proidennom puti*, vol. 7 (Tashkent: Academy of Science of the Uzbek SSR, 1967), 221–243.

31 On the opening in particular of the Ulugh Beg tomb see Kary-Niazov, *Razmyshleniia*, 330–339.



FIGURE 12.1 Navoi Museum in Tashkent  
PHOTOGRAPH: ©ELENA PASKALEVA 2021

1970), who had become famous for reconstructing faces of historical figures based on their skulls.<sup>32</sup> Just before the outbreak of the Second World War, Gerasimov headed the opening of Gūr-i Amīr between 16–24 June 1941 to “document the authenticity of Timur’s burial” in the Timurid dynastic tomb.<sup>33</sup> According to Gerasimov, the tombs were opened “on the occasion of the 500th jubilee of the great Uzbek poet Alisher Navoi” although the exact connection between Navoi and the Timurid male line was never established.<sup>34</sup> Based on the exhumed skulls, Gerasimov reconstructed the faces of Timur, Shāhrukh, Ulugh Beg and Mīrānshāh and created their portrait busts.

The second team (*vtoroi otriad*) carried out work around the Kohak Hill in Samarqand between 24 May–10 July 1941. The main aim was to discover the suburban palace of Ulugh Beg, known as the China pavilion (*chīnikhāna*).

- 32 Mikhail M. Gerasimov, *Osnovy vosstanovleniia litsa po cherepu* (Gosizdat: Sovetskaia Nauka, 1949); Mikhail M. Gerasimov, *The Face Finder* (London: Hutchinson, 1971). See also H. Ullrich and C. Stephan, “Mikhail Mikhaylovich Gerasimov’s Authentic Approach to Plastic Facial Reconstruction,” *Anthropologie* 54, no. 2, (2016): 97–107.
- 33 Robert D. McChesney, “Timur’s Tomb: Politics and Commemoration,” *The Central Eurasian Studies Lectures* (Bloomington, Indiana: Department of Central Eurasian Studies, 2003).
- 34 Gerasimov, *The Face Finder*, 129.



FIGURE 12.2 Memorial relief at the Navoi Museum in Tashkent

PHOTOGRAPH: ©ELENA PASKALEVA 2021

The second task was to determine the exact location of the Chil-Sutūn palace. While Timur led a nomadic lifestyle and used to live in gardens and tents, the archaeologists had to prove that his grandson Ulugh Beg constructed suburban palaces and adorned them with verdant gardens. Since the more experienced archaeologists were sent to Gūr-i Amīr, the second team consisted of mostly graduate students of the newly founded archaeological department of the Central Asian State University (SAGU).<sup>35</sup> Masson was put in charge of the excavations of both teams under the aegis of the Large Samarqand Archaeological Expedition (*Samarkandskoi bol'shoi arkheologicheskoi espeditsii*).<sup>36</sup>

The celebrations around Navoi anniversary in 1941 played an important role in unravelling the mysteries surrounding Timur's burial. They also set the tone for the study of the Timurid period with a main focus on literature, science and

35 The department was founded in 1940 and Masson was the first department chair.

36 TsGARUZ, f. R-2773, op. 1, d. 346, l. 28, Protocol 4.

architecture. It has to be noted here that all immediate publications after the war referred to the glory of Mawarannahr during the lifetime of Navoi (*epokhi Navoi*) with a special emphasis on his literary oeuvre and manuscript tradition.<sup>37</sup> In the essays of the late 1940s dedicated to the jubilee, the Timurids were studied by Aleksandr Belenitskii, Aleksandr Boldyrev and Mikhail Masson in relation to the topography of their capital Herat in which the literary circles around Navoi thrived.<sup>38</sup> The importance of the historical figure of Timur was never downplayed but his military achievements were always discussed in the foreground of monumental architecture, strong central government and economic stability.<sup>39</sup> Yet in particular in the 1940s, the cultural achievements of the Timurid dynasty, and not the military victories of its founder, were used to gain international recognition for Stalin's policies fostering nationhood. According to Stalin, it is only when all three characteristics of one territory, one language and shared history are "present together that we have a nation."<sup>40</sup> With regard to Soviet Uzbekistan, Navoi, as a well-known poet across the Turkic world, offered the narrative of one Uzbek language. The astronomical achievements of Timur's grandson Ulugh Beg, which were highly respected among the leading scientists of the European Renaissance, created the basis for shared history beyond the borders of the UzSSR. In this respect the Alisher Navoi Jubilee can be discussed as a direct enactment of Stalin's nationalistic policies in the late 1930s and 1940s. The studies published within the framework of the jubilee have become the basis for all academic and non-academic explorations by Soviet and post-Soviet scholars on the Timurids.

37 Aleksandr K. Borovkov (ed.), *Alisher Navoi. Sbornik Statei* (Moskva and Leningrad: Izd-vo Akademii Nauk sssr, 1946) and M.T. Aibek (ed.) *Velikii Uzbekskii poet* (Tashkent: Izd-vo Akademii Nauk UzSSR, 1948).

38 Aleksandr M. Belenitskii, "Istoricheskaia topografiia Gerata xv v.," in *Alisher Navoi. Sbornik Statei*, ed. A.K. Borovkov (Moskva and Leningrad: Izd-vo Akademii Nauk sssr, 1946), 175–202. Boldyrev, "Alisher Navoi v rasskazakh sovremennikov," 121–152, see also Mikhail E. Masson, "K istoricheskoi topografii Gerata xv v.," in *Velikii Uzbekskii poet*, ed. M.T. Aibek (Tashkent: Izd-vo Akademii Nauk UzSSR, 1948), 120–145.

39 Aleksandr Iu. Iakubovskii, "Timur (Opyt kratkoi kharakteristiki). Iztochniki o Timure," *Voprosy Istorii*, no. 8–9 (1946): 42–74. Only Yahya Guliamov's contribution from 1948 deals with urban architectural ensembles across Central Asia in the fifteenth century and describes the major monuments in Samarqand referring also to Timur's lifetime (*epokha Timura*), see Yahya G. Guliamov, "K voprosy o traditsii arkhitekturnykh ansamblей v gorodakh Srednei Azii xv v.," in *Velikii Uzbekskii poet*, ed. M.T. Aibek (Tashkent: Izd-vo Akademii Nauk UzSSR, 1948), 146–157.

40 Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1936), 8.

## 2 The Discoveries of the First Team at the Timurid Dynastic Mausoleum of Gūr-i Amīr

One of the oldest monuments of Timurid architecture is the Gūr-i Amīr complex situated to the southwest of the Samarqand citadel (see Figures 12.3 and 12.4). The first ensemble built by Timur's favourite grandson and heir-presumptive Muḥammad Sultan (1375–1403) dates from around 1400.<sup>41</sup> It consisted of a two-*īwān* madrasa and a domed *khānaqāh* arranged to the east and the west of a central courtyard. After the death of Muḥammad Sultan in 1403, Timur ordered the construction of an octagonal domed mausoleum in memory of his diseased grandson to the south of the original complex. Later on, in the winter of 1405 Timur was also interred there.

After Ulugh Beg became governor of Samarqand in 1409, he started expanding the ensemble. It is highly probable that a new courtyard with four minarets was created in the 1420s as an attempt to combine the three main buildings: the madrasa, the *khānaqāh* and the mausoleum in one architectural ensemble (see Figure 12.3).<sup>42</sup> Multi-domed galleries were added to the east in 1424 and later to the south, which transformed the main north-south axis of the original complex and provided a much needed access to the enlarged burial shrine.<sup>43</sup> The new east-west orientation was emphasized by a monumental centrally-domed space (24 m × 24 m) erected to the west of the octagonal mausoleum in the first half of the fifteenth century, of which only one enormous portal remains.<sup>44</sup> In addition, all significant ongoing building projects of the early 1420s, such as

41 Lisa Golombek and Donald N. Wilber, *The Timurid Architecture of Iran and Turan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 261, cat. no. 29 A, B. For the most recent and comprehensive study of the complex, see Robert D. McChesney, *Four Central Asian Shrines. A Socio-Political History of Architecture*. Studies in Persian Cultural History, vol. 18 (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 17–129. On the restorations of the ensemble, see Elena Paskaleva, "The Timurid Mausoleum of Gūr-i Amīr as an Ideological Icon," in *The Reshaping of Persian Art: Art Histories of Islamic Iran and Central Asia*, eds. Iván Szántó and Yuka Kadoi (Piliscsaba: The Avicenna Institute of Middle Eastern Studies, 2019), 175–213.

42 Paskaleva, *Gūr-i Amīr as an Ideological Icon*, 194.

43 Once the cenotaph of Sayyid Baraka was placed very close to the northern niche, access to the mausoleum through the southern courtyard portal may have been rather cumbersome. Most likely, there was not enough space to accommodate pilgrims entering from the northern mausoleum gate.

44 Pletnev calls the domed space *ziyāratkhāna* (antechamber in a mausoleum used by pilgrims for prayer), see Igor E. Pletnev, "Arkhitekturnyi kompleks u mavzoleia Gur-Emir," in *Sbornik Nauchnykh Trudov TashZNIIEP*, vyp. 6 (Tashkent, 1964), 96–105, see also the plan on p. 99. Any earlier suggestions that the western extension was from the seventeenth century have been refuted by Zasyipkin in the late 1940s.



FIGURE 12.3 Reconstruction model of the Gūr-i Amīr complex, Timurid Museum in Tashkent

PHOTOGRAPH: ©ELENA PASKALEVA 2018

the Ulugh Beg Madrasa and the Bibī Khānum Mosque, had their main compositional axis in the same east-west direction. These spatial transformations at Gūr-i Amīr coincided most likely with Ulugh Beg's massive building activities and decision to transform the burial site of his grandfather into a Timurid dynastic mausoleum in order to legitimize his rule in Samarqand. After 1409, Shāhrukh moved the Timurid capital to Herat and Samarqand was striving to preserve its primary role as a cultural and architectural centre across the vast Timurid realm.

The exact reasons for the opening of the Gūr-i Amīr tombs remain rather vague. According to the official act from October 1942, a copy of which is kept at the Samarqand State Museum (*Muzei Zapovednik*), "the opening of the burials was undertaken in connection with the fifth centenary of the birth of the great Uzbek poet Alisher Navoi [name also in Arabic script] and it aimed to give the fullest possible description of the era of Timur and the Timurids, in which Navoi lived and worked."<sup>45</sup> As mentioned above, the first archaeological team that conducted the excavations between 16–24 June 1941 was part of the official governmental expedition. According to Robert McChesney, the archaeological work at Gūr-i Amīr, approved already in 1938, would have required the permission from the highest echelon of power; in that case, only Joseph Stalin

45 The copy of the act is dated and signed by the members of the archaeological expedition.



FIGURE 12.4 View of the central courtyard at Gūr-i Amīr  
PHOTOGRAPH: ©ELENA PASKALEVA 2019

could have given the orders to open the Timurid tombs in Samarqand.<sup>46</sup> This clearly atheist expedition in the summer of 1941 was a public display of total disregard for religious traditions, it violated the Muslim sanctity of the dead and desecrated Timur's burial. It can also be regarded as an assault on Islamic practice in Uzbekistan. Although the Timurid tombs were meticulously studied and documented, there is no any direct evidence that Stalin used the results in his war propaganda. All skulls and the skeletons were reinterred in October 1942 accompanied by an exhumation report in four languages Uzbek, Russian, Persian and English.

The first team was led by the Russian forensic anthropologist Mikhail Gerasimov. The other members of the expedition were the anthropologist Lev Vasil'evich Oshanin (1884–1962),<sup>47</sup> the palaeographer Aleksandr A. Semenov, the architect Boris Nikolaevich Zasytkin (1891–1955), the archaeologist and architectural historian Vasilii Afanas'evich Shishkin (1894–1966) and the tex-

<sup>46</sup> McChesney, *Four Central Asian Shrines*, 109.

<sup>47</sup> For more on Oshanin and his academic activities, please see "Lev Vasil'evich Oshanin", In *Istoriia material'noi kul'tury Uzbekistana*, vyp. 4 (Tashkent: Izd-vo Akademii Nauk Uzbekskoi SSR, 1963), 152–154.

tile restorer V.I. Komonov<sup>48</sup> from the Hermitage Museum. The widely celebrated Tajik poet Šadr al-Dīn ‘Aynī, who lived in Samarqand close to Gūr-i Amīr, was invited as an honorary member.<sup>49</sup> The ethnographer, and in 1941 a scientific collaborator of the Jubilee Committee, Khodi Tillaevich Zarifov (also spelt Zaripov, 1905–1972) also took part. Yahya Guliamov, secretary of the Uzbek Committee for Preservation of Historic Monuments (*Uzkomstaris*)<sup>50</sup> until 1940, and subsequently head of the archaeology department of the Uzbek branch of the USSR Academy of Sciences,<sup>51</sup> was an important member of the team. Several graduate students from the Historical Faculty were hired as collectors, Lazar Izrail’evich Al’baum (1921–1997),<sup>52</sup> Durankovskii, V.I. Sprishevskii<sup>53</sup> and Skorobogatov.

Two women participated in the expedition as well, the anthropological assistant Zakintsova, who was noting Gerasimov’s descriptions and observations, and the architect Krinitskaia, who was in charge of measuring and recording the dimensions of the graves and the tombstones. It is surprising that the names of these two women have not been officially recorded in any of the publications that discuss the opening of Gūr-i Amīr. They are noted only in the budget overview from 1941. Based on archival documents and video recordings, I managed to define their exact roles in the expedition.<sup>54</sup>

48 Komonov preserved the fabrics discovered in 1941 and copied their patterns for the Hermitage Museum, see Gerasimov, *The Face Finder*, 146.

49 His house was situated just across the street from the Registan Square. It has been recently transformed into a museum featuring his life and work. On the role of Sadridin Ayni in the expedition, see McChesney, *Four Central Asian Shrines*, 119–121.

50 *Uzkomstaris* (*Uzbekistanskii komitet po okhrane pamiatnikov stariny*) was established in Samarqand at the end of 1928. In 1932 the *Uzkomstaris* was relocated to the new Uzbek capital of Tashkent. In 1939 the *Uzkomstaris* was reorganised into the *Glavnoe upravlenie po okhrane pamiatnikov pri Komitete po delam arkhitektury* under the *Sovnarkom* (the Council of People’s Commissars of the Uzbek SSR), the most influential Uzbek organization in charge of the restoration and preservation of the architectural heritage of Uzbekistan.

51 The Uzbek Academy of Sciences was established in 1943.

52 Al’baum was one of the most prominent archaeologists working across Uzbekistan in the second half of the twentieth century. He is best known for the study of the wall paintings at the Hall of the Ambassadors at Afrasiyab, see Lazar I. Al’baum *Zhivopis’ Afrasiaba* (Tashkent: Fan, 1975).

53 Sprishevskii defended his dissertation on the Ferghana Valley in the bronze period at the Institute of History and Archaeology at the Uzbek Academy of Science in 1963 under the supervision of Yahya G. Guliamov.

54 TsGARUZ, f. R-2773, op. 1, d. 346, l. 59 and films no. 172 and no. 173 kept at the National Film and Photo Archive of Uzbekistan. Since Kaiumov was the only officially recognized film-maker, I assume the archival footage mentioned above was recorded by him.

A total amount of 13,000 roubles was spent on the opening of the tombstones in the crypt.<sup>55</sup> The money was used for securing electricity through a generator for the filming team, creating special boxes for the removal of bones, textiles and wooden fragments, their conservation and subsequent packaging.

With due morbid suspense, this highly controversial desecration of Islamic mausoleums in Samarqand was filmed and recorded with numerous photographs that are currently kept in different archives and museums across Uzbekistan. The crew was led by Nikolai Kim; Malik Kaiumovich Kaiumov (1911–2010) was the chief cameraman.<sup>56</sup> The other cameramen included Kazim Mukhamedov, Arif Tursunov, Pavel Marshalov and four light technicians.<sup>57</sup>

The expedition worked ten to twelve hours a day and every detail of its progress was meticulously recorded by the Armenian artist Oganēs K. Tatevosian (1889–1974)<sup>58</sup> and the photographers G. Gerr,<sup>59</sup> I.P. Zavalin and E.A. Poliakov.<sup>60</sup> As the chief archaeologist, Masson was reporting in the local newspapers on all recent developments along with the updates by the TASS correspondent and the *Pravda Vostoka* journalist Michael I. Sheverdin (see Figure 12.5).<sup>61</sup>

Five burials were studied, that of the dynastic founder Timur (r. 1370–1405), the interments of his two sons Mīrānshāh (1366–1408) and Shāhrukh (1377–1447), and of his grandsons Muḥammad Sultan (1375–1403) and Ulugh Beg (1394–1449). Timur's other two sons Jahangir (1356–1376) and Umar Shaykh (1356–1394) are buried in Shahr-i Sabz. Due to the limited scope of this essay, I will discuss below only the opening of the tombs of Ulugh Beg and Timur.

In the early morning of 18 June 1941, the expedition proceeded with the burial chamber of Ulugh Beg, who was interred at his grandfather's feet in a slightly squeezed position to the southwest of the crypt. His tomb was covered by a massive grey marble slab, similar to the one on his father's grave. The sarcophagus was made of a solid block of marble. Since Ulugh Beg was assassinated

55 The total budget overview covers not only the opening of Gūr-i Amīr but also the excavations at the mausoleum of Qaḍi Zada al-Rumi, widely known as the Double-Dome Mausoleum at Shāh-i Zinda. TsGARUz, f. R-2773, op. 1, d. 346, l. 59.

56 Malik K. Kaiumov, *Zhizn' moia—kinematograf* (Tashkent: Izd-vo literatury i iskusstva imeni Gafura Guliyama, 1982), 87–96 describes in detail his filming of the opening of the Timurid tombs in 1941. I am also extremely grateful to Robert D. McChesney who kindly showed me a copy of the original footage recorded by Kaiumov.

57 Robert D. McChesney also provides the names of the crew, *Four Central Asian Shrines*, 112; the overview I present above is based on Kaiumov's biography.

58 More on the artist and a selection of his paintings see <https://art-blog.uz/archives/10096>.

59 Kaiumov, *Zhizn' moia*, 90.

60 Although Poliakov is not mentioned by Gerasimov, all photographs kept at the Archive of GlavNPU are by him.

61 Michael I. Sheverdin, "U grobnicy Timura," *Pravda Vostoka*, 20 June 1941, no. 144.



FIGURE 12.5 Newspaper article on the ‘Tomb opening of Timur’s son Shāhrukh’, *Leninskii Put’*, 18 June 1941, no. 142 (794)  
TSGARUZ, F. R-2773, OP. 1, D. 346

in October 1449, he was buried with the clothes at the time of his death as he was regarded as a martyr (*shahīd*). He was wearing a silk shirt and a pair of traditional trousers, held by a broad, silk checkered band with white and light blue squares; remnants of his unrolled turban could be also discerned. The skull was placed by the side of the skeleton at the height of the shoulders. The archaeologists could prove that Ulugh Beg had been decapitated, his vertebrae was scarred by a sharp instrument. Unlike his grandfather, Ulugh Beg had a delicate body. He had inherited the bone structure of his father; he was thin and of “lean frame.”<sup>62</sup>

Timur’s tomb was opened on 19 June 1941 (see Figures 12.6 and 12.7). At 7:20 pm the leader of the expedition Kary-Niazov ordered the removal of the slab. The walls of the grave were covered with blocks of limestone;<sup>63</sup> the floor

62 Gerasimov, *The Face Finder*, 147.

63 Gerasimov notes that the grave was covered with slabs of limestone (*The Face Finder*, 132),



FIGURE 12.6 Gerasimov exhuming Timur's skull. From left to right: Kary-Niazov, unidentified member, Guliamov, unidentified member, Zarifov, Oshanin

NATIONAL FILM AND PHOTO ARCHIVE; NUMBER 0-5269, 1941

consisted of one larger piece. The chamber was 228 cm long and 90 cm high, its width was 83 cm at the head and 74,5 cm at the feet. The coffin was made of juniper-wood and had large-headed nails. It is kept presently at the Samarqand State Museum (see Figure 12.8). The casket was covered with dark-blue brocade decorated with Quranic texts in silver thread. A small piece of this textile still attached to the original wood plank has been preserved in the museum collection and is in dare need of restoration.

The embalmed body of Timur was laid on its back with folded hands and stretched legs, his face was turned to the west in the direction of Mecca. There were still traces of muscles and skin tissue on the bones; several reddish-brown eyelashes and body hair have been preserved in the Timurid Museum in Tashkent. Timur had a high stature of about 170 cm. Gerasimov describes in detail the peculiarities of his skeleton and skull, proving Timur's lameness and anatomical birth defects.<sup>64</sup> Remarkably, he also notes that the bones were very strong and that there were hardly any "marks of senility;" he defines the over-

while Sheverdin describes them as massive marble, see Michael I. Sheverdin, "U grobnicy Timura," *Pravda Vostoka*, 20 June 1941, no. 144.

64 Gerasimov, *The Face Finder*, 134-136.



FIGURE 12.7 The governmental commission headed by Kary-Niazov and Usman Yusupov looking at Timur's skeleton; Semenov and Zasyppkin to the very left  
ARCHIVE OF GLAVNPU, 10376/65-1, PHOTOGRAPH BY E.A. POLIAKOV 1941

all skeleton as rather juvenile. In 1947 Gerasimov commented that neither the skull nor the skeleton showed any pronounced senile features and concluded that based on the preserved teeth, the outlines of the bones and the absence of osteophytes, all signs point to the fact that the remains belonged to a man in the prime of his life, whose biological age could not have been more than fifty.<sup>65</sup> Undoubtedly, these observations beg the question about the actual age of Timur in 1405, which may suggest that he was younger than his presumed sixty-nine years.<sup>66</sup> Gerasimov's interpretations are even more interesting if we

65 (Nalichie bol'shei chasti zubov, chetkii rel'ef kostei, pochti otsustvie osteofitov,—vse eto govorit skoree za to, chto cherep i skelet prinadlezhali cheloveku polnomy sil i zdorov'ia, biologicheskii vozrast kotorogo ne prevyshal 50 let), see Mikhail M. Gerasimov, "Portret Tamperlana," in *Kratkie soobshcheniia, o dokladakh i polevykh issledovaniiax Instituta Istorii Material'noi Kul'tury*, vup. 17 (Moskva, Leningrad: Izd-vo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1947), 18.

66 It is generally accepted that Timur was born in or around 1336.



FIGURE 12.8 Timur's wooden coffin. Kept in the Collection of the Samarqand State Museum

PHOTOGRAPH: ©ELENA PASKALEVA 2018

compare them to his comments on Ulugh Beg, who was killed at the age of fifty-six but “in appearance he was already completely decrepit, an old man exhausted by ailments.”<sup>67</sup>

Another point subject to future exploration is the condition and completeness of the skeleton; apart from gypsum salts accumulated as a result of water damage, the body was “exceptionally well-preserved.”<sup>68</sup> According to Vasilii V. Bartol'd, Timur died in the night of 17–18 February 1405 in Otrar (present-day Kazakhstan, some 550 km away from Samarqand).<sup>69</sup> He was first buried in the *khānaqāh* of Muḥammad Sultan, Timur's grandson. Only when the construction of the octagonal mausoleum was completed, he was reburied in the main crypt of Gūr-i Amīr. On the other hand, Masson suggests that the initial burials of Muḥammad Sultan and Timur took place in the adjacent Āq Sarāy, which was abandoned sometime between 1409 and 1419, and the bodies were

67 (Pogib on v vozroste 56 let, no na vid eto byl uzhe sovsem odriakhlevshii, istoshchennyi nedugami starik), see Gerasimov, *Osnovy vosstanovleniia litsa po cherepu*, 166.

68 Gerasimov, *The Face Finder*, 137.

69 Vasilii V. Bartol'd, “O pogrebenii Timura,” in *Raboty po otdel'nym problemam istorii Srednei Azii*, *Collected Works*, vol. 2, part 2, 423–454 (Moscow: Nauka, 1964).



FIGURE 12.9 Present state of the crypt with the Timurid tombstones

PHOTOGRAPH: ©ELENA PASKALEVA 2021

moved to the newly completed octagonal mausoleum.<sup>70</sup> In 1448 also the body of Timur's son Shāhrukh was reinterred from Herat to Samarqand. However, based on the position of the tombstones, the crypt was planned primarily for Muḥammad Sultan and Timur's tomb was placed to the west of its centre, which suggests that his burial took place after its initial construction and layout (see Figure 12.9). The completeness and condition of Timur's skeleton is also striking for a body that has travelled more than 500 km in the midst of a severe winter. It would be speculative to imply that Timur died in Samarqand and not in Otrar. Regardless of the place of death, I personally regard any secondary burials as rather unlikely.

Based on the exhumed skulls in 1941, Gerasimov reconstructed the faces of Timur, Shāhrukh, Ulugh Beg (see Figures 12.10, 12.11 and 12.12), and Mirānshāh. The original busts were initially kept at the Navoi Museum in Tashkent and considered as physical proofs confirming the local Uzbek identity of the Timurid

<sup>70</sup> Mikhail E. Masson, "Rezultaty arkhеologicheskogo nadzora za remontno-issledovatel'skimi rabotami Samkomstarisa na mavzoleiakh 'Gur-Emir' i 'Ak-sarai' v Samarkand v 1924 godu," in *Izvestiia Sredazkomstaris*, vyp. 1 (Tashkent: Izdanie Sredazkomstarisa, 1926), 82–114.

rulers.<sup>71</sup> At present, only the bust of Shāhrukh is there (see Figure 12.11). Gerasimov created several versions of the face reconstructions with and without headgear. There are certain sensitivities connected with the type of head covering. For example, recently the Uzbek authorities refused to include the bust of Timur without his military crown (see Figure 12.10) in the exhibition in the Louvre Museum<sup>72</sup> as they regarded it to be “disrespectful.” In 1941 Gerasimov inscribed the predominant Soviet narrative into the choice of head dressing by depicting Ulugh Beg as a “great scientist, astronomer and statesman, weighed down by the cares of state administration” wearing a white turban (*‘imāma*) characteristic of Muslim scholars (see Figure 12.12).<sup>73</sup> And on the other hand, portraying Shāhrukh as “covetous, cruel and fanatic” in an elaborate silk turban adorned with a plume (see Figure 12.11).<sup>74</sup>

The actual results of the archaeological excavations initiated as part of the 500th Jubilee of Alisher Navoi remain largely unknown. Only Gerasimov’s findings related to the study of the skulls and the reconstruction of the physical appearances of the Timurids were published, translated into several languages and widely celebrated. On the other hand, the comprehensive analysis of the exhumed skeletons, carried out by the anthropologist Oshanin at the Department of Anthropology at the Central Asian State University (SAGU) has received very little scholarly attention.<sup>75</sup>

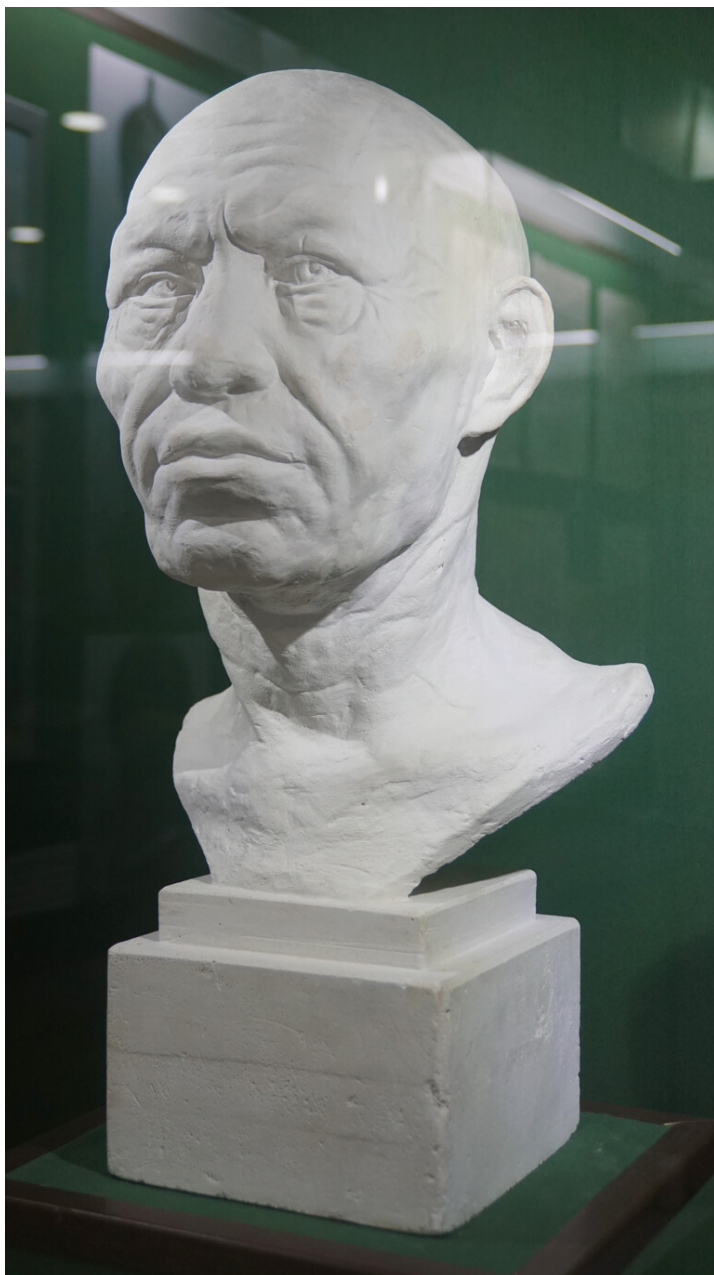
71 At present, the gypsum busts of Timur and Shahrukh (without any headwear) are exhibited in the Samarqand State Museum. The labels attribute them to Gerasimov.

72 *The Splendours of Uzbekistan’s Oases*, Louvre Exhibition 23 November 2022–6 March 2023.

73 (*Portret daet predstavlenie o vnesnem oblike velikogo uchenogo astronoma, gosudarstvennogo deiatelia, otiagoshchennogo zabotami upravleniia gosudarstvom*), see Gerasimov, *Osnovy vosstanovleniia litsa po cherepu*, 166.

74 (*Korystoliubie, zhestokost’, fanaticism—vot osnovnye dannye kharaktera mladshego syna Timura*), see Gerasimov, *Osnovy vosstanovleniia litsa po cherepu*, 162.

75 For more on Oshanin and his academic activities, please see “Lev Vasil’evich Oshanin”, In *Istoriia material’noi kul’tury Uzbekistana*, vyp. 4 (Tashkent: Izd-vo Akademii Nauk Uzbekskoi SSR, 1963), 152–154.



**FIGURE 12.10** Bust of Timur without headgear by Gerasimov, Samarqand State Museum

**PHOTOGRAPH:** ©ELENA PASKALEVA 2021

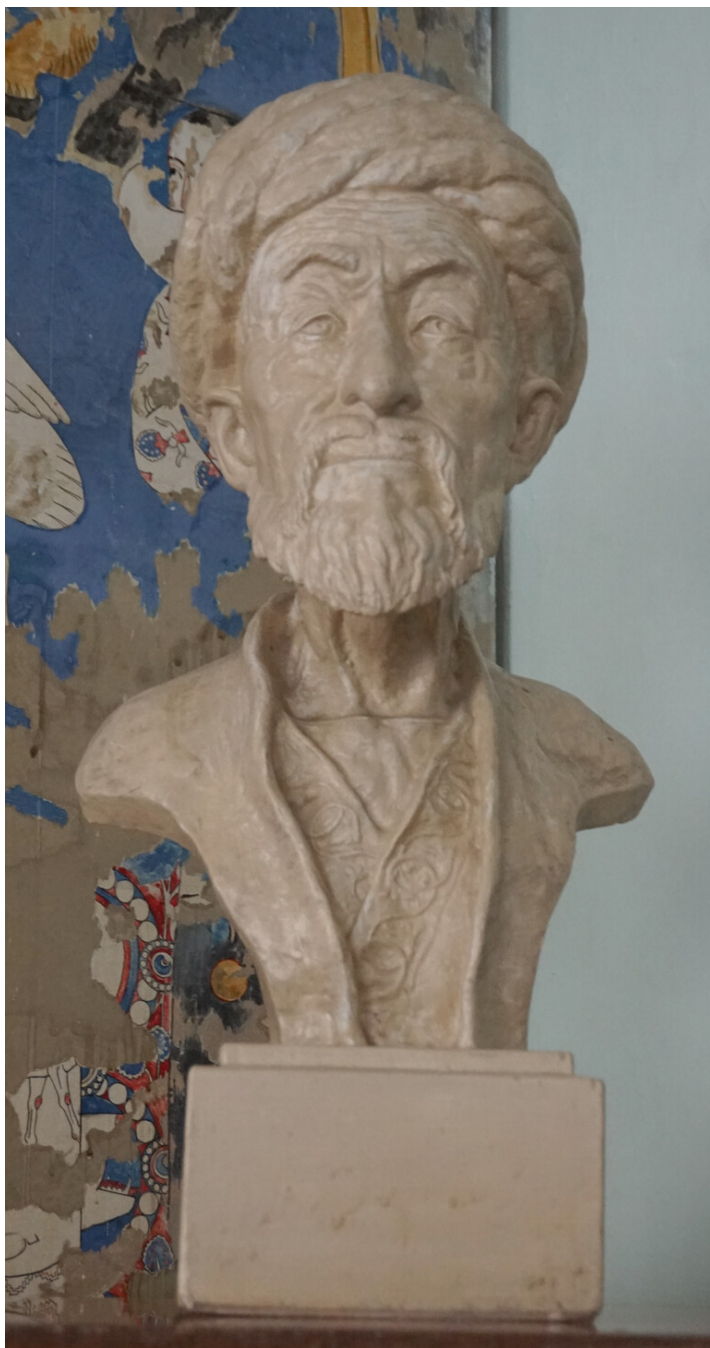


FIGURE 12.11 Bust of Shāhrukh by Gerasimov, Navoi Museum in Tashkent  
PHOTOGRAPH: ©ELENA PASKALEVA 2021

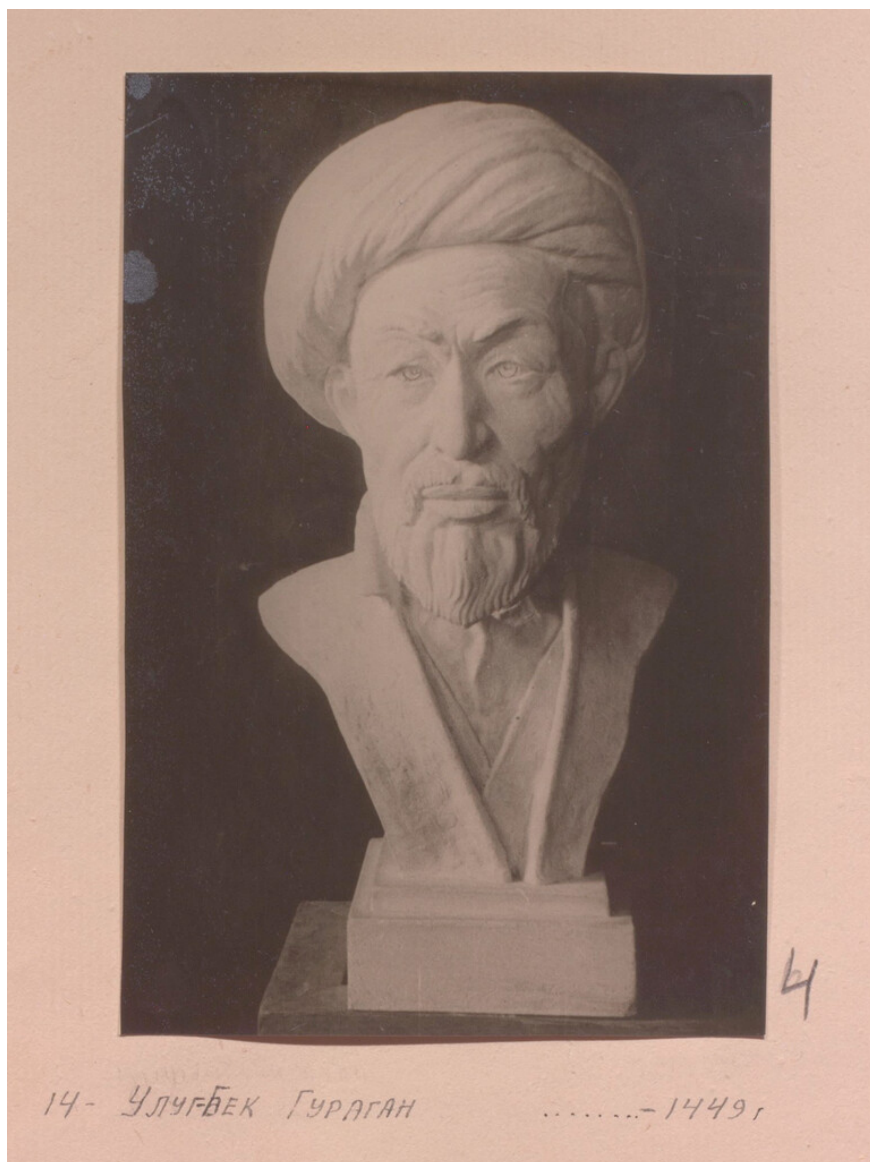


FIGURE 12.12 Bust of Ulugh Beg with a turban by Gerasimov, current location unknown

In August 1941 after the end of the expedition, all skeletons were carefully packed in separate wooden boxes and sent to the *Uzkomstaris*. In September 1941 the bones were given to the Anthropology Department of SAGU where they were kept in a simple bookcase in the room of the department's chair. All skeletons were studied in the winter of 1941–1942. V.Ia. Zezenkov analysed the skulls and Oshanin explored the bones. Most likely, the skeletons never left Tashkent and were examined locally. In the early 1960, Oshanin pleaded with the rector of the Tashkent State University for the publication of his anthropological study of the Timurid skeletons.<sup>76</sup> However, the university leadership kept on delaying the book under the pretext that Oshanin's findings had to be incorporated in a broader publication on Gūr-i Amīr including Shishkin's study of the mausoleum's epigraphic programme and Zasyrkin's decade-long research on Timurid architecture. Such a comprehensive edition on the architecture and epigraphy of Gūr-i Amīr remains unpublished until today.<sup>77</sup> Parts of Oshanin's study of the Timurid skeletons were made public in 1964.<sup>78</sup>

In more general terms, the archaeological expeditions from 1941 served a nationalistic narrative woven around the propaganda targets of the Communist Party. The conclusions were based on a carefully selected and choreographed body of archaeological material, presented as a sensational scientific achievement by the Soviet and Uzbek press. The articles, illustrated with numerous photographs, appeared in the national daily newspapers *Pravda*<sup>79</sup> and *Izvestiia*,<sup>80</sup> and in the local newspapers *Pravda Vostoka*<sup>81</sup> and *Lenniskii*

76 TsGARUz, f. R-2467, op. 1, d. 32. Parts of this study will be published and discussed in my upcoming monograph on Gūr-i Amīr.

77 The most comprehensive study of the mausoleum to date is the chapter on Gūr-i Amīr by Robert D. McChesney, *Four Central Asian Shrines. A Socio-Political History of Architecture*. Studies in Persian Cultural History, vol. 18 (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 17–129. On the restorations carried out at Gūr-i Amīr since the late nineteenth century see Paskaleva, *Gūr-i Amīr as an Ideological Icon*, 2019.

78 L.V. Oshanin, "Antropologicheskoe issledovanie skeletov Timura i Timuridov," In *Arkheologiia i antropologiia, Nauchnye Trudy TashGU*, vyp. 232 (Tashkent, 1964), 74–189.

79 *Pravda* (Russian "Truth") was the official organ of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1918 to 1991. "Issledovanie mavzoleia Timura" (10 June 1941, no. 159 (8567), 6); "Vskryta grobnitsa Timura" (20 June 1941, no. 169 (8577), 6).

80 *Izvestiia* (Russian "News") was published by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR and was the official national publication of the Soviet government until 1991. *Izvestiia* grew rapidly to a circulation of 354,000 in 1924 and 1,500,000 by 1932. The articles on the opening of Gūr-i Amīr were published daily between 18–22 June 1941. "Raskopki grobnitsy Tamerlana" (18 June 1941, no. 142 (7518), 4); "V sklepe Gur-Emir, raskopki grobnitsy Ulug-beka" (19 June 1941, no. 143 (7519), 4); "Raskopki grobnitsy Timura" (20 June 1941, no. 144 (7520), 2); Three photographs were published on 21 June 1941 (no. 145 (7521), 4); "Raskopki grobnitsy Timura" (22 June 1941, no. 146 (7522), 4).

81 A series of extremely detailed articles were published in the newspaper *Pravda Vostoka*,

*Put'*.<sup>82</sup> TASS, the Russian news agency, and the *Pravda* newspaper had special correspondents in Samarqand who were reporting daily between 10–22 June 1941. Following the opening of Timur's tomb on 19 June 1941,<sup>83</sup> all Soviet newspapers announced the start of martial law (*voennoe polozenie*) on 23 June. The *Izvestiia* newspaper published a poem on “holy war” (*sviashchennaia voina*) just under Stalin's photograph on its first page and the media focus quickly shifted from the excavations onto the military achievements of the Soviet army.

### 3 The Discoveries of the Second Team at the China Pavilion (*chīnīkhāna*) of Ulugh Beg

The second archaeological team of the 1941 expedition carried out work around the Kohak Hill in the vicinity of Eski Mazār to the north of the historic area of Afrasiyab between 24 May–10 July 1941; the fieldwork lasted a total of 47 days. The main aim was to discover the suburban palace of Ulugh Beg, “known in the literature under the name Chini-Khana.”<sup>84</sup> Another task was to determine the “exact location of the Chil-Sutūn palace” (*tochnogo mesta nakhozhdeniia dvortsa Tchil'-Sutuna*).<sup>85</sup> The goal was to prove that Ulugh Beg had a sedentary lifestyle; his thirst for knowledge was enhanced by a significant building activity that demonstrated his highly developed aesthetic taste.

The archaeological team consisted of different groups of mostly graduate students. At the beginning, between 24 May–14 June, the first group had five members, the PhD candidate of the National University of Uzbekistan<sup>86</sup> Zekenkov and four students from the Historical Faculty Al'baum,<sup>87</sup> Durankovskii, Skorobogatov and Sprishevskii.<sup>88</sup> The second group that worked between 14–21 June had only two members. After 21 June Sergei P. Bazhin joined.<sup>89</sup> Once

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“*Bol'shaia arkhelogicheskaiia ekspeditsia*” (18 June 1941, no. 142); “*Vskrytie grobnitsy Ulug-Beka*” (19 June 1941, no. 143) and “*U grobnitsy Timura*” (20 June 1941, no. 144).

82 *Izvestiia* (23 June 1941, no. 147 (7523), 1).

83 “*Vskryta grobnits Timura*” (*Pravda*, 20 June 1941, no. 169 (8577), 6).

84 (*Zagorodnogo dvortsa Ulug-beka izvestnogo po literature pod nazvaniem Chini-Khana*), see TsGARUz, f. R-2773, op. 1, d. 346, l. 81. Capitalized and transcribed site names according to the archival document.

85 Ibid. The translation and transliteration are mine.

86 *Srednoaziatskii Gosudarstvennyi Universitet* (SAGU).

87 Al'baum worked previously with the first team at Gūr-i Amīr.

88 These students are mentioned only with their surnames in the archeological report.

89 On 24 July 1941 Bazhin was mobilized and disappeared in military action in November 1943, see <https://100.psu.ru/sergej-pavlovich-br-bazhin-br-1919-1943>.

the work of the first team was completed at Gūr-i Amīr and at the Ulugh Beg observatory,<sup>90</sup> more collectors and students were involved in the excavations of the second team. Some of these students would join only for a couple of days and most of them were summoned for military duty immediately after the start of the Second World War. Given the hasty completion of the work, larger parts of the terrain could not be excavated. The official field report is signed by the Soviet archaeologist and member of the Uzbek Academy of Sciences Vsevolod Danilovich Zhukov (1902–1962), the leader of the second archaeological team.<sup>91</sup>

Despite the name of the area, Eskī Mazār, which suggests the existence of a mausoleum or a shrine, no burials could be detected under the three *kurgan* mounts. Zhukov attributes the *mazār* to the eighteenth century.<sup>92</sup> The archaeologists were able to reconstruct two earlier architectural sites from the first half of the fifteenth century on the excavated area of about 800 square meters (see Figure 12.13). The small garden (*nebol'shoi intimnyi park*) was described as the *bāghcha* of Ulugh Beg and its construction was attributed to the late 1420s.<sup>93</sup> According to the most prominent Central Asian archaeologist Vasilii Lavrent'evich Viatkin (1869–1932), who also discovered the Ulugh Beg observatory in 1908, the *bāghcha* was adjoining the larger garden Bāgh-i Maydān situated in the direction of the Chūpān-Āṭā' Mausoleum (see the map on Figure 12.14). The Chil-Sutūn palace was built with turned marble columns in the middle of the Bāgh-i Maydān, fragments of these columns were found in 1941. A large stone throne (presumably belonging to Ulugh Beg) stood in its hall (*īwān*).<sup>94</sup> As Barthold summarises, “a pavilion tiled and faced with china was situated in the [smaller] garden.”<sup>95</sup>

Presumably, the latter could be identified as the *chīnīkhāna* of Ulugh Beg, the first example in Islamic architecture of a purpose-built pavilion designed to

90 TsGARUz, f. R-2773, op. 1, d. 346, l. 81–83. The report of the second team signed by V. Zhukov is the only document that mentions archaeological work at the observatory in 1941. I haven't been able to find any other sources that confirm this.

91 For more on Zhukov, his life and bibliography, please see “Vsevolod Danilovich Zhukov,” in *Istoriia material'noi kul'tury Uzbekistana*, vyp. 4 (Tashkent: Izd-vo Akademii Nauk Uzbekskoi SSR, 1963), 155–157.

92 TsGARUz, f. R-2773, op. 1, d. 364, l. 82.

93 Galina A. Pugachenkova, “Sadovo-parkovoe iskusstvo Srednei Azii v epokhu Timura i Timuridov,” in *Trudy SAGU, Istoriia 4*, vyp. 23 (Tashkent: 1951), 154.

94 Viatkin is referring to a columned *īwān* typical of Central Asian architecture and not to a monumental gate, common in Persian architecture.

95 Barthold, *Ulugh-Beg*, 125.



FIGURE 12.13 Samarkand, excavations in the area of Eskī Mazār, 24 May–10 July 1941

TSGARUZ, F. R-2773, OP. 1, D. 346

exhibit Chinese porcelain or to be decorated with Chinese porcelain tiles.<sup>96</sup> The most opulent existing *chīnīkhāna* is situated in the Safavid dynastic shrine at Ardabil.<sup>97</sup> The importance of the discoveries of the second archaeological team is huge as the *chīnīkhāna* of Ulugh Beg has never been previously researched. Its existence testifies that cross-cultural artistic exchanges have always played an important role across Central Asia. In the Timurid period, in particular during the reign of Shāhrukh (r. 1409–1447) and Ulugh Beg (r. 1409–1449), a series of embassies to the Ming court of Emperor Yongle (r. 1402–1424) resulted in an innovative revival and appropriation of Chinese designs.<sup>98</sup> The Chinese artistic influences on Timurid aesthetics have been widely described as Islamic

96 Literally the term means in Persian a house (*khāna*) for Chinese ceramic or porcelain (*chīnī*).

97 Kishwar Rizvi, *The Safavid Dynastic Shrine. Architecture, religion and power in early modern Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 143–155.

98 David J. Roxburgh, “The Narrative of Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash, Timurid Envoy to Khan Baligh, and Chinese Art,” in *The Power of Things and the Flow of Cultural Transformations*, ed. Lieselotte E. Saurma, Monica Juneja, and Anja Eisenbeiss (Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2010), 90–107. Lisa Golombek, Robert B. Mason and Gauvin A. Bailey, *Tamerlane’s*



craftsmanship traditions. The westward transmission of Chinese designs was further encouraged by the thriving artistic, political and commercial exchanges between the Ming and the Timurid courts in the first half of the fifteenth century.

We know about the existence of the Ulugh Beg *chīnīkhāna* from the *Bābur-nāma*, the founder of the Mughal dynasty Babur visited Samarqand in 1497–1498, some seventy years after its completion and described the pavilion as follows:

On the western side of the Kohak Hill was constructed a garden called Bagh-i Maydan, in the middle of which was built a superb building called Chil Sutun, two stories high with columns of stone. [...] Going from that building toward Kohak Hill is another small garden where yet another portico was built. [...] In this small garden is a *chardara*, called the Chini-khana with porcelain all around the dado. Someone was sent to Cathay to bring the porcelain.<sup>103</sup>

Although Babur provides the exact location and refers to the architecture of the China pavilion, our factual knowledge of the garden setting is very patchy. The artefacts discovered by the second team of the archaeological expedition in Samarqand in the summer of 1941 are the only material evidence we have about its layout and decoration. At present, the area is part of a densely populated local neighbourhood (*mahalla*) and it is virtually impossible to explore any traces of its Timurid architecture (see Figure 12.15). It is likely that any remaining structures might have been damaged during the Siege of Samarqand in 1868; fierce fighting took place in the vicinity of the Chūpān-Āṭā' Mausoleum to the northeast of the Bāgh-i Maydān.<sup>104</sup> Below I will present the main architectural discoveries as recorded in the archaeological reports from 1941 and I will try to reconstruct the decoration of the ensemble based on the artefacts kept at the Samarqand State Museum. Similar to the reports, these artefacts are discussed here for the first time.

103 Zahiruddin M. Babur, *The Baburnama, Memories of Babur, prince and emperor*, trans., ed. by Wheeler M. Thackston (New York: The Modern Library, 2002), 58–59.

104 On the history of the Chūpān-Āṭā' Mausoleum, see Yahya G. Guliamov, "Chupan-Ata," in *Trudy Instituta Istorii i Arkheologii, Materialy po Arkheologii Uzbekistana*, vol. 1 (Tashkent: Izd-vo Akademii Nauk UzSSR 1948), 22–34. See also illustration 6.3 The site of the battle of Chupan Ata in Alexander Morrison, *The Russian Conquest of Central Asia: A Study in Imperial Expansion, 1814–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 289.



FIGURE 12.15 Present view of the neighbourhood in which the Bāgh-i Maydān may have been situated

PHOTOGRAPH: ©ELENA PASKALEVA 2019

In her comprehensive essay on Timurid gardens from 1951, Galina Anatolievna Pugachenkova (1915–2007) described in detail the small garden (*bāghcha*) and published the only architectural plan known to me.<sup>105</sup> The site to the southwest consisted of a levelled terrace raised on square bricks. A system of clay pipes ran under the western ridge of the terrace and supplied water to an open basin connected to a twelve-sided polygon platform with a stone circular fountain in the middle. The water was most likely pumped up the hill from the adjacent Siyob canal and distributed by means of a sophisticated hydraulic network of water pipes. In front of the polygonal platform, that may have been decorated with a grill of carved marble (see Figure 12.16), there was a square area inlaid with multi-coloured varieties of onyx. To the south of it, the steep slope was supported by a brick wall of about one and a half meters high that marked the slanting outline of a park.

Perpendicular to the main axis of the twelve-sided polygonal basin and situated on the eastern elevation of the *bāghcha*, there was another probably

105 Pugachenkova, “Sadovo-parkovoe iskusstvo”, 154–155, see drawing 3.

earlier site. That part of the excavated area was referred to as the *chīnīkhāna*. Its main water feature along the east-west axis was an octagonal fountain with a diameter of one and a half meters decorated with glazed blue bricks;<sup>106</sup> the water was provided by an open canal of six-seven meters which was also clad with bricks. An elevated *ṣuffa* of about two and a half meters covered with hexagonal marble tiles was situated to the north of the canal. To the west of the octagonal fountain and built in the main longitudinal axis of the canal, Masson excavated the remains of a wall clad with marble slabs typical of the Timurid monumental structures in Samarqand. The floor level of that structure was raised some twenty-five to thirty-five centimetres and it was dated by coins found on site to the first half of the fifteenth century. This structure, that Zhukov defines as an *īwān*, is the only building in the garden that may have had any interior decoration.<sup>107</sup> However, it is not clear whether it was a free standing pavilion or whether it had only a protruding polygonal niche facing the western slope of the garden.

The 1941 expedition also discovered many fragments of carved marble window screens and grills (see Figure 12.16), coloured glass, pieces of intricate mosaic faience in dark and light blues, white and dark brown with floral, geometrical and epigraphic designs. In addition, they found glazed carved majolica, and unique carved terracotta fragments with stylised lotus flowers (see Figure 12.17) most likely belonging to an ornate revetment or a *muqarnas* vault.<sup>108</sup> All finds suggest the existence of a richly-decorated garden setting with different structures and water features. Based on the quality of the carved terracotta fragments it is clear that the compound was of exquisite aesthetic quality and Ulugh Beg spared no expense for its decoration. However, it is very difficult to define it as a palace as there are no rooms.

At present, the majority of the artefacts are kept at the Samarqand State Museum, inventory nr. A-283. There are only two finely carved terracotta fragments recorded in the catalogue of the museum that are attributed to the *chīnīkhāna*.<sup>109</sup> The actual collection, however, contains 111 pieces.

In 1968 nine carved terracotta fragments from the Ulugh Beg *chīnīkhāna* were published by N.S. Grazhdankina, M.K. Rakhimov and I.E. Pletnev.<sup>110</sup> One

106 TsGARUZ, f. R-2773, op. 1, d. 364, l. 81.

107 TsGARUZ, f. R-2773, op. 1, d. 364, l. 82.

108 TsGARUZ, f. R-2773, op. 1, d. 364, l. 82.

109 Akbar Khakimov (ed.), *Masterpieces of the Samarkand Museum* (Tashkent, 2004), catalogue entries nr. 332 and nr. 334, 176–177.

110 N.S. Grazhdankina, M.K. Rakhimov, I.E. Pletnev, *Arkhitekturnaia keramika Uzbekistana. Ocherk istoricheskogo razvitiia i opyt restavratsii* (Tashkent: Fan, 1968), drawing 17.



FIGURE 12.16

Detail of a marble railing, Samarqand State Museum, box A 283–281-III

PHOTOGRAPH: ©ELENA PASKALEVA 2021

of the pieces has Arabic epigraphy against a background of intertwined lotus leaves and stems. Another fragment has carved epigraphy interwoven within an arabesque motif. Two of the other larger details seem to be pieces of floral cartouches. At the *chīnikhāna*, the larger cartouche fragments and the arabesque details were most likely incorporated in the exterior revetment around the main portal that could have consisted of multiple bands made up of glazed tiles and carved terracotta. However, I was unable to identify the examples published by Grazhdankina, Rakhimov and Pletnev among the artefacts of the Samarqand State Museum. It might be possible that they are kept in another collection in Tashkent. It is highly probable that the technique of carved ter-



FIGURE 12.17 Detail of carved earthenware with floral lotus ornaments, Samarqand State Museum, item A 283–285

PHOTOGRAPH: ©ELENA PASKALEVA 2021

racotta was continuously applied for different forms of exterior decoration including flat and curved surfaces in the 1420s.

Either way, the only structure in the Ulugh Beg *bāghcha* that could be described as the “China pavilion” but definitely not as a palatial structure, had a polygonal form and it protruded from a larger enclosure to the west; its lower exterior was decorated with marble slabs. The upper exterior walls may have been covered with the exquisitely carved terracotta panels. There should have

been some openings (doors or niches) in all directions from which the visitors could admire the surrounding landscape and the two fountains to the east and to the west.

In addition, onyx seems to have been used throughout the garden compound but surprisingly enough there is no evidence of any original Chinese porcelain tiles found during the archaeological excavations in 1941. Zhukov lists only “facing fragments close to faience.”<sup>111</sup>

Babur asserts that the porcelain tiles were specifically brought by someone from China.<sup>112</sup> Barthold and Sukharev state that during the reign of Ulugh Beg porcelain tiles were brought from China during consecutive trips.<sup>113</sup> Atwell suggests that the porcelain trade was conducted by many merchants who travelled back and forth and that the Ming porcelain collection of Ulugh Beg was so extensive that he had to build a special “Porcelain House” to store it.<sup>114</sup> Yet based on the archaeological reports by Zhukov and Masson, and on the artefacts and archival photographs that I have been able to trace, these tiles were not discovered on the site of the above described *chīnīkhāna* in Samarqand in 1941.

According to Masson’s earlier notes published in 1926, a large fragment of carved marble with slots for tile mosaic was accidentally unearthed by locals to the east of the Chūpān-Āṭā’ elevation. These previous discoveries also included glazed vessels, which Masson describes as “vases for flowers” and “several hexagonal porcelain tiles, decorated with stylized blue flowers and acorns on a white background with traces of gilding.”<sup>115</sup> Most likely, Masson is referring to tiles with Chinese iconographic designs that could be related to Babur’s

111 TsGARUz, f. R-2773, op. 1, d. 364, l. 82.

112 Bābur, *Bābur-nāma (Vaqāyi’)*. Critical edition, 72, چینی خانه دیرلار خطای دین کیشی بیباریب, یکتوروتور

113 (*Spetsialno dostavlenymi iz Kitaia v neskol’ko priemov*), see I.A. Sukharev, “Dva bliuda xv. iz Samarkanda,” in *Trudy Instituta Istorii i Arkheologii. Materialy po arkheologii Uzbekistana*, vol. 1 (Tashkent: Izd-vo Akademii Nauk UzSSR, 1948), 50. Also see Vasilii V. Barthold, *Ulugh-Beg. Four Studies on the History of Central Asia*, vol. 2, tr. V. and T. Minorsky (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1958), 112.

114 William S. Atwell, “Time, Money, and the Weather: Ming China and the “Great Depression” of the Mid-Fifteenth Century,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 61, no. 1 (2002): 88. It is very likely that Ulugh Beg had an extensive porcelain collection, however, I haven’t come across a single historiographical source that confirms that. All we know about the love of Ulugh Beg for Chinese porcelain comes from the Soviet archaeological excavations and publications on Gūr-i Amīr, the Ulugh Beg Madrasa and the China pavilion.

115 (*Neskol’ko shestiugol’nykh farforovykh plitok, raspisannykh po belomu fonu sinimi stilizovannymi tsvetami i zheludiami so sledami pozoloty*), see Mikhail E. Masson, “Neskol’ko arkheologicheskikh dannyykh k istoricheskoi topografii Samarkanda v svyazi s provedeniem uzokoleinoi gorodskoi zheleznoi dorogi,” in *Izvestiia Sredazkomstaris*, vyp. 1 (Tashkent: Izdanie Sredazkomstarisa, 1926), 118, note 1. According to Masson, the marble frag-



FIGURE 12.18 Porcelain tile found during the excavations of the China pavilion. Collection of the Samarqand State Museum, KP 1774, A-4-80

PHOTOGRAPH: ©ELENA PASKALEVA 2021

description of the *chūnikhāna*. Although Masson mentions that “several” tiles were discovered and Pugachenkova refers to “a few hexagonal porcelain tiles with cobalt blue decoration on a white background,”<sup>116</sup> it is not very clear how many of these tiles were exactly found by locals in the 1920s as discussed by Masson. At present, only one tile is displayed at the Samarqand State Museum inventory number KP 1774, A-4-80, (Figure 12.18) and another broken fragment from a very similar tile is kept in the collection of the Samarqand Museum of Regional Studies.<sup>117</sup>

ment has been kept at the Samarqand District Museum since 1921. It was not part of the present A 283 museum collection.

116 (*Nekotoroe kolichestvo shestigrannykh farforovykh plitok*), see Pugachenkova, *Arkhitektura epokhi Ulugbeka*, 32.

117 A second hexagonal tile has been preserved at the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. It was published by the Soviet art historian Tat'iana B. Arapova in 1977 and she attributed it to the sixteenth century. It has almost black decoration and the glaze on the edges seems to be damaged, see Tat'iana B. Arapova, *Kitaiskii farfor v sobranii Ermitazha: konets XIV-pervaia tret' XVIII veka* (Leningrad: Avror, 1977), 40.

In a later report from 1943, Masson comments that a fragment from a hexagonal porcelain tile found under the main floor at Gūr-i Amīr is very similar to the tile from the *chīnīkhāna* of Ulugh Beg and suggests that the Ulugh Beg gallery and the *chīnīkhāna* could have been erected simultaneously.<sup>118</sup> It might be possible that the broken fragment kept at the Samarqand Museum of Regional Studies is that particular piece. In the same report, he also mentions that Chinese bases for porcelain vases were discovered at the Timurid dynastic mausoleum and suggests the existence of a large porcelain collection there. One wonders how and why similar tiles could be found at Gūr-i Amīr. Were they initially kept at the mausoleum (given its earlier construction date) or were they also used in its decoration? According to Al'baum the onyx hexagonal tiles of the dado at Gūr-i Amīr were gilded with designs copying the exact geometry of the ornamentation found on the porcelain tile at the Samarqand State Museum.<sup>119</sup>

My hypothesis is that the original Chinese tile samples were never used on the Samarqand dados but studied at the Timurid artistic workshops; their exquisite linear patterns in white and blue were transformed into tile designs applied across Samarqand.<sup>120</sup> These artistic transformations were not only executed with different techniques but they were also locally manufactured based on the availability of building materials, silicate sands and glazes. Their hexagonal shapes were indeed implemented in the dados of the major Timurid mausoleums from the start of the fifteenth century, however, the linear geometric decoration was executed in gilding applied onto the glazed monochrome surfaces of the locally produced tiles as was the case with the dado at Gūr-i Amīr.

Almost all Samarqand monuments from the Timurid period have been heavily restored, partially rebuilt and are still undergoing major transformations, usually linked to subsequent anniversaries and commemorations celebrating Timur and Ulugh Beg.<sup>121</sup> The example set by the Alisher Navoi Jubilee in 1941, and skilfully used as an ideological pretext to conduct extensive archaeological work, has been reused as a propaganda tool in the current ethno-nationalistic discourses of the Uzbek independent state. That is why it is almost impossible

118 TsGARUZ, f. R-2406, op. 1, d. 1579, l. 2. Report by Mikhail E. Masson on the archaeological excavations at Gūr-i Amīr from 25 July 1943.

119 L.I. Al'baum, "Panel' Gurimira," in *Trudy SAGU. Arkheologia Srednei Azii*, vyp. 49 (Tashkent: Izd-vo SAGU, 1953), 137, Figure 3.

120 All six sides of the tile on Figure 12.18 are gilded and in almost immaculate condition, there are not traces of mortar on its back, which suggests that the tile was never attached together with other tiles on a walled surface.

121 Elena Paskaleva, "Samarqand Refashioned. A Traveller's Impressions, August 2013," *The Silk Road Journal* 11 (2013): 139–153.

to reconstruct the original exteriors and interiors of the existing Timurid monuments. The exact attribution of all Chinese porcelain fragments discovered in Samarqand could be answered in future explorations. For that reason studying the scattered museum collections and the fieldwork reports compiled by the leading archaeologists and architectural historians of the Soviet period can shed new light on our knowledge and understanding of the complex cultural exchanges in the Timurid realm.

#### 4 Conclusion

By using unpublished archival sources, drawings and historiographical descriptions, I tried to contextualize the findings of the two archaeological expeditions that took place in Samarqand in the summer of 1941. Both of them were organized around the celebrations of the 500th anniversary of the great cultural patron of the later Timurid period Alisher Navoi, although none of them was directly related to his literary legacy.

Given the importance of the discovery of the skeletons at Gūr-i Amīr, the attention of the political elite swiftly shifted to the cultural legacy of the Timurids. The outcome of the expeditions proved that the Timurid rulers of Samarqand, the dynastic founder Timur and his grandson Ulugh Beg, did not only leave their artistic heritage in the city in the form of monumental buildings and garden pavilions, but they were also buried on the territory of Uzbekistan. What is more, the anthropologists Gerasimov and Oshanin could confirm that they were blood relatives. Once the genealogical relationships were established, the archaeologists proceeded with crafting architectural evidence that Ulugh Beg lived in sedentary palaces and built magnificent gardens, one of which even had a pavilion decorated with Chinese porcelain tiles (*chīnikhāna*). His historical figure was elevated to the status of a scientific prodigy who lived for knowledge and as a result lost his life fighting the dogmas of Islam. Unlike the military successes of Timur, Ulugh Beg achieved scientific fame and his work resonated for centuries with distinguished international scholars. The paradigms defined during the Navoi Jubilee determined the study of the Timurid period within the borders of present-day Uzbekistan from the perspective of Soviet cultural continuity.

Pertinent questions related to the controversial legitimacy of the excavations and the desecration of local burial rituals were shrouded in a media frenzy that followed all discoveries with a scary meticulousness. Although the archaeological excavations in the summer of 1941 were well-documented, they still remain largely unknown to the wider audience. Hopefully, the above presen-

ted data has helped to shed more light and clarity on the political storylines on the eve of the Second World War.

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