

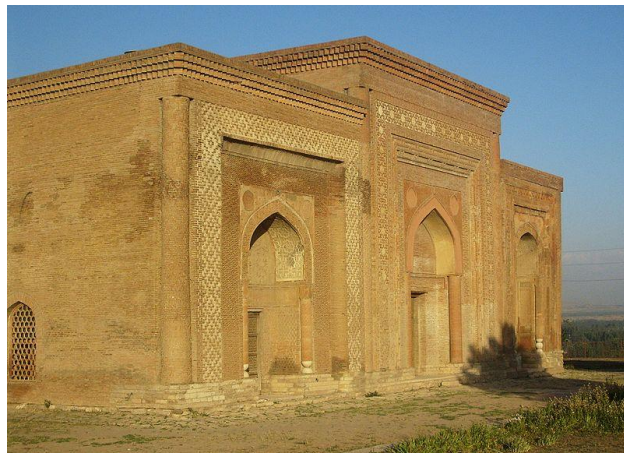
QARAKHANID CULTURAL HISTORY – Art & Architecture

Architecture

Although the number of surviving Qarakhanid buildings is limited, enough examples (mostly mosques and mausoleums) have survived to allow scholars to determine certain distinctive features of Qarakhanid architecture. As the first Turkic Muslim state, the Qarakhanids had no existing Turkic Islamic architecture on which to model their structures. Consequently, they used the architecture of their neighbors and political rivals, the Samanids, as the starting point for their own architecture, and Samanid influence is particularly notable in the decoration of Qarakhanid mausoleums.



*Samanid Mausoleum, 10th century, Bukhara
Kyrgyzstan*



*Qarakhanid Mausoleum, 12th century, Uzgen,
Kyrgyzstan*

Of the various surviving Qarakhanid structures, minarets are the most common, the most distinctively Qarakhanid, and display almost all of the characteristic features of Qarakhanid architecture. The typical Qarakhanid minaret is constructed of brick, has a tapered shaft, and a large “lantern” at the top, as seen in the Vabkent Minaret (*right*) from the late 12th century. The brickwork generally employs different decorative techniques, usually arranged in bands on the shaft of the minaret. However, these techniques were not restricted to minarets, and can be found on other Qarakhanid structures.

The first of these decorative techniques is “outset fret brick decor”. In this technique, the decorative elements are square or rectangular units that are two or three times the height of the bricks’ length and project out from the surface of the structure. These patterns were frequently arranged in clearly marked panels. Examples of this technique can be seen above the entrance to the Maghak-i Attari mosque in Bukhara and on the Uzgen Minaret in Uzgen, Kyrgyzstan.

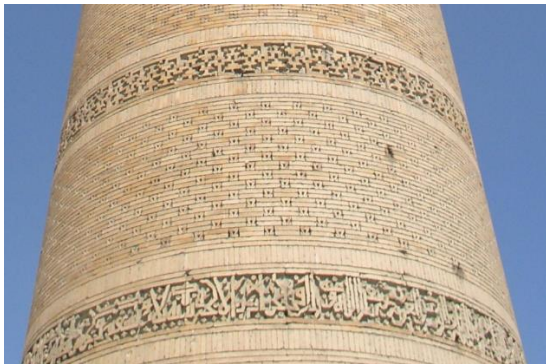


Maghak-i Attari Mosque, 10th century

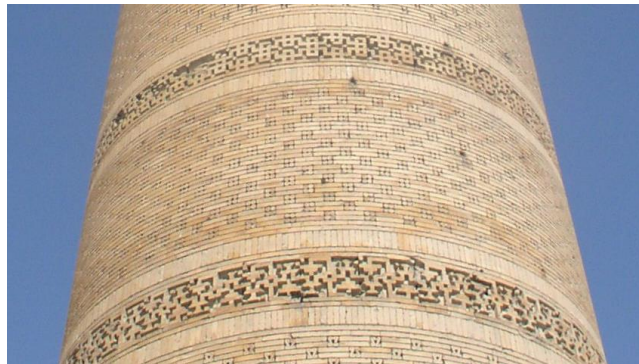


Uzgen Minaret, Band 1, 11th century

The second decorative brickwork technique that is frequently employed in Qarakhanid architecture is “brick plugs”. Brick plugs are terracotta plugs of various shapes used to fill spaces between double-stacked bricks. A variation of this technique used on minarets was to employ brick plugs of different shapes in different bands on the shaft of the minaret. This use of brick plugs can be seen in the Vabkent Minaret.



Brick plugs, Band 1, Vabkent Minaret



Brick plugs, Band 2, Vabkent Minaret

In addition to the previously mentioned characteristics of Qarakhanid architecture, there are two additional characteristics that are worth mention. First, the Qarakhanids employed a very distinctive, regional epigraphy in their building inscriptions, coins, ceramics, gravestones and manuscripts of the Qur’an. Although the Qarakhanid epigraphy was clearly influenced by the styles used by Ghaznavid and Ghurid artists, Qarakhanid artists developed unique letter forms that are found in different media across Qarakhanid territories in the 11th and 12th centuries.

The second characteristic is the increasing use of Persian in Qarakhanid building inscriptions and coinage, in place of Arabic. The earliest surviving examples of the use of Persian on any Islamic building are found on the Shah Fazl tomb at Safid Buland, constructed between 1055-1060 for the Qarakhanid ruler Muhammad ibn Nasr. The Qarakhanids’ use of Persian in these official roles is in contrast to practice of their predecessors, the Samanids. Despite being of Iranian origin and patrons of Persian literature, the Samanids made almost no use of Persian in any official, public capacity. However, the Qarakhanid practice of expanding the use of Persian would be copied by later dynasties and spread across much of Central Asia and beyond.



One unique example of Qarakhanid architecture is the Ribat-i Malik caravanserai, dating from the late 11th century, in Uzbekistan. Although only the main entrance portal has survived to any degree, its intricate brickwork décor is a testament to the high level Qarakhanid architecture achieved in the use of bricks to create decorative effects.

Entrance portal of the Ribat-i Malik

The influence of Qarakhanid architecture continued even after the fall of the Qarakhanid states, and can be seen in the architecture of later Muslim dynasties in Central Asia. In particular, the architecture of the Timurids in the late 14th and early 15th centuries utilizes many elements of Qarakhanid architecture, although on a considerably larger scale and with a much greater use of glazed tiles.

Minor Arts

Very little Qarakhanid art has survived other than the decorative elements of structures that are primarily religious in nature. However, in 2000 a French-Uzbek archaeological mission excavating a Qarakhanid royal pavilion uncovered the remains of wall paintings which once decorated this elite residence. Despite the fragmentary condition of most of the wall paintings, depictions of human figures, animals and foliate decorative elements were recovered. The most complete human figure was a dynamic, three-quarter-life size painting of an arrow bearer. The paintings display a high degree of technical skill and artistry in their composition and use of color.

In addition to these, fragments of inscriptions in both Persian and Arabic were also discovered. Although the complete inscriptions could not be reconstructed, enough was preserved to show that Persian was used for poetic inscriptions while Arabic was used for Qur'anic verses and patronage information.

Readings

McClary, Richard P. *Medieval Monuments of Central Asia: Qarakhanid Architecture of the 11th and 12th Centuries*. Edinburgh, 2020.

Discussion Questions

1. What innovations did the Qarakhanids bring to Islamic architecture in Central Asia?
2. What was the influence of Qarakhanid architecture on later cultures?