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## The Grand Mosque of Herat, a symbol of Islamic art and architecture

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### ABSTRACT

*Afghanistan has been at the crossroads of many human civilizations throughout its glorious history. The magnificent and great works and monuments developed and constructed through its many historical eras represent the skillful and artistic taste and power of thinking of the people inhabiting this glorious ancient land. The Grand Mosque of Herat demonstrates the peak of Islamic art and architecture. It is one of the most beautiful mosques in the region, reflecting the beauty and artistic skills of the Islamic art and architecture. The Grand Mosque of Herat is a living testament to Islamic history and culture that has reached its perfection in this corner of Asia.*

**Keywords**— *Grand Mosque Of Herat, Islamic Art and Architecture*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan has enjoyed a special geographical and strategic location in Asia and is a landlocked country. Despite its landlocked geography, Afghanistan has still nourished and perfected great human civilizations, namely, the Aryan, Bactrian, Buddhist, and Islamic civilizations. During the initial stages of Islam's expansion, especially when the holy religion of Islam was being spread throughout Afghanistan, the people of Afghanistan, after converting and embracing Islam, demonstrated their unique masterworks the world had not witnessed yet. This skillfulness was reflected in the Islamic art and architecture in famous art and constructional works such as mosques, monuments, caravanserais, minarets, etc. Many such masterworks are still standing throughout the country. The Grand Mosque of Herat is one of these masterworks that accounts for a valuable and important example of Islamic art and architecture, dating back to 1,400 years old and in the Timurid era's architectural art.

Prior to elaborating on the features of the Grand Mosque of Herat and exploring the artwork it enjoys, let us have a brief look at the history of ancient province of Herat. The name, Herat, is deeply tied to the history of Aryan immigration from the north to southern part of Oxus, the Amu River, which dates back to 5,000 years ago. When the Aryans landed "Hindu Kush" areas, they invaded the Belhika, Areyia, and Drangiana regions. They later named their territory as "Ariana". As time passed, the northern regions of Herat became known as Balkh and Bactria, while the southern lakes of Hirmand river became known as Darangiana. The only region that has preserved the Aryan name is Herat. The name of Herat has been derived from the word Eric, Arya, and Arya Mukhoz. The term "Herat" has been mentioned in Avesta as "arya" and "aryana", while it has been called "hariva", and "harivaa" in the inscriptions of Dariush. It has also been reflected in the works of Western and Arab historians in the forms of Harry, Hariew, Hariva, Harah, and Herat. (9: 263)

Despite its historical background and ancient history, Herat province has enjoyed a highly important geopolitical standing. Herat enjoys a very rich cultural profile, especially in calligraphy, painting, drawing, tileworks and miniature arts. The numerous monuments built over different periods, especially the Islamic era, are unique and have been developed by talented artists who gathered from around the world to create such precious masterpieces. These masterworks illustrate the perfection of art, architecture, calligraphy, painting, and poetry. The Grand Mosque of Herat is one of the finest and most rare masterworks developed throughout history.

Constructed using various techniques, material, and architectural art, the Grand Mosque of Herat is a complete and perfect symbol illustrating history, culture and art. As you enter the mosque, whatever you see is the combination of art and love with history. There

will be no human being who would not be fascinated by its beauty, and no human being would be found not praising the artwork of this holy place once he/she stands and looks at the domes, porches, pillars, bricks and tiles used in the construction of this grand monument.

The Grand Mosque of Herat is one of the few historical monuments constructed by our innovative artist ancestors. Prior to being officially converted to a mosque in year 26<sup>th</sup> of the Lunar Calendar, this was a wood-made inscribed building, most parts of which were burnt on a Friday night, 8<sup>th</sup> Jemadi Al-Awwal 616 Lunar Calendar. The current design and view of the mosque was developed by Sultan Ghiasuddin ibn Muhammad ibn Sam-e-Ghori when he turned Herat into the capital of his kingdom. The name of Sultan Ghiasuddin Ghori is written in Kofic inscription on one of the porticos (*rawaq*) of the mosque. This grand monument was destroyed during Chengiz Khan's attack but was later repaired by King Ghiasuddin Kurt and Malik Muaz-Aldin.

During the Timurids, it was first renovated by Shahrokh Mirza whose name was carved in one of the porticos of the mosque; however, proper repairing and restoration was completed during the reign of Sultan Hussein Bayqara and his talented minister, Amir Ali Shir Nawayee, in 954. When major porticos of the mosque experienced fractures, the restoration activities commenced which included construction of additional structures and extensions. These new extensions seem to be larger than the original building. The same year, the old wood-made pulpit was replaced with a white marble pulpit. The marble was collected and transferred from remote regions; however, the stonemasonry activities, which took tremendous efforts, were accomplished inside Herat. (16:1)

After the death of Ghiasuddin Muhammad, his brother, Sultan Shahabuddin Ghori, who was commissioned to Khorasan, came to power. Due to wars and tensions between Khorasan and Sultan Mohammad Khuawarzm, he failed to complete the construction of the Grand Mosque of Herat. After returning from his successful campaign to India, he was killed in the Dehik area of Ghazni City, in 602, Lunar Calendar. Following Sultan Shahabuddin Ghori's death, his nephew, Ghiasuddin Mahmoud, the son of Sultan Ghiasuddin Mohammad, became king. During his kingdom, the construction work of the Grand Mosque was finally completed. (22:3)

The courtyard of the mosque, housing a large water basin in the middle, was developed in a rectangular shape surrounded by the mosque's additional buildings. The complex of this mosque consists of numerous buildings and elements such as four large porches (*ivans*), six entrance gates, four hundred and eighty domes, one hundred and thirty porticos (*rawaq*), four hundred and forty pillars, and a large seminary "religious school". These buildings and elements were built using a collection of baked-brick works, tiles, gypsum, paintings, beautiful Kufic calligraphy, *thuluth* (a style of calligraphy) and Nastaliq which constitute the main artistic heritage of this homeland.

The significance and prominent feature in the construction of the Grand Mosque of Herat is its gradual construction in the course of history. The construction of the Grand Mosque of Herat was not exclusively completed during one specific era or one single style of architecture; but instead, it has enjoyed various architectural styles of the Ghorids, Timurids, and many other tribes and rulers. This multiplicity of architectural styles is one of the prominent and unique features of this monument. A brazen caldron "large pot" which has been stationed in the corner of the Grand Herat Mosque, draws the attention of any visitor. This caldron, considering the structure and ornamentation, is one of the wonderful masterpieces in the history of art and industry. In the past, on special days of ceremonies, syrup/special drinks were prepared using this caldron and were distributed to the public. The Grand Mosque of Herat is a masterpiece or symbol of Islamic architecture. It is one of the largest mosques in Afghanistan and had been the fifth largest mosque in the Islamic world in the past. The peak of Ghorids and Tamiurids architecture is still clearly noticeable, even after many centuries have passed. (119:6)

Four large porches/*ivans* are placed on the four sides' middle points. They each add to the glory and magnificence of this building on account of their size and magnitude. The courtyard covers 4,920 square meters of land housing a large water basin in the middle. There is a drilled well in a corner from which abundant crystal and tasty water is utilized. (205:5)

In decorative architecture, each engraving has its own superficial value. The engravings are rooted in the culture and reflect the continuous belief and desire of the people over many generations. The architectural presentations, on the one hand, attract the attention of the viewers to explore the superficial elegance of ornaments on walls and elements; on the other hand, it opens the eyes of the viewer to the realm of religious and cultural secrets and codes hidden in the concepts illustrated in the ornaments and engravings. It is clear that, in the past, most part of the mosque had benefited from tileworks. Moreover, various lines of holy tablets such as Quranic verses and prophetic hadiths had been inscribed on them.

The exterior façade of Timurid monuments has a significant feature that distinguishes them from past monuments. The Timurid monument buildings are higher, the three-dimensional decorating appears less, and they benefit from application of tiles of multiple colors. In addition, the Timurids-made sky-blue/azure domes are visible from long distances. On account of the colorful tiles, it can even be expressed that the exterior surface work of any Timurid monument resembles a miniature tableau.

In most Timurid monuments, the main components of the building are made of square-shaped baked bricks, and in some sections, wood work has been utilized in the arcs/bows and the lower component of the dome acting as a resistor to tension and strain. The building material including limestone, plaster powder, and other mixtures such as clay have been used as mortar in the construction work. Mud-clay and cob (*plaster made of clay and straw*) layers have been used in the ceilings. Tiles have also been used as decorative components in many cases. The gypsum powder, in addition to being used as mortar, was used in large quantities in the decoration of muqarnas and gypsum works for the interior design of the building. (8:1)

Tiles have been used in most monuments of the Timurid era, especially in the construction of the Grand Mosque of Herat. One of the reasons behind the use of tiles is its resistance to wind and rain, sunlight, chemical elements, and physical tension and strain. The colors and design of tiles also induce an aesthetic atmosphere providing peace of mind and soul to the visitor. The reason for the application of geometric designs and plant drawings in the tileworks is based on "circles" which are symbols of perfection in the Islamic art. The circle also attracts the attention of the visitor towards the center of the drawing.

Color in the Islamic tilework, is also one of the most interesting symbolic examples in Islamic art; for example, blue and azure colors in the Islamic art represent a symbol of infinity of the sky and inner/intrinsic peace. The blue tile, clay, and baked brick works reflect the colors of earth and sky which, although in conflict with each other, employ harmony and pleasantness.

When one enters the hallway of the Grand Mosque of Herat, he/she sees the main porch appearing on the right. The surface of the corridor is covered with baked-bricks and the ceilings consist of blue ornamented arcs. The courtyard is very wide. The porch of the mosque is stationed between two high minarets making the porch resemble a flower. The beautiful Dari and Arabic lines separate Islamic ornaments. The verses of Holy Quran in the upper parts of the wall indicate the Ascension of the Prophet of Islam (pbuh). The surface of porticos' pillars is designed with fascinating poetry from Khwaja Abdullah Ansari, Mawlana Abdurrahman Jami, Saadi, and Hakim Sanayee. The mihrab and pulpit/menbar are made of excellent marble. What has remained from the Timurid era in the mosque are the remnants of glazed blue, golden mosaic tiles used in the elements and designed in a way that inspire love and movement. (19:8)

A fascinating feature of the Timurid-era architecture that attracts attention is the fact that Timurid monuments' plans were generally constructed on a completely symmetrical axis, and the horizontal axes are perpendicular to the main axis which induces a second symmetry.

Although the symmetry and balance of forces in the arcs and domes were anticipated in the plan, the internal mass of the walls has been managed for various purposes and other small rooms have been improvised among them. In the Timurid monuments, particularly in their plans, many similarities are sometimes found, especially when these monuments are designed and built by the same engineer or architect. In terms of the area of land the buildings cover, the Timurid monuments seem to be larger than the monuments constructed in the past. (13:4)

The Grand Mosque of Herat is one of the largest mosques in the Islamic world and in terms of its historical background and artistic value, the elegance and fame of this great monument have been reflected in the works of many historians, tourists, and scholars. The first Arab geographer who has reflected about the Grand Mosque of Herat is Abu al-Ishaq Ibrahim ibn Muhammad Astakhari, who lived through the first half of the fourth century (solar year). He, in his famous book "Al-Malik and Al-Masaleh" has elaborated about Herat as follows: The mosque is located in the middle of the city and is surrounded by the bazaar in a way that no other mosques in Khorasan, Transoxiana and Sistan can compete with in terms of elegance and magnificence. (147:7)

Abdul Razaq Samarqandi, author of *Mutle-Al-Saadain*, elaborates further: Ghiasiyeh Madrasa, one of the best madrasas, is located in the north of the Grand Mosque of Herat. Many people have been dedicated to the construction of this great building and to carry out tasks and functions such as the Imam, the orator, the guardians, the muezzins, and servants of the Herat Mosque). 32:3)

Sayed Reza Husaini writes in his book *"An Introduction to The History Of Architecture And Urban Development In Afghanistan"*: The Grand Mosque of Herat or Herat Friday Mosque is one of the ancient mosques and a valuable architectural structure located in Herat city. Many parts of this building were constructed during the Golden era of the Timurids dynasty, while only a small portion of the Ghoridan mosque still remains in the southern entrance. The remnants of decorations and ornaments applied by the Ghorids dynasty were covered under the ornaments of the Timurids era and were discovered by the experts in 1969. The Timurids repaired this great building using their own taste of art and skills. (282:2)

To sum this paper up, the Grand Mosque of Herat, from the perspective of architectural art and its ornaments, is one of the most famous monuments in the Islamic world. The skills and delicacies used in construction of the Grand Mosque of Herat illustrate the glorious, delicate craftsmanship and demonstrate the well-developed competence and skillfulness of the craftsmen that built this great monument. The delicacy and skillfulness make people wonder how they had been able to produce such an artistic masterwork by only applying clay and gypsum. The artwork utilized in the development of this monument is still a source of amazement and wonder, even though, several centuries have passed.

## **2. CONCLUSION**

The monuments of the Timurid period, in terms of engineering and architecture, highlight a bright era in the history of our country's architecture. That era enjoyed numerous initiatives and innovations throughout all branches of art, especially the architectural art. The Timurid architects have completely planned and design the symmetry construction of monuments on both main axes. They had concentrated on the surface and façade of monuments as well as the application of abundant colors, especially in the tileworks. In their tileworks, they have benefited from the marbled tiles and mosaics decorated with drawings of plants and geometric designs. In addition, the excessive use of blue and azure colors in domes' tileworks, the initiative to build long cylindrical pillars, the building of double-layered and triple-layered domes, the application of various lines on the tiles and decorations of mansions, and the construction of high porches in mosques and mausoleums constitute the unique features of Timurids architecture. In short, the Grand Mosque of Herat is a perfect symbol of Islamic art and architecture, representing the dynamics and development of Islamic culture and civilization, and the role of the people in the growth and development of this civilization.

### **3. RECOMMENDATIONS**

Studies into and observation of the current condition of the Grand Mosque of Herat indicate that the following recommendations should be considered to provide improved maintenance of this great monument as the largest and most valuable treasure of civilization and of the Islamic world:

- In the past, 2% of the revenue collected through Herat Province's Custom Department was allocated to cover the operational and maintenance costs of the Grand Mosque of Herat; therefore, it is recommended that such a process is reinitiated.
- A charity foundation or Charity Fund should be established to attract financial support for the mosque.
- Any potential destruction should be prevented as soon as possible.
- The missing inscriptions must be retrieved and reinstalled; in case the inscription cannot be found, new inscriptions should be developed using the archived documentation.
- Tilework factories should be established within the mosque, in their own dedicated places, so this delicate industry develops and grows further.
- The government, especially the Ministry of Information and Culture, shall initiate efforts to register this great monument through the World Cultural Heritage Organization.
- The government shall pave the way for the tourism industry so that visitors can explore this Islamic monument.
- Efforts should be made to facilitate the support of Religious Scholars' Council of Herat and the Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs.

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