













Islamic Art

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CONTENTS

13 INTRODUCTION

BASIC PRINCIPLES

22 THE INTERPRETATION OF ISLAMIC ART

30 THE FORMS OF ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE

52 CALLIGRAPHY: THE FORM OF THE DIVINE WORD

60 THE APPLIED ARTS

THE HISTORY OF ISLAMIC ART

66 THE UMAYYADS

80 THE 'ABBASIDS: EMPIRE OF THE CALIPHATE

94 THE MEDITERRANEAN BASIN BETWEEN
THE EIGHTH AND ELEVENTH CENTURIES:
THE BIRTH OF REGIONAL IDENTITY

122 CENTRAL ASIA BETWEEN THE TENTH AND TWELFTH CENTURIES

132 THE MEDITERRANEAN BASIN BETWEEN
THE ELEVENTH AND FIFTEENTH CENTURIES

162 THE SELJUQS

188 THE ILKHANIDS, THE TIMURIDS AND THE KHANATES

220 THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

252 PERSIA FROM THE SAFAVIDS TO THE QAJAR DYNASTY

284 THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT

APPENDIXES

310 GLOSSARY

313 PRINCIPAL DYNASTIES AND FIGURES
OF THE ISLAMIC WORLD

318 BIBLIOGRAPHY



INTRODUCTION

In keeping with the true nature of things, the human should conform to the Divine, and not the Divine to the human.
(Sayyed Hossein Nasr)

“Let us suppose that we are living back, say, in the year 900. [During this period] the Islamic Middle East/North Africa was the cradle of civilisation. Not only was it the most advanced region in the world economically, standing at the centre of the global economy, but it enjoyed considerable economic growth and even per capita income growth. ... Were we to ... inquire into the causes of Islamic economic progress, we might come up with the following answer. The Middle East/North Africa was progressive because ... first, it was a pacified region in which towns sprang up and capitalists engaged in long-distance global trade. Second, Muslim merchants were not only traders but rational capitalist investors who traded, invested and speculated in global capitalist activities for profit-maximising ends. Third, a sufficiently rational set of institutions was created including a clearing system, banks engaged in currency exchange, deposits, and lending at interest, a special type of double-entry bookkeeping, partnerships and contract law, all of which presupposed a strong element of trust. Fourth, scientific thought had developed rapidly after 800. And fifth, Islam was especially important in stimulating capitalism on a global scale. Certainly no-one would have entertained the prospect of writing a book entitled *The Christian [sic] Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*; ... more likely someone would have written a book called *The Islamic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which would definitively demonstrate why only Islam was capable of significant economic progress and why Christian Europe would be mired forever in agrarian stagnation. Or one might subscribe to the claim made by a contemporary, Said al-Andalusi (later followed by Ibn Khaldun) that Europe’s occupation of a cold temperate zone meant that its people were ignorant, lacked scientific curiosity and would remain backward.” (John M. Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilizations*, Cambridge 2004, p. 272)

Islam (from *Islām*, an Arabic word meaning ‘abandonment’, ‘submission’ to God) is a religion characterised by absolute and uncompromising monotheism, and a radical and unitary view of the world, indifferent to the historical, social, cultural and racial particularities of its adherents. Disseminated with

brehtaking speed and facility throughout a world exhausted by the constant state of belligerence between the Byzantine and Persian empires and the inevitable consequences in terms of economic, social and religious upheaval, within the space of a few short decades Islam was to invade and conquer Spain and part of Southern Italy; traverse the wastes of the Sahara and convert populations in black Africa where it overlaid their local cults; and expand to the borders of distant Asia, encountering Vedic religions and Buddhism. To the north it flooded into Oxiana (today Uzbekistan), venturing farther even than the conquering armies of Alexander the Great, until it ran up against the frontiers of China.

The territory over which Islam held sway had already witnessed the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian civilisations in the West, followed by Greek Orthodoxy. In ancient times the East had seen the dominance of Persian and Zoroastrian cultures. It was this joint legacy that laid the foundations of Islamic artistic experience. In the domain of culture – and therefore of art too – the Islamic world assimilated the creative energies, technical skills and local customs of the conquered peoples, rejuvenating them with original concepts the like of which had never been seen before. Islam and its language, Arabic, constituted a powerful ‘glue’ that bound together various cultural traditions, composing a surprisingly homogeneous amalgam that informed a wide range of civilisations, as well as the spiritual and political experience of hundreds of millions of people in many nations. Sharing one and the same perspective, each gradually developed idioms of art and custom which, although stamped with a common Islamic identity, gained an individual character over time. Aided and abetted by vigorous input from indigenous communities, these codes were complemented by contributions from new arrivals and by the constant flux of populations for religious, commercial, or even scientific reasons. Within this Islamic mosaic, cultural, spiritual and artistic worlds coexisted, which, although characterised by specific values and legacies, were nonetheless imbued with a definably ‘Islamic’ identity.

The Islamic religion

The Islamic profession of faith runs: “There is no God other than God and Muhammad is his prophet.” In order to become a

Note

The transliteration of names, in particular in Arabic, Persian and Turkish, is based on frequently encountered current English forms (though our selection in no way excludes other, equally valid alternatives). For the sake of simplicity, the majority of diacritics have been omitted.

Pilgrims at Mecca

1410–1411

Persian miniature from a manuscript by Jalal al-Din Iskandar (15th century)
British Library, London

**Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque
on the terrace of the
Temple of Solomon**

689–691 and subsequent alterations
715 and subsequent alterations
Jerusalem

“Al-Walid ... saw that Syria was a country long occupied by the Christians and he noted the fine churches still belonging to them, so charming and beautiful and renowned for their splendour ... Therefore, he strove to build for the Muslims a mosque without equal and a wonder of the world ... Abd al-Malik, seeing the majesty of the *martyrium* at the Holy Sepulchre and its magnificence, was seized by the fear that it would dazzle the minds of the Muslims, and therefore erected over the Rock the Dome that one sees today.” (Al-Muqaddasi, 10th century).

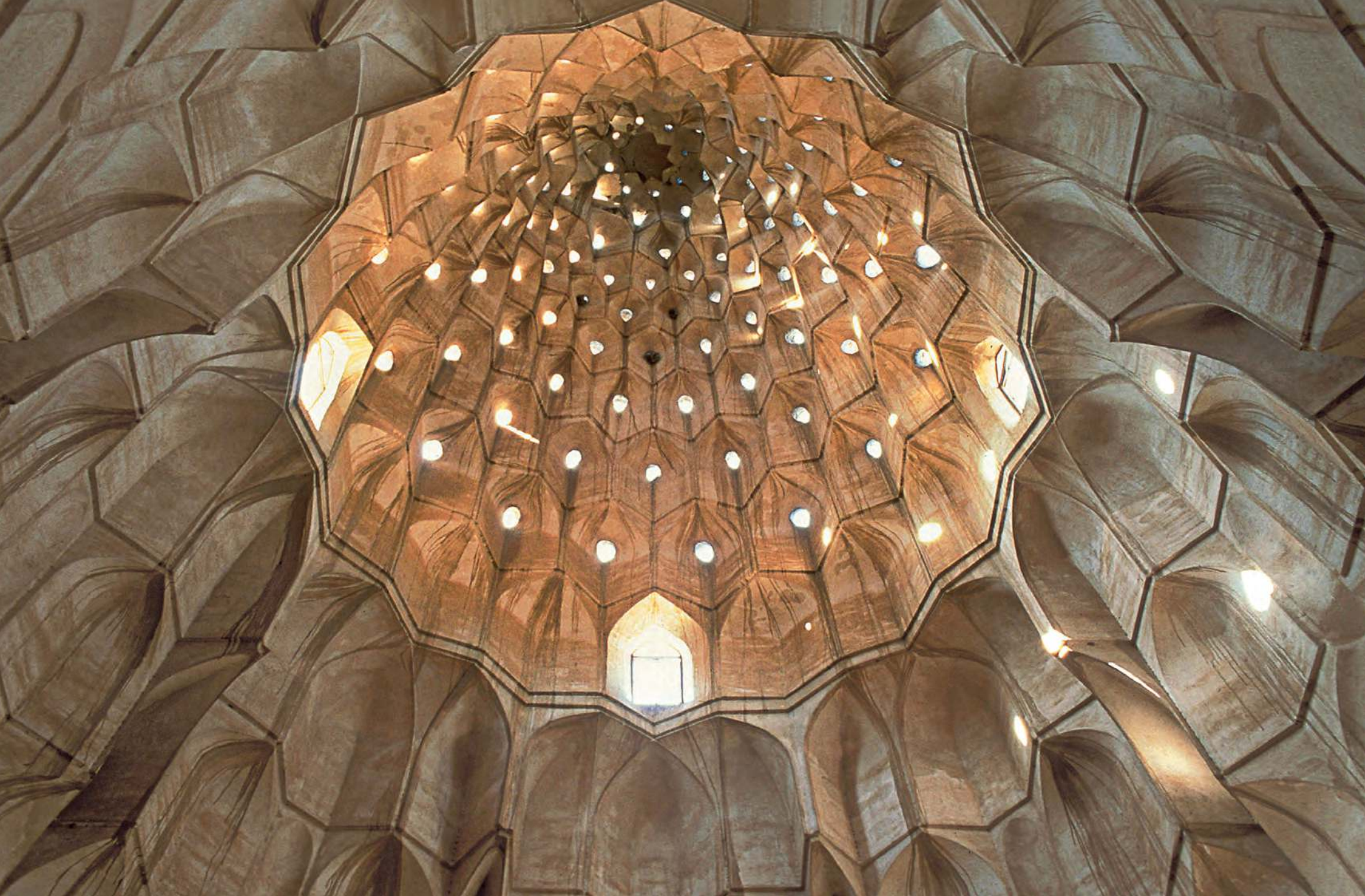
The building, crowned by a centred cupola built of wood, rises regally upon the immense artificial platform known as al-Haram al-Sharif (‘the noble sanctuary’), corresponding to the so-called Mount of Solomon’s Temple and dating back to the time the temple was extended and reconstructed under Herod the Great in 20 CE. The diameter of the octagonal base measures some sixty metres, that of the cupola approximately twenty. The geometric design underlying the structure can be interpreted in the light of the analysis in the preceding chapter. The entire levelled terrace acted as a precinct for the contemporary mosque of al-Aqsa, although later alterations have transformed the structure to such an extent that it is impossible to picture how it looked originally.



**Dome of the Rock
Interior**
689–691
Jerusalem

Resembling a colossal ciborium, the structure is derived from the Byzantine architectural and decorative style, modified by Sassanid influences which are particularly noticeable in the mosaics in the middle gallery showing jewels and crowns. These motifs should be seen as an allusion to the treasures seized from the defeated emperors that were stored in the Ka'ba in Mecca, of which the Dome represents a kind of symbolic double. Amidst the luxuriant growth of plants, script assumes a new and specifically Islamic role, imposing itself as a necessary element in the iconography: the inscription is 240 metres long and provides the key to reading the monument. The fundamental principles of Islam are boldly asserted, as is the role of Muhammad as the last of the prophets, although a special place is also reserved for Jesus and Mary. The epigraphy concludes with an explicit invitation to the “people of the book” to acknowledge Islam as the final revelation, superior to both Christianity and Judaism.





Mausoleum of Zumurrud Khatun, known as of 'Sitta Zubaida'
Interior of the cupola with *muqarnas*

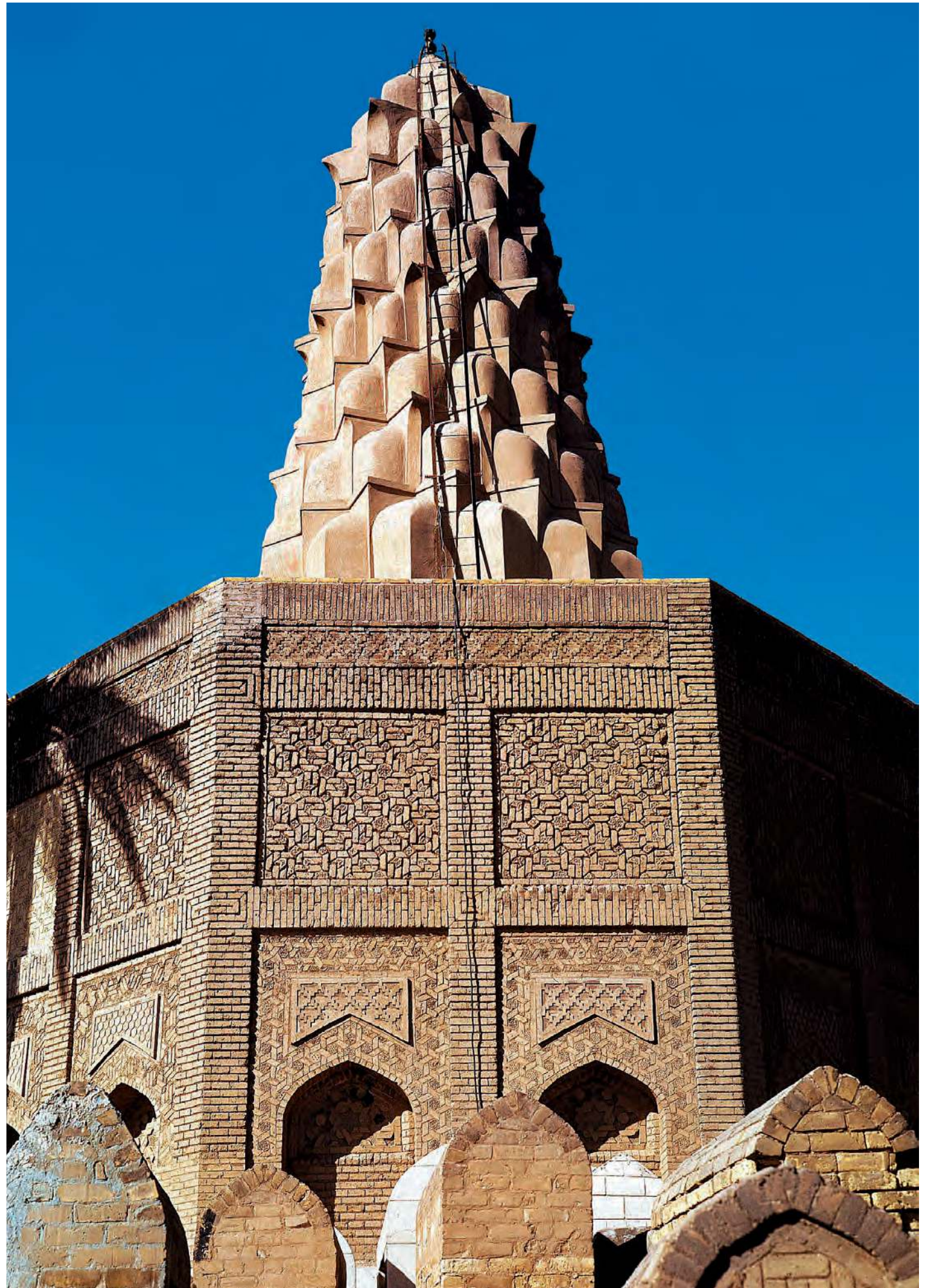
1179–1225
Baghdad, Iraq

The renowned mausoleum was constructed by the caliph al-Nasir for his mother, Sitta Zubaida, in a cemetery reserved for burying people of noble birth. The interior space is an inverted reflection of the external structure, the latter boldly soaring into the sky, the former extending like a kind of infinite stairway into a dazzling, chiselled penumbra, multiplying to infinity in a stellar glow that wafts up from the unfathomable depths of the cosmos. The gossamer line of demarcation between one order of *muqarnas* and the next exalts the sense of distance until it culminates in the motif of the star plunged into mysterious half-light at the summit.

**Mausoleum of Zumurud Khatun,
known as of 'Sitta Zubaida'**
Muqarnas with cupola

1179–1225
Baghdad, Iraq

Standing on a base of octagonal plan from which the cupola surges up in spectacular fashion with the *muqarnas* imparting vibrant dynamism, the building is perfectly at one with its function. Probably of Iraqi origin, this 'honeycombing' technique consists in subdividing the surface of corner niches in a precisely geometric fashion so as to connect the successive tiers of the cupola as it ascends. Deeply carved in an arabesque motif known as *hazarbaf*, the terracotta is laid flush with the smoothed brick. The tomb represents an elaborate architectonic solution typical of the final flourishing of the 'Abbasid caliphate, by that time under Seljuq rule. The unmistakable 'sugar-loaf' outline, in which the honeycombs are visible while the window apertures remain hidden, was invented in ninth-century Samarra.





Shuja Ibn Mana (13th century)
The 'Blacas' ewer
Entire object and detail (facing)
1232
British Museum, London

Metallurgical techniques in Iraq reached an apogee with the production of the splendid silver- and copper-inlaid brassware characteristic of Mosul in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and decorated with refined scenes of court life tailor-made to satisfy a demanding and privileged clientele. The priceless 'Blacas' ewer is signed by Shuja Ibn Mana, one of city's most consummate craftsmen, whose compositions with friezes and medallions were popular and widely imitated. Among a number of genre scenes showing camels, women at their looking-glass, hunting episodes, and musicians, one of the most telling presents a medallion with an illustration of the renowned *Shahnameh* ('Book of the King') by the Persian Firdusi. The Sassanid ruler Bahram Gur is depicted during a hunt, accompanied by the pretty Azadeh, his favourite musician strumming her harp. Showing off, Bahram fires a single arrow at a deer, transfixing its ear to its hoof. But the girl remains unimpressed and the enraged king throws her to the ground, trampling her to death under his horse's hooves.





Mosque of Ibn Tulun
Courtyard and minaret
876–879, upper part 1296
Cairo, Egypt

The courtyard is framed by pointed arches verging on the horseshoe, a curve as emphasized by the continuous ornamental banding in stucco that confers lightness and harmony as well as solidity. The section of wall over the pillars is perforated by lancets that echo, with greater dynamism, the larger motif, flanked by circular rosettes disposed with nonchalant asymmetry and terminating in a frieze of rosettes in stucco. Intended to receive thousands of worshippers, the vast expanse of the courtyard is dominated by a stone minaret articulated over four tiers. The first level is rectangular, the second circular, the third and fourth an octagonal kiosk, with the whole reaching a height of some forty metres. According to the sources, Ibn Tulun erected a minaret with an external staircase, but the analogies with prototypes at Samarra, in brick and entirely circular, end there. The Mamluk Lajin restored the mosque in 1296, notably the dome in the courtyard and upper octagonal reaches of the minaret.



Nilometer

861

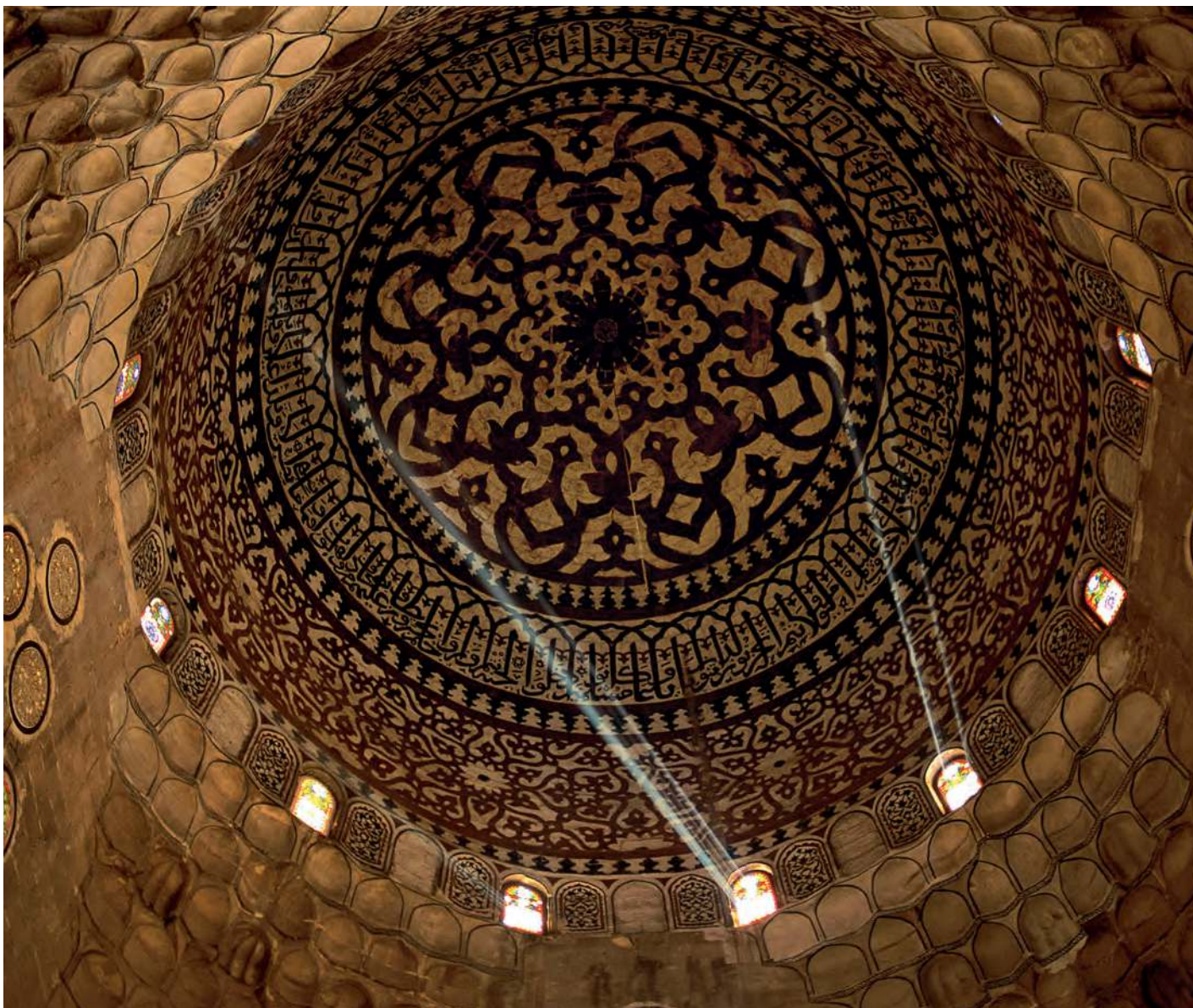
Cairo, Egypt

A nilometer serves to measure the flow of the Nile, and hence the quantity of water available for irrigation, the basis for calculating the amount of tax levied. This one was built in 861 by Caliph al-Mutawakkil to replace an earlier construction derived from the simple models of Pharaonic Egypt, at a time when the branch of the Nile situated between the island of al-Rawda and the city of al-Fustat had practically dried up. Before installing the perimeter walls, an octagonal column more than ten metres high marked with a measuring scale was fixed onto a timber plinth and attached to wooden beams embedded in the sides down the centre of a borehole ten metres square and twelve and a half metres deep. The three pointed-arched niches correspond to the channels through which the water flowed. Access was ensured down two staircases fixed to the walls and split into landings. The Kufic inscriptions constitute the most ancient example of architectural epigraphy in the country. The structure was restored in 872 by Ibn Tulun, who advertised his independence by effacing the name of the preceding 'Abbasid caliph.

Mausoleum of Sultan Barquq
Khanaqah

1410
Cairo, Egypt

The mausoleum of Sultan Barquq in Cairo is an outsized example of how the Mamluks turned their funerary monuments into an instrument of self-aggrandizement and dynastic propaganda. In the present case, the builder had no hesitation in providing a sizable *khanaqah* – or monastic complex – with a vast façade flanked by two minarets, as well as a suite of lodgings for monks and all requisite facilities. There is also a hypostyle mosque with domes on octagonal pillars and a *minbar* for Friday prayer, and a courtyard with a fountain for ablutions, in addition to the two immense mausoleums on towering cupolas, one dedicated to the sultan and the other to his wife and daughters.



Mausoleum of Sultan Barquq
Dome

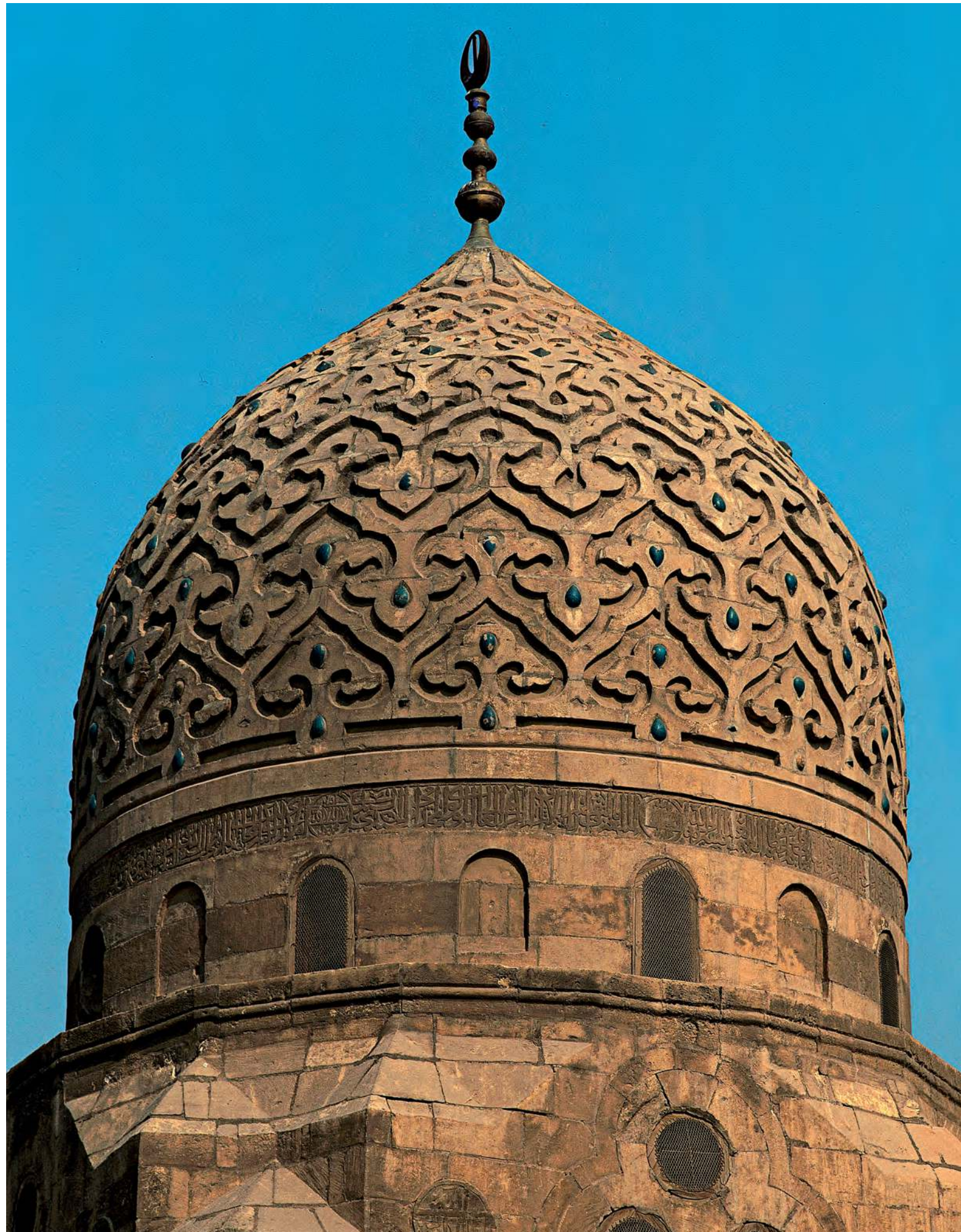
1410
Cairo, Egypt

This complex formulates a positive apotheosis of the sultan and his lineage. Their names are recalled forever in the prayers of monks who transformed the burial place into a centre of a cult. Pilgrims would come in droves to earn *baraka*, asking the sultan for favours of every kind and expressing their gratitude with prayers and offerings. The beams of light slicing through the dome exalt the motif of an exploding star in the apex of the cupola in what is an obvious reference to paradise where the spirit of the sultan now dwells.

**Necropolis of Amir Azrumuk
Northern mausoleum**

1503
Cairo, Egypt

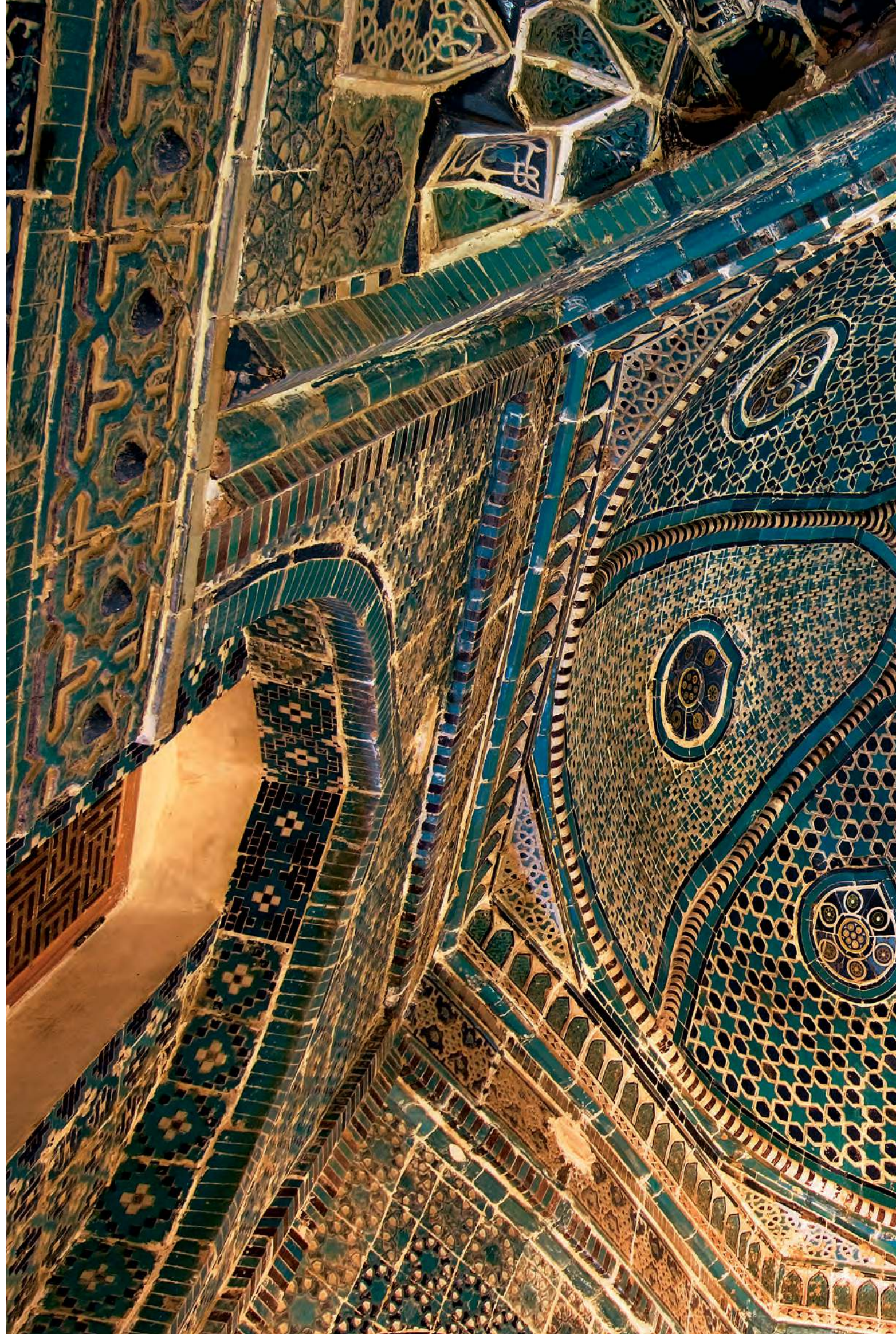
Stone domes were a characteristic of architecture in Mamluk Egypt, without equivalent in other edifices of the Islamic world. The earliest were realized at the beginning of the fourteenth century, the acme in terms of technique and aesthetic being attained towards the end of the fifteenth. With the Ottoman conquest of 1517, this costly architectural custom was abandoned as the new political regime scattered the patron classes. Among the later and most interesting domes is that of the emir Azrumuk, one of thousands of functionaries in the service of Sultan Qansuh Abu Sa'id, remarkable for a splendid decoration of floral motifs between which shimmer droplets of blue majolica, unique of their kind. The original purity of the form, inherited from the Ayyubids and expressed initially with geometric clarity, has been tempered, one might say, Iranized by the delicate transition between rectilinear and curved forms and reaffirmed in the mildly manneristic lyricism of the floral motifs. This emblematic monument, where decorative superstructure plays a role of prime importance, can be said to mark the end of the heyday of Mamluk art.



**Necropolis of Shah-e Zinda.
Mausoleum of Shadi Mulk Ata**
Dome
1372
Samarkand, Uzbekistan

The mausoleum of Shadi Mulk Ata was the first Timurid construction in Samarkand. Dedicated to the beautiful young granddaughter of Timur, who remained deeply affected by her death, an inscription notes: "In this tomb a precious pearl has been lost." The interior is a masterpiece of delicacy and affection, where, in tones of searching harmony and melancholic lyricism, a searing regret for the lost loved one is conveyed through great chromatic sensibility.

The cupola is crowned by an eight-pointed star enclosing a golden circle orbited by half a dozen other discs, the beams framing eight tear-shaped medallions dropping as from the cosmos, each a reiteration of the central motif. Mediating the acceptance of human destiny on the cosmic level and a troubling meditation on death and the inconsolable desolation of those left behind, this intimate and contemplative sepulchre is cleansed of all rhetorical gestures.





**Bibi Khanum Mosque
Courtyard**

1399–1405
Samarkand, Uzbekistan

Although embroidered with legend, one of the most revealing contemporary descriptions of the erection of this colossal ensemble was penned by the Persian court chronicler Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi: "The last Sunday in Ramadhan in the year 801 (1399 CE), at an hour and time in favourable conjunction with the stars, skilful architects and expert craftsmen laid the foundation-stone of the building. Five hundred stone carvers from Azerbaijan, Fars, and Hindustan and other places gathered to do the work, together with labourers for hewing the stone from quarries and others for hauling it to the city. Painters and experts in every art, chosen amongst the best each guild could offer, were summoned to the palace from all four corners of the earth. To transport the materials to the site, ninety-five elephants were brought from India which, with the aid of a great number of people, dragged in the enormous blocks. Surrounded by princes and emirs, Timur supervised the work in person. The ceiling of the mosque rests on 480 stone columns, each more than five metres high. The magnificent pavement is executed using artfully squared marble slabs. The height from pavement to ceiling is over seven metres. Were there no sky, the dome would deserve the first place of all, and the same might be asserted for the arch on the *iwān*, were there no Milky Way. Placed along the walls to all four sides stand a like number of minarets, their summits reach up to the sky. The sound of the great metal doors, made from an alloy of seven metals, can be heard by the faithful in every region and calls them to the house of Islam. The walls of the domed hall are lined with calligraphy in stone ... When His Highness visited the Great Mosque His Majesty expressed the opinion that the height of the gateway erected during his absence was dishonourably low. He therefore ordered it to be demolished and be replaced by a larger and taller one. Owing to such mistakes committed during construction, the architect Khodja Mahmud Dawud was taken away for interrogation." The ceramic tiles are colour painted using the technique known as *cuerda seca* in imitation of the finest *mo'arraḡ*. Like all Timur's architectural undertakings, this mosque was realized in record time, but often with poor materials and deficient techniques.

