

A RELIC FROM SAMARKAND IN THE URALS

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The accidental discovery in Ekaterinburg of a piece of carved marble fence that had originally been in the Timurid Gur-e Amir mausoleum in Samarkand initiated a fascinating exploration of the piece's significance and the history of how it arrived in the foothills of the Urals, far from its original home. The article which follows here presents the results of this research on a remarkable fragment of 15th-century Central Asian architecture.

In 2014 research fellows of the Sverdlovsk Oblast' Museum of Regional Studies (*Sverdlovskii oblastnoi kraevedcheskii muzei*), Ekaterinburg, came across an intriguing entry in the catalogue of the Urals Society of the Lovers of Scientific Knowledge (*Ural'skoe obshchestvo liubitelei estestvozananiia*, USNSF) for the year 1917. The record included a description of a rare exhibit that had been presented to the museum by General Aleksandr Evstaf'evich Baranov in 1887 and then would be on display until 1920. The description characterized the exhibit as "a piece of stone slab with bas-reliefs,

that had been originally enclosing Tamerlane's tomb at the oldest mosque in Samarkand" (*Katalog* 1887, p. 372). An examination of the museum holdings located the object, a piece of marble slab weighing 20 kg, measuring 96 x 15 x 5 cm [Fig. 1].

In order to identify the exhibit correctly and proceed with historical analysis, the museum addressed the Ural Federal University (UrFU) Central Asian Research Center (CARC). CARC is an UrFU department that has been carrying out fieldwork and research on the Central Asian region since 2010, with the Samarkand Expedition as one of its key projects. In the course of the expedition, research groups from UrFU visited Uzbekistan, examined the archaeological site of ancient Afrasiab, carried out excavations and studied the cultural heritage of Samarkand, especially its architectural monuments, including the Gur-e Amir mausoleum. Thus there was an opportunity to combine the efforts of scholars from Ekaterinburg and Samarkand to study the artefact in order to trace how it came to the Urals.

Fig. 1. The marble fence fragment from the Gur-e Amir mausoleum, obverse bottom, reverse top.

Photos courtesy of Sverdlovskii oblastnoi kraevedcheskii muzei.



The historical background begins with Russian territorial expansion into Central Asia in the 1860s. In 1865 Russian troops under the command of General Mikhail G. Cherniaev conquered Tashkent; in 1866 Khujand was occupied too, as well as, a bit later, Ura-Tiube. In 1867 these territories were included in the newly-formed Turkestan governorate (Abashin 2008, pp. 73–77). In 1868 Samarkand was also included in the same administrative unit, but not without a struggle, as Russian forces had to take refuge in the citadel and defend it against a concerted counter-attack.

Vasilii V. Vereshchagin, who became a famous Russian artist noted for his battle scenes and depictions of Central Asia, was among the citadel defenders and wrote in his memoirs:

Soldiers are scurrying to and fro in the smoke-covered ground above the Bukhara gate and exchanging lively fire with the enemy. I rushed in, saw how few were our defenders, grabbed the gun of a dead soldier lying closest to me, filled my pockets with ammunition rounds of the dead and for 8 days defended the fortress together with my comrades. This was not any kind of heroism, but simply because our garrison was already few in numbers to the extent that those released from the hospital, even if still weak, were impressed into service to increase the number of bayonets. For a healthy individual to remain idle in the circumstances was sinful and unthinkable. [Vereshchagin 1888/2011].

At the time of its conquest in 1868, the city of Samarkand was subjected to sanctions of the newly formed Turkestan governorate. The governor-general Konstantin P. von Kaufman ordered the local bazaar to be burned and, as was typical for almost any conquering force, allowed his soldiers to plunder the city. It was only later, as he established stable colonial administration in Central Asia, that von Kaufman initiated projects to study and record local culture, one of which led to the publication of the invaluable *Turkestan Album* of photographs that would include a major section on the architectural monuments, among them the Gur-e Amir.

Colonel (later General) Aleksandr Baranov was among the army officers at the taking of Samarkand [Fig. 2]. Information about his personal life is thin, but we know he was the son of an 1812 Napoleonic War veteran and general, Evstafii Baranov, was trained in the Corps of Pages, and then enrolled in the prestigious Preo-

brazhenskii Life Guard regiment. He was reassigned to the Caucasus, where he received honors for bravery in battles against the indigenous mountain people, served briefly in Poland during the 1863 uprising, and then was sent in 1865 to the Turkestan governorate. In Turkestan Baranov took part in all major military expeditions against the still independent Bukhara Khanate. In 1866 after the siege of Khojend he was promoted to major. His service in 1868 commanding the 3rd Orenburg Line battalion in a battle near Samarkand resulted in promotion to colonel. After the fall of Samarkand, Baranov proceeded together with von Kaufmann's main corps to the city of Bukhara which was also forced to capitulate. Over the course of his career, Baranov was awarded multiple orders and other military decorations of the Russian Empire, e. g. Order of St. Stanislav (First Class), Order of St. Anna (First Class), Order of St. Vladimir (Second Class, 1890), Order of White Eagle (1896), Order of St. Alexander Nevsky (1905), Golden Sword for Bravery, and Order of St. George. His promotion to the rank of Major-General came during his service on the Caucasus front in the Russo-Turkish war of 1877–1878. With his appointment to command the army's Perm' brigade in 1881, he made his home there for the last 24 years of his life. The obituary published in the local Perm' newspaper after his death on 27 December 1905 described him as "a fine man, modest and honest in the highest degree" (Baranov necrology 1906). One ought to take this into account while analyzing his stay in Turkestan.

Presumably Baranov acquired the piece of the marble fence from Tamerlane's tomb during his stay in Samarkand in summer or autumn of 1868. How he actually obtained the piece is unknown, although it is hard to imagine he simply ripped the slab away from its position in Timur's mausoleum. Nevertheless, in those days seizing this kind of "oriental souvenir" of the Islamic world was routine. Baranov might have either purchased the fence piece or found it lying in a pile of rubble and picked it up while visiting Gur-e Amir, which apparently was in a truly deplorable condition (see below). Situated not far from Timur's citadel (later destroyed), the mausoleum would have been easy for the Russian occupiers of the fortress to visit. Thus, Aleksandr Baranov, a military professional and fancier of historical artifacts, took the Gur-e Amir fence piece from Samarkand as a memento of the expedition, and until 1887 kept it in his private possession.

In 1887, while still in military service



Fig. 4. General Aleksandr Evstafievich Baranov.

Image source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7d/Baranov_Aleksandr_Evstafievich.jpg

as head of the 21st Perm Brigade, General Baranov applied to participate in the Siberian-Urals Exhibition of Science and Industry, which took place in Ekaterinburg from June to September of the same year. Organized on the initiative of USNSF members (Korepanova 2005, pp. 34–65) the exhibition included eleven sections: anthropology, geography, ethnography, education, mining industry, factories, cottage crafts, agriculture, imported items (the so-called *vvoznoi* section), a Siberian section, and the section of arts. With almost 4000 exhibitors from 32 Russian provinces, the exhibition was a significant milestone in the cultural and industrial life of the Urals region and for Russia as a whole. Moreover, it was the first large-scale exhibition in Russia that successfully combined scientific and industrial exhibits (Istoriia 2015).

Baranov was not the only participant displaying Turkestan artifacts at the exhibition. Central Asian participants included representatives from Samarkand, Verniy (Almaty), Tashkent and Pishpek (Bishkek). Even the governor-general of the Turkestan district contributed to the exhibition and presented his essays on the local natural environment. Documents relating to the exhibition now in the State Archive of the Sverdlovsk (Ekaterinburg) Region (GASO) point to intensive cooperation between the Ural region and Central Asia. It is worth noting that such interaction had a long history, going back to the Muscovite period when “Bukharan” merchants were regular visitors to the Urals and Siberia. The exhibition in 1887 was visited by a number of Samarkand merchants: Dmitrii L. Filatov, famous for his wine and cognac; Mirza Bukharin and Mirza Abdulin, purveyors of silk; and tobacconist I. M. Bolonin. Among those from Tashkent were the merchant A. G. Donskoi and Ieronim I. Krauze (Karl Hironim Krause). Krauze was a noted specialist on medicinal plants, had established a string of pharmacies in Tashkent, and would receive many

honors for his study of the natural resources of Turkestan. The ethnographic section of the exposition featured the Kirghiz people in their traditional clothing and yurts.

General Baranov was awarded the “Great Silver Medal” at the exhibition for displaying “an archaeological rarity,” the artefact which he then, on 15 September 1887, presented to USNFS (*Katalog*, p. 372). One might assume he did so with the encouragement of his wife, Ekaterina I. Lenarttsen, the daughter of Ivan I. Lenarttsen, the deputy head of the Urals mining factories association and a founding member of the Society.

According to USNFS records, the fence piece was put in a separate showcase, where it remained on display in the History Department of the Society’s museum until 1920. Then, with the whole country in the throes of Civil War, the museum was closed, its holdings abandoned, and, like a homeless orphan, relocated from one cellar to another — e. g., in the Voznesenskaia Church, which for a time in the inter-war years was home to a museum, and the Aleksandr Nevsky Cathedral, which for several decades beginning in 1961 was a repository for holdings of the regional museum. Thus the unique Central Asian bas-relief lay concealed for almost a hundred years in storage, until its re-discovery in 2014.

The first questions about the piece which demanded attention concerned its significance and authenticity. To answer them involved searching for similar carved designs which might have been preserved in the Gur-e Amir mausoleum itself or in other Samarkand museums.

The Gur-e Amir, Tamerlane’s mausoleum, is one of the outstanding monuments of Central Asian medieval architecture, listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site, and one of Uzbekistan’s most popular museums, visited by millions of tourists annually [Fig. 3]. Begun in 1403 as the burial place for Timur’s grandson,

Fig. 3. *The Gur-e Amir. (Left): Photo from the 1890s; (Right): Photo from 1999, after rebuilding of minarets.*



Image credits: (Left): Photo archive of the Institute of the History of Material Culture, Russian Academy of Sciences (St. Petersburg): Vvedenskii Collection; (Right): Courtesy of Daniel C. Waugh



Fig. 4. The grave of Tamerlane in the basement crypt of the Gur-e Amir, photographed in 1979.

Photo courtesy of Daniel C. Waugh

who had pre-deceased him, the mausoleum was not yet finished in 1405, the year of Timur's death, after which it became the family tomb. The main floor of the mausoleum contains the magnificent cenotaphs, sumptuously decorated according to local tradition, while the actual graves, as is typical for such mausolea, are below on the plainly decorated basement level [Fig. 4]. Construction continued in the 1420s when the mausoleum was widened and buildings were added adjacent to it to house pilgrims (Pugachenkova and Rempel' 1958, pp. 119–22). Ulugh Beg, Timur's grandson who ruled in Samarkand, installed as the cenotaph over Timur's grave the large block of dark green jade one sees there today and in 1447 had a carved marble fence added around the cenotaphs on the main floor. On his assassination two years later, Ulugh Beg would be buried at the feet of Timur.

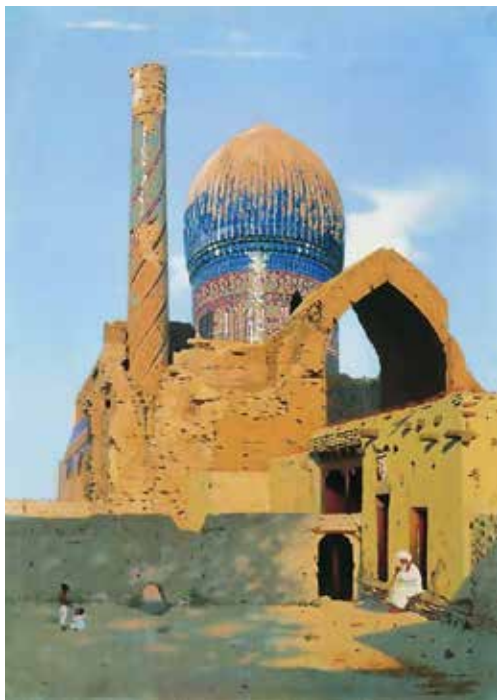


Image source: <http://veresh.ru/img/turkestan/gur-emir-mavzoley.jpg>

Between the reign of Ulugh Beg and the Russian conquest of Samarkand, control over the city passed through the hands of a succession of sovereigns, who, hypothetically, could each alter its architecture at will. The last Timurids were dethroned by Shaybani Khan in 1507, the Bukhara Khanate was established, and in 1612 Yalangtush Bahadur (1576–1656) was appointed governor in Samarkand, where he was responsible for transforming the Registan with the construction of the Shir-Dor and Tilla-Kari medreses. There is no indication he altered the Gur-e Amir. Finally, in 1740, Transoxiana was conquered by Nader Shah (1688–1747).

While the latter was famous for taking as booty the treasures of the places he conquered — and in fact, unsuccessfully, tried to abscond with the jade cenotaph over Timur's grave — there is no evidence that otherwise he changed the mausoleum. For in fact it was not only a tomb, but a sacred Islamic site as well: Timur was buried at the feet of his Sufi mentor, Mir Sayyid Baraka, and another prominent Sufi *pir*, Sayyid Umar, was buried in the mausoleum.

As attested by early photographs, the fabric of the mausoleum complex had decayed with the declining fortunes of Samarkand, but it is almost impossible to document to what extent the interior decoration had changed prior to 1868. For the state of the interior at the time of the Russian conquest (and soon thereafter), we have two key pieces of evidence.

Even though Vasilii Vereshchagin's account of his time in the city in 1868 focuses on military affairs, he also recorded interesting conversations with von Kaufman regarding antiquities. On a second trip to Central Asia in 1870, the artist apparently visited Samarkand again and sent a letter to the newspaper *Sankt-Peterburgskie vedomosti*, in which he painted an alarming picture of the sad state of the antiquities of Samarkand. He specifically mentioned Tamerlane's mausoleum and the damage to the cenotaphs, where locals could easily bribe the watchman to allow them to take away pieces of tile and rubble. It appears the artist prodded von Kaufman to salvage what remained of the original decoration, preserve it in a museum and hire local craftsmen to do some restoration based on the remains (Demin 1991, Ch. 4). Using his sketches drawn while in Central Asia but after he had re-located elsewhere, Vereshchagin painted his famous Turkestan series. A painting of his from 1890 shows the exterior of the Gur-e Amir [Fig. 5]. A drawing done for the series when he was in Munich in the

Fig. 5. Vasilii Vereshchagin's 1890 painting of the Gur-e Amir, viewed from the west.

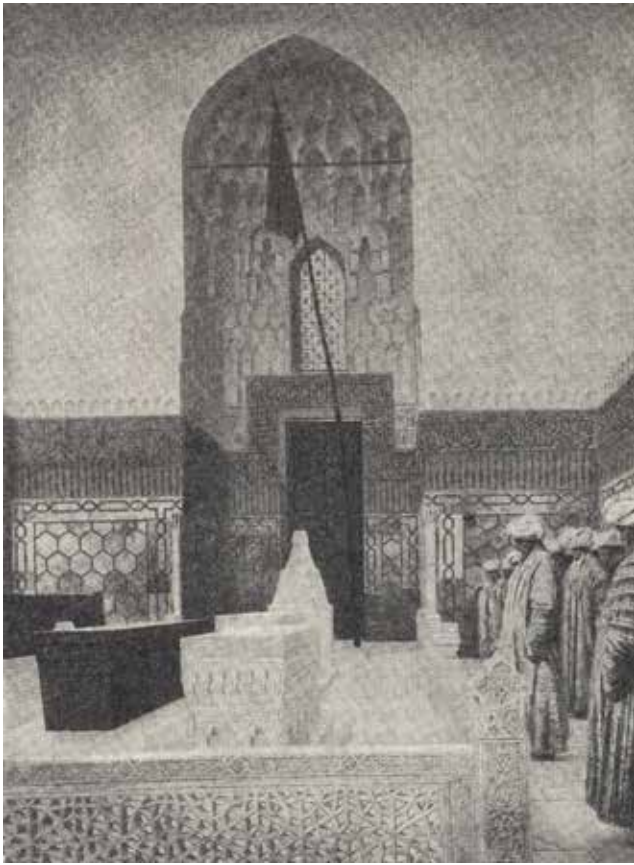


Fig. 6. Vereshchagin's 1873 drawing of the Bukhara Emir's praying in the Gur-e Amir.

early 1870s shows the interior, captioned "They pray to the Almighty at the grave of the saint" (1873) [Fig. 6]. It is an imagined scene of the Emir of Bukhara and his entourage inside the building, where they stand next to the cenotaphs on the main floor. However, the details in the picture clearly indicate it is based on the artist's first-hand observation, though perhaps with some "restoration" of detail—in it the fence around the cenotaphs seems to be intact.

Fig. 7. The photograph of a part of the fence around the cenotaphs in the Gur-e Amir in the *Turkestan Album*, Pt. 1, Vol. 2, Pl. 120.

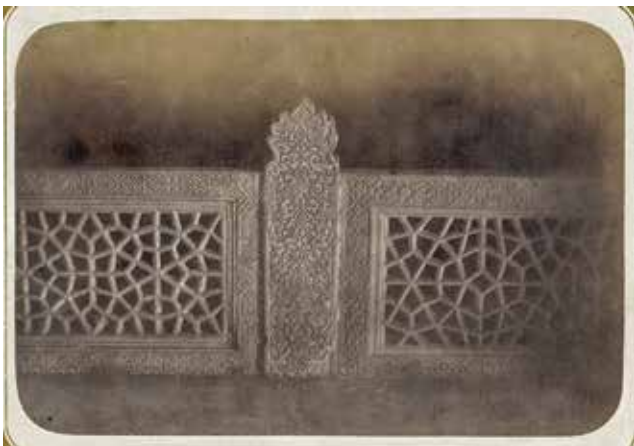


Image source: <https://memory.loc.gov/master/pnp/ppmsca/09900/09947/00297u.tif>

Vereshchagin's observations about the state of the mausoleum are confirmed in another report from 1870. Nikolai A. Maev, who later became a leading expert on the antiquities of Turkestan, published an article in the newspaper he edited, the *Turkestanskie vedomosti*, where he noted (1870, p. 11):

At one time the grave stone of Timur was surrounded by an elegant carved marble lattice fence, though now only a small piece of it has been preserved. By the order of the Governor-General [von Kaufman] the lattice fence was restored and, following the model of what had been providentially preserved, another, alabaster fence was ordered made.

A well-preserved section of the fence, presumably the one referred to by Maev, was photographed *in situ* for the famous *Turkestan Album* published in 1871-72 [Fig. 7], where the caption indicates that it is a "part of the marble lattice fence around the cenotaphs." What Maev's account does not make explicit is when the restoration commissioned by von Kaufman may have been completed. Since Vereshchagin saw the interior only in its ruined state, possibly he referred to the photograph at the time he painted his picture in 1873 showing the fence as intact. In any event, we know that by 1890, when Countess Praskov'ia Uvarova visited Samarkand, she could describe how "the tomb stones were fenced with a low carved alabaster railing" (1891, No. 12, p. 5). Interior photographs from the 1890s, one by G. A. Pankrat'ev, and another usually attributed to I. Vvedenskii [Fig. 8], show the intact

Photo from the 1890s showing the interior of the Gur-e Amir, the cenotaphs, and the fence.

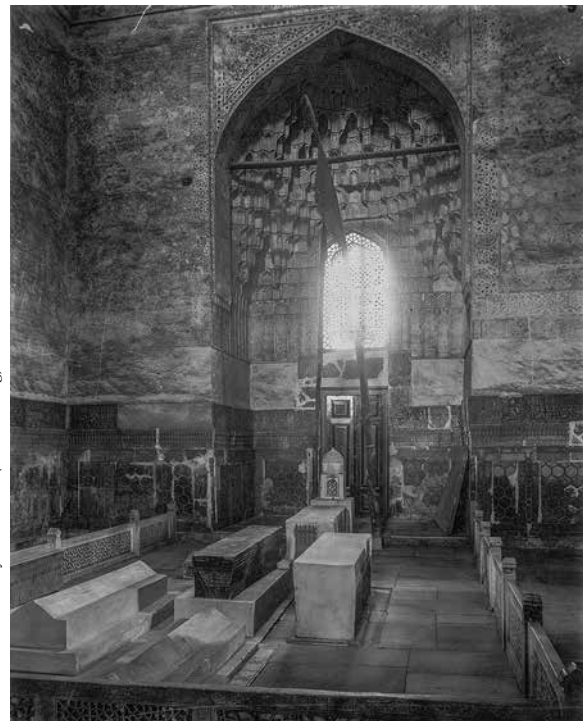


Image credit: Photo archive of the Institute for the History of Material Culture, Russian Academy of Sciences (St. Petersburg); Vvedenskii Collection

Fig. 9. A. Minenko's drawings of the Gur-e Amir lattice fence, published in 1905.



fence. An album of plates published in St. Petersburg in 1905 (edited by Nikolai I. Veselovskii) includes reproductions of the precisely drafted watercolors made *in situ* by A. Minenko showing details of the fence as it existed around the end of the 19th century [Fig. 9].

Our analysis of the piece suggests that its original position had been in the lower part of the fence. The carved floral and geometric decoration on it has analogues both in marble garden fences, numerous pieces of which have been excavated in the Chil Sutun palace garden in Samarkand, and in the carving on the Timurid cenotaphs in Gur-e Amir (Pugachenkova and Rempel' 1965, p. 73). However, the various reconstructions of the mausoleum (1890, 1916, the 1950s, extensively in 1967, and in 1996) have resulted in a major part of the original interior design having been lost. It is unclear to what degree the fence around the cenotaphs one sees there today may be a modern creation even if patterned on the presumed original [Fig. 10].

It is reasonable to conclude then, given the identity of the ornamental elements with those on other

carved pieces from the 15th century, the evidence from Vereshchagin's painting and the photograph in the *Turkestan Album*, and the fact that the primary reconstruction of Gur-e Amir occurred only some time after 1870, that the fence piece located in the Ekaterinburg museum must be an original fragment of the fence which had been in Gur-e Amir prior to the Russian conquest of Samarkand in 1868. There seems to be a very low probability that any significant reconstruction of the tomb had occurred between the middle of the 15th and middle of the 19th century, at which time Russian artists and photographers documented the deplorable condition of the building. So the age of the piece is some 570 years, and it merits being considered an example from Central Asia's architectural heritage in the age of the Timurid "Renaissance."

The news released in late October 2015 concerning the rediscovery of the piece and the conclusions based on its scholarly analysis created quite a sensation, as reflected in the publication of various popular-science articles. In November 2015 the *Sverdlovsk Oblast'*

Fig. 10. Two views of the cenotaphs and fence in the Gur-e Amir, photographed in 1979.



Photos courtesy of Daniel C. Waugh





Photo by Rustam Ganiev

Fig. 11. The Samarkand relic displayed today in the Museum of History and Archaeology, Ekaterinburg.

museum in Ekaterinburg opened a special exhibition dedicated to the relic. That exhibit then sparked a great deal of interest here and in the wider Urals region in studying the era of Tamerlane, the Turkestan expeditions and the history of the centuries-long ties between the Urals region and Central Asia. Today, the remarkable marble slab from Samarkand is on permanent display in the Museum of History and Archaeology, a branch of the *Oblast'* museum (Istoriia 2015) [Fig. 11].

Acknowledgements

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