After its independence in 1991, Uzbekistan, one of the five post-Soviet Central Asian republics, was looking for a common framework to shape the discourse on nation-building and nation-branding. The great emperor Timur (1336-1405), one of the very few mortals to give their name to an acclaimed architectural style, was branded as the epitome of Uzbek national identity. While the alluring persona of Timur played the role of a symbol, the production of meaning was created by Timurid architectural artefacts. As a result, the surviving Timurid monuments were hastily restored for the celebrations of Timur’s 660th birthday in 1996. In the period between the Uzbek Independence in 1991 and 2001, when the architectural centre of Samarkand was put on the UNESCO World Heritage List, some of the Timurid monuments were actually rebuilt, not restored. In this analysis, I discuss the epigraphic additions to two key Timurid monuments in Samarkand. The restorations are treated as a power tool used for the production and acceptance of history.

Amir Timur and the Timurid legacy

Timur (r) was a nomadic conqueror whose empire stretched from Anatolia to India in the late fourteenth century. The architectural monuments of the Timurid empire, situated mainly in present-day Uzbekistan, are regarded as masterpieces of medieval Islamic architecture. Throughout his reign, Timur utilised and exploited the cultural and artistic resources of his vast empire for the beautification of his two capitals Samarkand and Shah-i-Sabz. It was only after 1991, when the Independence of Uzbekistan was proclaimed, that articles and books on Timur started reappearing. After the break with the Soviet Union, Uzbekistan drastically rejected the Marxist-Leninist communist legacy and substituted it with the Timurid cult. In 1993 the horse statue of Amir Timur replaced the monument of Karl Marx in the heart of the Uzbek capital Tashkent. The main square of the New City – Revolution Square – was renamed Amir Timur Square. Following an initiative of the Uzbek president Karimov, UNESCO took a decision to celebrate the 660th anniversary of Amir Timur in 1996. The celebrations were crowned by the opening of the new yurt-shaped museum of Timur, erected very close to the Amir Timur Square. Further, the international conference Amir Temur and His Place in World History took place in Tashkent on 23-26 October 1996. In his opening speech, president Karimov said: ‘Amir Temur became part of world history not only as an outstanding military leader, but also as the speech, president Karimov said: ‘Amir Temur became part of world history not only as an outstanding military leader, but also as the architect and statesman who had created a powerful prosperous state; he transformed his capital – Samarkand – into one of the cultural and scientific centres of the world. Magnificent monuments of architecture, the true pearls of folk arts, craftsmanship and culture, remain to be perfect decorations of our cities and towns.” The powerful personality of Timur and his megalomaniac architectural ambitions, fostering state legitimation, have made him a popular figure among post-Soviet political elites. Following the trend to revise the national historiography in Central Asia, the Timurid cult has likewise been used for new historical identification in the post-Soviet era.

What happened to the Timurid monuments?

The restorations of Timurid monuments had already begun in the Soviet period. As early as the 1950s, Uzbekistan was portrayed as the cradle of cultured socialism across Central Asia. The Timurid architectural legacy was used to sustain these claims during the Khrushchev era (1953-1964) and the Brezhnev era (1964-1982). International delegations and flocks of tourists from neighbouring Soviet republics attested their socialist solidarity by paying tribute to the Timurid heritage until the late 1980s. The ruins of Timurid mosques, mausoleums and Islamic schools (madrasas) in the Uzbek cities of Samarkand, Shah-i-Sabz and Bukhara were extensively studied by the Soviet scholars. Timurid architecture is used to boost the Uzbek population’s sense of belonging and pride throughout the construction of an ethno-national identity.

The Newsletter | No. 64 | Summer 2013

Elena Paskaleva

Epigraphic restorations of Timurid architectural heritage

The Bibi Khanum Mosque (fig. 1) was the most ambitious architectural project of the Timurid period. The building was conceived as the first Islamic monument with three domed sanctuaries – the main one with the prayer niche (mihrab) to the west and two smaller ones to the north and to the south. The Bibi Khanum Mosque was comprehensively studied by Ratia in the 1940s. Ratia drew up the first restoration plans based on its ruins and produced reconstruction watercolours in his book published in 1950. According to his drawings, however, the main sanctuary facade stood higher than the dome, which conflicts with Timur’s fifteenth century historiographer Ya’qub’s exclamation: “The dome would rank supreme were it not for the sky itself, and so would the arch of the iwān were it not for the Milky Way.” Furthermore, in the earliest photographs of Samarkand, taken by Kozlovsky (1890s), Vedensky (1894-1897) and Prokudin-Gorsky (1907), the latter after the devastating earthquake in 1897, the dome was indeed higher than the arch of the iwan. Given the giant proportions of the Bibi Khanum sanctuary, the dome was undoubtedly meant to surpass the height of the smaller side mosques and be visible above all other buildings. However, the restorations undertaken during the Soviet and post-Soviet period dramatically changed this concept.

The renowned Soviet archaeologist and architect Pugachenkova finalized the restoration plans for the Bibi Khanum Mosque at the beginning of the 1990s. Further archaeological research was performed by Mankovskaya in 1967. The subsequent restoration project in the 1990s was led by the architect Rukov, Asanov was the construction engineer. By the end of the 1990s the main sanctuary and the two side mosques had been completely rebuilt and their epigraphic programmes were anew executed. Islamic epigraphic programmes can be regarded as architectural discourses that reflect the contemporary social, political and religious contexts. Unfortunately, during the modern colonial restorations in Samarkand, some epigraphic programmes of key Timurid monuments were completely redesigned.

Given the giant proportions of the Bibi Khanum sanctuary, the dome was undoubtedly meant to surpass the height of the smaller side mosques and be visible above all other buildings. However, the restorations undertaken during the Soviet and post-Soviet period dramatically changed this concept.

Fig. 1 (small): Bibi Khanum Mosque, Samarkand, present view after restorations 1991-1996.

Fig. 2 (main image): Inscription main sanctuary Bibi Khanum Mosque, present view after restorations.
It is very interesting to note that exactly the same text can be found above the entrance to the Gok Gunbad Mosque in Shah-i Sabz, initially commissioned by Timur’s grandson Ulugh Beg (1432-1468) and rebuilt after 1901. Another example is the main sanctuary of the Shaybandi Kalan Mosque in Bukhara (completed around 1514), the Surat Al-Baqarah sanctuary inscription was only added after 1987 (fig. 3 and 4). The present Koranic epigraphy of the exterior and interior of Bibi Khanum, Gok Gunbad and other Timurid monuments, was designed by the Uzbek calligrapher Saliev. It might be possible that during the restoration campaigns similar calligraphic templates were reused for these three completely different monuments stemming from three consecutive centuries.

In analogous restoration campaigns, inscriptions were added to the main entrance of the Timurid dynastic mausoleum Guri Amir. Again, the earliest photographs of the gateway by Vvedensky (1864-1867) and Prokudin-Gorsky (1911) (fig. 5) reveal only the damaged muqarnas vault. Very detailed drawings of this vault were also published in a lavishly illustrated Russian imperial edition on Guri Amir (1909). In 1943 the Uzbek government took a decision to restore the Guri Amir ensemble, consisting of Timur’s mausoleum to the south, a madrasa to the east and a Sufi lodge (khanaqah) to the west. At the beginning of the 1950s the whole courtyard was refurbished under the architectural guidance of Notkin. Although the main efforts went into the preservation of the original architectural fabric of the buildings was considerably damaged by several devastating earthquakes and military activity, it is impossible to reconstruct with absolute certainty the original architecture of these monuments. Furthermore, there are no surviving plans or drawings that might shed more light on their original design. This is why, the earliest photographs and lithographs, from the second half of the nineteenth century, could be regarded as objective evidence revealing the state of the Timurid monuments prior to their subsequent restorations by the Soviet and post-Soviet elites.

Why were the inscriptions added?
I suspect that the artistic reasons were overshadowed by a political move to manifest the process of Uzbek nation-building initiated after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Both texts transcribed above underline the concept of a nation. After the Uzbek Independence in 1991, the Timurid myth became the key to the process of Uzbek state formation. The Turkic steppe conqueror Timur, previously ‘Uzbekified’, became the undisputed national hero. Throughout the last two decades, Timur has enjoyed a mass appeal among the Uzbek general public in a predominantly Muslim nation with nomadic roots. Timurid architecture, in turn, is used to boost the Uzbek population’s sense of belonging and pride throughout the construction of an ethno-national identity.

Since Independence, the Uzbek government has been using the Timurid heritage for state-branding. Uzbekistan is presented to the world as the cradle of Timurid civilization and as an important cultural hub along the Silk Road. The Timurid monuments in Samarqand and Shah-i Sabz are depicted on all state-issued tourist brochures and projected onto large screens during state-sponsored Uzbek cultural events across Europe and the US. The authenticity of these monuments is not questioned. The legitimacy of their exquisite decoration and epigraphic programmes are branded as perfectly preserved Uzbek architectural heritage.

Elena Paskaleva works on architectural heritage in Central Asia. At present she is an affiliated post-doctoral fellow at the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) in Leiden. (elpask@gmail.com)

All images taken by the author (2006), unless otherwise specified.

Notes
1 Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan.
2 Sh. E. Ratiia. 1950.
3 In 1426-1427 Yazdi completed the biography of Timur.
4 A large vaulted hall with an arch opening on one side, usually overlooking a rectangular courtyard.
6 A system of projecting niches used for zones of transition and as an important cultural hub along the Silk Road.
8  Ibid., p. 59.

Fig. 3 (left): Sanctuary Kalan Mosque, Bukhara, inscription main sanctuary after restorations.
Fig. 4 (right): Sanctuary Kalan Mosque, Bukhara, main sanctuary prior to epigraphic restorations 1980s (Aga Khan archive).
Fig. 5 (left): Entrance portal Guri Amir, photograph by Prokudin-Gorsky 1911. (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LOT 10338, no. 92).
Fig. 6 (top right): Entrance portal Guri Amir after restorations in the 1950s.
Fig. 7 (below right): Entrance portal Guri Amir, after epigraphic restorations. (Courtesy creative commons Flickr).