The Resilience of the Friday Mosque: The Case of Herat

In the course of the fifteenth century metropolitan centers in the Timurid and Turkmen realms underwent astonishing growth. The old urban cores were ringed by new suburbs. Water facilities expanded to accommodate the vast garden estates that had been growing up in these previously open spaces. Suburbs with their own quarter infrastructures rapidly became integral parts of the cities as population pressure pushed out from the old cores. Despite the sprawling expanse of these enlarged metropoles, however, the old city core continued to show remarkable vitality.

To some extent the ability of the old commercial centers to survive was due to the inclusion in their very hearts of the cities' first Friday mosques. By virtue of its very age and often its beauty, the old mosque in each city was held in special esteem by the townspeople, regardless of how many new and more fashionable mosques made their appearance in its suburbs. Archaeological studies of the great mosques of Isfahan, Yazd, Shiraz, Kirman, and other cities all demonstrate that, despite political changes, fluctuations in the economy, and even ethnic transformations of the whole urban population, the life of the early Friday mosque was assured. In fact, the history of a city's Friday mosque is often a microcosm of the history of the city, reflecting in its periods of decay and rejuvenation the fate of the town at large.

The history of the Friday mosque of Herat illustrates well this capacity for survival. It is situated in the northeast quarter of the city, within the original walls. It did not stand in the physical center of the city, but was easily reached from the north and east branches of the bazaars which did intersect at the center (fig. 1). The most recent testimony to the importance of the old mosque was the renovation work begun in 1944. It unfortunately destroyed much of the original character of the mosque. The work of contemporary restorers contrasts sharply with the extraordinary pains that had been taken by all previous benefactors who had repaired the mosque over the past nine hundred years to preserve its original character — and even actual parts of the early structure — despite the difficulties that this often posed.

The Herat mosque was founded in the second half of the eleventh century by the vizier of Sultan Tekish, Shams al-Din Mas'ud Haravi.1 It had a wooden roof and covered an area considerably smaller than the plot its successor would occupy. The mosque was almost completely destroyed by an earthquake in Jumada I 495/February-March 1102.2 People were so thankful that the collapse had occurred at night when no one was in the mosque that they immediately began its repair the next day, working in shifts around the clock.

The new mosque fell prey to fire a century later in the time of the Ghurid sultans. In 597/1200-01, Sultan Ghiyath al-Din Muhammad b. Sâm initiated the construction of a new mosque which incorporated into it the very mosque that had burned down, as well as additional properties. Not only did he rebuild the mosque on its former site, but he also respected the original westerly orientation that reflected its Hanafite tradition. The texts emphasize that Ghiyath al-Din was himself Shafi'i and built the mosque for the use of the Shafi'ites, who favored the southern orientation for the qibla.3 The new mosque was built entirely of brick. The sanctuary was covered by a large brick dome behind an iwan. There were three iwans on the axes of a large courtyard. Outside the mosque, on the north, Ghiyath al-Din Muhammad built a domed mausoleum in which he was subsequently buried, in Jumada I 599/February 1203.4 The inscriptions in the mausoleum have been studied from photographs taken before its unfortunate demolition in the 1940s. The mosque was not quite finished at the time of the
founder’s death and was completed only two years later by his son, Sultan Ghiyāth al-Dīn Maḥmūd.

It is this very mosque, now over seven hundred years old, that remains the spiritual center of the city of Herat. Although elements of the interior (such as piers, arches, and vaults) have been replaced at various times, the dimensions and general configuration of the mosque have survived. The old Ghurid portal on the southeast, until 1964 covered by Timurid revetments, has inscriptions naming the Ghurid sultan and the date, Ramadan 597/June–July 1201. The portal shows that the Ghurid mosque extended at least this far east. The Ghurid plaster inscriptions of the sanctuary iwan near the mihrab have always remained in view, despite the many renovations of the following two centuries. These also contain the name of the Ghurid sultan and indicate the western limits of the Ghurid mosque.6

To what extent the grid pattern of square piers in the rest of the mosque belongs to the Ghurid period or to a later one is not clear. The mosque fell into disrepair, and in 720/1320–21 the south and east iwans were rebuilt. We are told that nothing remained of the piers and domes of the covered halls, which all had to be restored “stronger and better than before.” The mausoleum was also repaired and the entire mosque redecorated. The Kurt ruler Ghiyāth al-Dīn Muḥammad at this time constructed a madrasa, the Ghiyāthiyā, along the north side of the mosque.7

Once again fate dealt harshly with the venerable mosque. In 765/1364, a devastating earth-quake destroyed most of the buildings in Herat. In the mosque the vault of the sanctuary (maqsūra), “to which there was no equal in any city,” fell. Only its piers remained. The Kurt ruler of Herat, Muʿizz al-Dīn Ḥusayn, repaired it and also added to it the “new khanqah.” In 771/1369–70 he himself was buried in the mausoleum.8 In 775/1373–74 the last Kurt ruler donated a bronze sharbat basin, which still stands in the courtyard.9

Within ten years the armies of Timūr stood at the gates of Herat. The city fell, and the dynasty of the Kūrs was extinguished. In 1397 Timūr’s son, Shāh Rukh, became ruler of Herat and made it his provincial capital. The rebuilding of the city began in 1410. Shāh Rukh focused attention on the old city core, reconstructing the bazaar in brick. In 1417 the foundation of a new Friday mosque, outside the city core in the “mūsalla,” by his wife, Gawhar Shād, signaled the beginning of the extensive development of suburbs toward the northwest and, later, to the north and northeast.10

Yet the old mosque did not lose its magnetism. In the 1440s it was again repaired, this time not by the monarch, but by one of his most prominent amirs, Jalāl al-Dīn Firūzshāh (d. 848/1444–45).11 These repairs must have been superficial, for the building did not survive the troubled times that followed. A period of great political instability and the inevitable weakening of the economy intervened between the death of Shāh Rukh in 1447 and the emergence of Sultan Ḥusayn Bayqara as heir to the dwindling Timurid state in 1470. Severe natural disasters, such as earth-
quakes and floods, coupled with neglect and normal wear and tear, must have reduced the structure to a pitiful state, if we are to judge from Khwandamir’s touching description of the mosque prior to its next repair:

In the days . . . of Sultan Husain the vault [iṭāq] of its sanctuary [maqṣūra] was completely broken and the sides of its dome [ṣubba] were ruined. Its walls of great height were like bowing worshipers with crooked backs. The remains of its lofty piers were like men kneeling, their heads suppliant on the ground. The white plaster from its exalted roof had been removed. Black, moist dirt had gathered on its precious floor. When word of this state reached ‘Ali Shir [he decided to repair it].

‘Ali Shir, an astute, highly cultured aristocrat, served Sultan Husain as his closest adviser for over twenty-five years (1472–1501). ‘Ali Shir was the center of literary circles and was himself an author, known for his promotion of Chagatai Turkish. A beneficent patron of the arts of the book and architecture, his most important foundation was the Khalasiyya kulliyya in the suburbs of Herat, a comprehensive religious and social-welfare complex which included a mosque, madrasa, khanaqah, library, and hospital.

The Makārim al-akhlāq mentions over one hundred thirty-five monuments built or repaired by ‘Ali Shir, and much of this work could come under the category of urban renewal. ‘Ali Shir spread his funds by spending them, for the most part, on repairs of old buildings, rather than on the founding of new ones. Many of the new foundations he did finance, other than the kulliyya in Herat, were built in smaller towns or along the highways. They include numerous hostels for travelers, as well as dams and cisterns. None of those that remain shows the kind of expensive tile decoration that seems to have been lavished by him on the kulliyya or the Friday mosque of Herat, which must have been exceptions.

Despite ‘Ali Shir’s willingness to spare no
expense in decorating the mosque, Khwāndāmir’s commentary demonstrates his dedication to preserving its original character. Khwāndāmir had this to say, for example, about the Ghurid mosque’s domed sanctuary, which was on the verge of collapse:

In Ramadan 903 [April–May 1498] first they attempted to put the dome back on the sanctuary iwan [ṣūfa-i maqṣūra] which had been broken. After a while, in consultation with the most skillful builders and engineers [mi‘mārān va muhandisān] about straightening the building, because they could not make it stronger, they advised that two lofty iwans be constructed on the two sides of the sanctuary iwan and in that way to strengthen the large vault [jaq].

Not until he had consulted teams of engineers and architects did ‘Ali Shīr decide that the original dome of the sanctuary had to go. The decision was made to re-create the sanctuary as an extended iwan, as shown in the plan drawn in 1944 by Stuckert (fig. 2). In this plan the piers of the sanctuary iwan fail to align, perhaps an indication of the degree to which the piers had shifted through the deformation of the dome before its demolition. Despite this major alteration of the sanctuary, ‘Ali Shīr preserved the Ghurid plaster inscriptions under the arches nearest the qibla wall. They have never been concealed.

‘Ali Shīr was no armchair philanthropist. He took a personal interest in his building projects, and the repair of the old mosque was especially dear to his heart. As Khwāndāmir indicates, he often participated as a common laborer and lifted the morale of the workmen by throwing parties for them.

Every day he [‘Ali Shīr] came himself and most days his hem was tucked up into his belt like the other laborers [mużdārā], giving bricks into the hands of the ustad and working. Every few days the builders [mi‘mārān], ustadās, and artisans [pišhavādan] would dress up in fine garments and be entertained there. No doubt, divine favor and princely help facilitated the completion of a work, normally taking three to four years, in only six months. The height of the sanctuary iwan even surpassed the amir’s orders by from 6 to 7 cubits. When the basic work was done and the foundations secured, poets composed verses on the date...[verses by Zameh dated 904]. After this work was completed they proceeded with the decoration. Tile cutters [kāshī tārāsh], painters [naqqāsh], and master stoncutters [sang tārāsh], working at great speed, completed in one year decoration that would normally have taken five.

And when the vaults and arcades were decorated with “Muslim” and “Chinese” motifs and the surfaces of the iwans with wondrous and marvelous inventions, it was exceptional compared with other religious establishments.

The lofty roofs of its domes were like nicely worked surfaces, accepting [reflecting] light. The dadoes [żār] of its exquisite iwans were of stone...

A minbar of nine steps was carved from a solid block of marble brought from Khwāf, the work of the Ustad Shams al-Dīn. The mosque had six doors. It was completed by 14 Sha‘bān 905 (1500). ‘Ali Shīr so inspired his workmen that a labor which would normally have required a much longer time was completed at unprecedented speed.

In addition to its commentary on the personality of ‘Ali Shīr, the passage from Khwāndāmir provides important information on building procedures and crafts and on the mosque itself. We are rarely told how long it took to complete a project. Here we learn that the extensive repair of a large building could take from three to four years for the structure, and five years to prepare and apply the revetments of tile and carved stone. The Friday mosque of Gawhar Shād in the musalla of

Herat, according to its inscriptions, took sixteen years to build and at least another four years to complete the revetments.\(^1\)

To what extent does the mosque, as recorded in the photographs and plan of Stuckert, reflect the state of the building in 1500? Khwāndamīr includes an enumeration of the domes, columns, and arches in the mosque, as well as many of its more important dimensions.\(^2\) These specifications are summarized in the table below. The principal source used is the British Library manuscript of Khwāndamīr’s Khulāṣat al-akhbār.\(^3\) Variants that appear in other editions are also given. It is instructive to compare these dimensions, which are given in dirī\(^4\) [sic], or cubits, with the actual dimensions of the mosque. This has been done using the unpublished notations of Eric Schroeder, which, although incomplete, are the most accurate measurements of the mosque,\(^5\) together with approximate measurements taken from Stuckert’s published sketch plan. The dimensions in cubits have been converted into meters using the equivalency of 1 dirī = .717 m.\(^6\) This figure was obtained by choosing three features that were not likely to have altered over the centuries and that could be measured most accurately from the sketch plan: the width and length of the courtyard, and the side of the mausoleum. Column A of the table gives the specifications in dirī. Column B translates the specifications into meters. In column C, these figures are compared with the actual measurements approximated from the sketch plan, and the differences are shown in column D. In characterizing the discrepancy it has been necessary to ignore the overall length and width of the building as reported by Khwāndamīr because the outer limits of the building have shrank over the centuries. Furthermore, because the exterior was irregular, the measurements would have varied depending on the position of the axis which was measured. Also omitted from consideration is the figure given for the width of the iwan-i maqṣūra. In T’imādī’s edition the figure is certainly incorrect, and in the British Library manuscript the discrepancy is far too great, considering that this measurement could not have undergone much change if the iwan itself were not drastically altered, as it was not.

With the above exceptions, then, the discrepancy between the specifications according to the text and the measurements of the actual features ranges between just under a meter (0.9 m) and zero. Average discrepancy is 30 cm. We may therefore conclude that the building which could be seen as late as 1943 preserved in its basic dimensions and plan the mosque as renovated by ‘Alī Shīr.

The six portals of the mosque mentioned by Khwāndamīr can be identified on Stuckert’s plan. In the recent renovations these portals have

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**TABLE 1. The Friday Mosque of Herat: Specifications**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A Ethnographic Data</th>
<th>B Ethnographic Data</th>
<th>C Ethnographic Data</th>
<th>D Ethnographic Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Khwāndamīr Text</strong></td>
<td><strong>Khwāndamīr Text</strong></td>
<td><strong>Actual Measure</strong></td>
<td><strong>Column C minus</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>(in dirī?)</strong></td>
<td><strong>(in meters: 1 dirū = .717 m)</strong></td>
<td><strong>(in meters: approximate)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Column B</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length (interior)</td>
<td>254(^1)</td>
<td>182.1</td>
<td>172.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Width (along N–S</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>107.6</td>
<td>105.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>axis of court)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courtyard: length</td>
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<td>81.7</td>
<td>81.6</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.1</td>
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<td>width</td>
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<td>60.2</td>
<td>60.4</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>+.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Iwans</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maqsūra: length</td>
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<td>14.3</td>
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<td>-2.7</td>
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<td>arch span</td>
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<td>18.6</td>
<td>18.3</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North: length</td>
<td>23(^4)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>11.2</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>East: length</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>19.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>width</td>
<td>15</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>South: length</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>16.0</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>width</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>9.3</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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1. 250 dirū (T’imādī, ed., Khulāṣat al-akhbār).
2. 3 dirū (sic; ibid.).
3. none (ibid.).
4. 29 dirū (Belenitskī, “Istoricheskaia topografia”).
yielded to a major monumental portal built on the east exterior. The irregular disposition of the doors indicated on the plan probably reflects a pre-Timurid street pattern.

The variation in the sizes of the four iwans correspond to the dimensions given by Khwândamîr. The rest of the mosque was laid out in bays marked by simple piers, conforming for the most part to a uniform grid. According to Khwândamîr, the number of piers was 440, slightly more than what is indicated in the plan. He also reports 408 cupolas, about 30 more than is possible in the plan. It is likely that one or two rows of bays have disappeared from the eastern extremity since the Timurid renovations.

The Timurid façade on the west side of the courtyard in front of the sanctuary was a triple-arch configuration, such as is found in the mosque at Ziyaratgâh.24 In Stuckert's photographs the central arch, which rose from the massive pylons on the courtyard, has disappeared. If reconstructed, it would have extended between 10 and 15 m higher to accommodate an arch of a span of about 17.5 m. The arch shown in Stuckert's photographs originally appeared in the rear wall of the iwan of the great arch, and was reconstructed once the iwan fell. Khwândamîr confirms that the sanctuary iwan was exceedingly high. The sanctuary itself must appear much as it did in 'Alî Shir's days, a protracted iwan supported by walls pierced by arched openings of various sizes.

Except for the qibla wall, the sides of the courtyard were bordered by arcades flanking the iwans. One variant of the Khwândamîr text mentions 30 arches (riwaq), two more than shown in the plan. Other manuscripts give much larger numbers (such as 130 arches), suggesting double- or triple-story arcades around the court. Stuckert's photographs show an open arcade built above the arches of the courtyard, but it does not appear to be integral with them. Almost nothing of the original Timurid revetments remain in the courtyard façade. Most have been replaced by modern tile.

The history of the mosque of Herat raises two questions which go beyond the interest of the chronology of the specific monument. The texts demonstrate that despite political changes and unfavorable economic conditions the mosque was continually maintained. The rulers of Herat seem to have felt that its upkeep was not only a responsibility, but also a priority. This attitude toward the Friday mosque is in contrast to the practice common among the patron classes to disdain repairing monuments which they did not themselves found. 'Alî Shir's willingness to expend great sums on restoration was exceptional. People preferred to build their own self-aggrandizing private foundations, such as madrasas, khanaqahs, and smaller mosques, rather than restore someone else's. It was the public nature of the Friday mosque that gave it a special place in the hearts of rulers and people alike.

The second question concerns the repairs themselves. Although the mosque of Herat was often on the verge of total collapse, none of its benefactors gave serious thought to tearing down the whole building and starting anew. It is apparent from the study of the texts, inscriptions, and standing remains that the Friday mosque of Herat changed very little over seven centuries, despite many renovations. The Kurb rulers and early Timurid restorers left much of the Ghurid decoration intact and preserved the original dimensions of the mosque. The rare passage from Khwândamîr demonstrates 'Alî Shir's dedication to retaining the original form of the mosque, including its dome. When this was not possible, he insisted on preserving the Ghurid plaster inscriptions nearest the qibla wall. Again, this conservatism with regard to a Friday mosque must be explained, in part, by its public nature. The antiquity of the early structures gave to the building a certain sanctity. Theoretically speaking, the closer something was to the time of the Prophet, the better or holier it was considered to be. It therefore behooved the restorers to retain as much of the old mosque as possible and to treat the parts they could preserve as relics, as one would do for any object associated with the early years of Islam. Herat was not unique in this respect. The first mihrab of the mosque of Qayrawan is believed to have been preserved behind the one built in the ninth century.25 The Masjid-i 'Atif of Shiraz retained fragments of its ninth-century plaster mihrab, despite many renovations, until as late as the 1930s.26 Although the area of the mihrab was considered particularly sacred and therefore suitable for preservation, it is clear from the texts relating to the mosque of Herat that the whole mosque was deemed worthy of preserving, whenever that was possible.

These conclusions are perhaps relevant to urban renewal efforts in the Islamic world today. In certain cases, particularly in the case of the Friday mosque, the preservation of medieval forms and perhaps even the reproduction of those forms in modern materials correspond to a longstanding and well-favored tradition.

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TORONTO, ONTARIO
NOTES


3. Hāfīz-i Abru, Jughrafiyya, (see above, n. 1); the Hanafite tradition was already well established in Khurasan and Transoxiana in the eleventh century (David King, “Al-Bazdawī on the Qibla in Early Islamic Transoxania,” forthcoming). Despite the Ghurid patron’s Sha’īfite leanings, the mosque seems to have been rebuilt following the disposition of the earlier, Hanafite mosque. The mosque of Ziyāratgāh south of Herat (see below, n. 24) is also oriented due west and is said by Zamchī to follow the “rule of Egypt” (hukm-i Mīr, in Rawdat al-jannāt, 2:255). According to King, “the precise meaning of [this term] is unclear, not least because in Egypt the most traditional orientation of the qibla was toward the rising sun at midwinter, so that one would expect on the basis of Zamchī a qibla for Herat toward the setting sun at midwinter.” I am most grateful to Dr. King for this and other helpful suggestions.

4. The inscriptions in the mausoleum have been studied from the photographs that were taken before the building’s unfortunate demolition in the 1940s. On the architecture of the mausoleum and its date, see Donald Wilber, The Architecture of Islamic Iran: The Il Khānīd Period (Princeton, 1955), pp. 136–37, fig. 24, pls. 63–65; Ruedi Stuckert and Bernt Glätzer, “Die Grosse Moschee und das Mausoleum Ghiyât ud-Din in Herat,” Afghanistan Journal 7, no. 1 (1980): 6–22; Zamchī, Rawdat al-jannāt, 1:33.


11. Khwāndamīr, Khulāṣaṭ al-akhhār, p. 10; ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Samargandi, Maṭla‘-i su‘dayn, ed. Muhammad Sha‘īf (Lahore, 1946), 2:839–41. At this stage the mosque apparently still had a dome behind the iwān-i maqsūra. Both iwan and dome were mentioned in the late thirteenth- or early fourteenth-century poem of Amir Khursaw Dīhlavī (Zamchī, Rawdat al-jannāt, 1:30). Zamchī himself does not mention a dome in this text, but does remark that the Ghurid inscription “on the iwān-i maqsūra” was exactly three hundred years old.

12. Khulāṣaṭ al-akhhār, p. 10; this passage and further excerpts which follow are also found in Khwāndamīr’s special treatise on ‘Alī Shīr, Makārim al-akhhāq, ed. T. Gandjei (facsimile ed.; Gibb Memorial Series, n.s. vol. 28) (Cambridge, 1979), fols. 148v–150v.


14. See chaps. 2, 5, and 6 in Khwāndamīr’s treatise on ‘Alī Shīr (above n. 12).

15. Khulāṣaṭ al-akhhār, p. 10. Boleintskii seems to have found this text in a ms. of Zamchī (1), but gave it the opposite interpretation; that is, that the architects first repaired the dome. If the dome had been retained in this restoration, it is difficult to explain why Khwāndamīr would not have given its dimensions, along with all the others (see table).


18. Ibid.; an inscription bearing the date 905 appears in a photograph by Eric Schroeder, kindly brought to my attention by Terry Allen.


20. Khulāṣaṭ al-akhhār, p. 13. Khwāndamīr records that there were 408 domes, 440 piers, and 130 arcades; variant editions list 444 or 44 piers and 30 arcades.

21. I have used the British Library ms. Or.1292 and am grateful to Bernard O’Kane for making a copy of it available to me. I have included figures from the Ilīmād edition and from Boleintskii (see n. 10) when they differed from those in the British Library ms.

22. The existence of this plan was discovered by Michele DeAngelis of the Islamic Department, Fogg Art
Museum, and generously provided for use in these calculations.

23. The *dhir* of .717 m is close to the *gaz* of Timurid monuments in Khurasan and Transoxiana, such as the Aq Saray at Shahrisabz (.73 m), the Bibi Khanom mosque at Samarqand (.73 m), and the mosque at Anau (.70 m). On the Central Asian *gaz*, see G. A. Pugachenkova, “Arkheitekturnye zametki: II. O sredneaziatskom arkheitekturnom giaze,” *Isskusstvo zodchikh Uzbekistana* I (1962): 190–94. It is also close to the cubit of the Caliph 'Umar (.728 m), according to *EI*, 2d ed., s.v. “Dhirā’.”


25. In fact Ziyādat Allāh wanted to demolish the mihrab but acceded to public pressure to preserve it (K. A. C. Creswell, citing al-Bakrī, in *A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture* [Penguin Books, 1958], p. 249).