



ARG-E 'ALĪŠĀH

ARG-E 'ALĪŠĀH, the remains of the Masjed-e 'Alīšāh, a colossal mosque built in Tabrīz at the behest of Tāj-al-dīn 'Alīšāh Jīlānī, the vizier of the Mongol Ilkhans Oljāytū Ḳodābanda and his son, Abū Sa'īd Bahādor Khan. Today it is the most prominent historical monument in the city. It was completed before 722/1322 beside the gate of Oljāytū, beyond the Nārmīān quarter. The main unit was oriented toward the *qebla* with either a single wide and lofty *ayvān* or, more probably, two *ayvāns*, one above the other, framed by a minaret on either side. The construction material was entirely baked brick. Only the side and *qebla* walls have survived; the side walls average 26 m high and 10.4 m thick; on the evidence of the ruins, the *mehṛāb* chamber must have been approximately 66 m high, while the vault spanned 30.15 m, exceeding the width of the largest medieval arches in Europe.

A contemporary account by Ḥamdallāh Mostawfī (*Nozhat al-qolūb*, ed. M. Dabīrsīāqī, Tehran, 1336 Š./1957, p. 87) describes “a large congregational mosque with a courtyard measuring 250 x 250 *gaz* (1 *gaz* = approx. 1 m) and a hall (*ṣoffa*) larger than the *Ayvān-e Kesrā* at Madā'en. Much marble and many sorts of devices were used in it, but because of haste in its construction, it soon collapsed” (i.e., soon after 727/1326-27; the damage may also have been due to earthquake, water seepage, or shifting foundations). Some repairs must have been carried out in the next few years, however, because the Golden Horde prince Jānī Beg took part in a Friday prayer at this mosque after his invasion of Tabrīz in 757/1356.

The earliest description of the Masjed-e 'Alīšāh, written in 722/1322 by a young



aide-de-camp in the Egyptian embassy to Abū Sa'īd's court, gives some idea of the mosque's original splendor (Badr-al-dīn Maḥmūd 'Aynī, *'Eqd al-ḵomān fī ta'rīk ahl al-zamān* IV [unpublished manuscripts in diverse collections]; V. Tiesenhausen, "Brief Notes and Information on the Mosque of Alishah in Tabrīz" [in Russian], *Zapiski vostochnogo otdeleniya imperatorskogo arkhelogicheskogo obshchestva* I, 1886, p. 116). There was an entrance courtyard measuring 250 x 200 *derā'* (ca. 285 x 288 m) with a large square pool in the center. The pool featured a central platform bearing an octagonal fountain flanked by stone lions with water pouring from their mouths. Inside the sanctuary *ayvān* (*šabestān*), two bronze pillars plated with silver and gold supported the pointed vault, and the area was illuminated with various lamps (probably of silver and enameled crystal) suspended on gold- and silver-plated chains. Each of the latticed windows contained 200 round panes with ornamental gold and silver mountings (*Survey of Persian Art* III, pp. 1058-59; A. Kārang, *Āṭār-e bāstānī-e Ādarbāyjān*, Tehran, 1351- Š./1972-, I, pp. 240-61).

The Moroccan traveler Ebn BaṭṭūṭĀja, who stopped at Tabrīz in 727/1326-27, reported that the mosque was surrounded by bazaars and that its entrance lay in the bazaar of the ambergrisa sellers. Its marble-paved courtyard contained trees of several varieties, including vines and jasmines, and was divided into two parts by a canal (presumably the pool). To the west of the *šabestān* was a *madrasa* and to the east, a *zāwīa* (hospice for dervishes). The surrounding walls were faced with "qāšānī" (i.e., *kāšī*, or glazed tile). The people of Tabrīz gathered in this mosque every day after the evening prayer for Qur'ān recitation (Ebn BaṭṭūṭĀja [Paris], II, pp. 129-31). By the early 10th/15th century, the mosque was known as the 'emārat (palace) of 'Alīšāh. An Italian merchant staying in Azarbaijan at that time wrote that even though it was situated in the middle of the city, it could be seen from all the outskirts; the vault of the *meḥrāb* chamber was so high that an arrow shot from the floor would not reach it. His indication that the *meḥrāb* chamber was unfinished probably reflects its semiruin state at the time. He also describes a newly erected platform in the middle of the mosque pool. Set on six carved pillars of pure marble, it was connected to the bank by a bridge; floating in the pool was a beautiful boat which Shah Esmā'īl sometimes boarded for recreation with four or five of his courtiers (C. Grey, ed. and tr., *A Narrative of Italian Travels in Persia in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*, London, 1873, pp. 167-68).

By the late 11th/17th century, the structure was largely in ruins. When Jean Chardin visited Tabrīz in 1084/1673, only the area of the *meḥrāb* and the



šabestān, facing the *qebla*, had been repaired. Chardin mentions a tall minaret which could be seen by travelers from Erevan to Tabrīz long before they reached the city (Chardin, *Voyages du Chevalier Chardin en Perse et autres lieux de l'Orient*, Amsterdam, 1735, I, p. 225). John Ogilby, a traveler contemporary with Chardin, refers to the monument as the “Friday Mosque,” which indicates that it was still used for worship (J. Ogilby, *Asia, the First Part*, London, 1673, p. 21 ; *Survey of Persian Art* III, p. 1056).

By the time Jane Paule Rachel Dieulafoy visited this historic building in 1881, it had been transformed into a barracks or citadel (*arg*) for the Tabrīz garrison. She describes it as a huge structure with lofty towers visible from far outside the city, situated in the middle of a large, open space, and together with an adjacent disused cannon foundry, surrounded by a wide and deep, but partly filled in, moat (*La Perse, la Chaldée, et la Susiane*, Paris, 1887, p. 52).

This mosque was in fact one of the biggest buildings ever erected in Iran, and its combination of grandeur and artistic grace aroused the admiration of all who saw it. The minarets of the mosque of Qūsūn in Cairo, which was completed in 730/1331, only eight years after the Egyptian embassy’s visit to Tabrīz, were modeled on those of the Masjed-e ‘Alīšāh. The Italian merchant who visited Tabrīz in the 10th/15th century wrote that the excellence of its construction was beyond his powers of description. The 11th/17th-century Turkish traveler Evliya Çelebi remarks in his *Sīāhat-nāma* that the distance from the *mehrāb* to the door of the mosque was so great that human vision could scarcely take it in (Evliya Efendī, *Narrative of Travels in Europe, Asia, and Africa in the Seventeenth Century*, tr. J. F. von Hammer-Purgstall, London, 1850, II, p. 135). James Morier (J. Morier, *A Second Journey through Persia, Armenia, and Asia Minor to Constantinople, 1810-16*, London, 1818, p. 226) found its brickwork “as fine, perhaps, as any in the world,” while Robert Ker Porter, who was in Iran in 1233-35/1818-20, considered the tilework, with its turquoise, aquamarine, and dark blue colorings and interlaced Arabic inscriptions, equal to the works of the “most accomplished artists of any age” (R. Ker Porter, *Travels in Georgia, Persia, Armenia, Ancient Babylonia..*, London, 1821-22, p. 222).

Although the use of this mosque as a barracks in the last century greatly accelerated its deterioration, it was registered as a national monument in the 1970s, and after preliminary studies, repair work was begun.

See also ‘Alīšāh, Tāj-al-dīn.



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See also *Survey of Persian Art*, pls. 377-79.

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