



BĪBĪ KHANOM MOSQUE

BĪBĪ KHANOM MOSQUE, named after Bībī Khanom, otherwise known as Sarāy-Molk Khanom, chief wife of Tīmūr (r. 771-807/1370-1405). She was the daughter of Qazān Solṭān Khan and the niece of Amir Mūsā and was taken by Tīmūr from the harem of Amir Ḥosayn after his defeat of the latter in 771/1370 (Yazdī, I, p. 155). It was on account of her Chingizid ancestry that Tīmūr was entitled to call himself Gūrgān (son-in-law, from the Turkish *küräkān*). Bībī Khanom is mentioned regularly by Yazdī in the reverential terms suitable for Tīmūr's main wife, and on one occasion he even notes that several ass-loads of precious cloth were dispatched from Yazd on her behalf (I, p. 560). Clavijo has left a particularly vivid description of her at a feast in Samarkand. She appeared in a red silk robe whose train was carried by fifteen handmaidens, wearing an elaborate feathered and bejeweled headdress that required a minimum of three persons to hold upright (pp. 258-60).

Bībī Khanom's name is most often connected nowadays with the eponymous mosque in Samarkand, which earlier in the century had been known as the Madrasa of Bībī Khanom. This building has more recently been identified as the Jāme' Mosque of Samarkand which was begun by order of Tīmūr on 4 Ramaẓān 801/7 May 1399 and to which Yazdī devotes a whole section of his history (II, pp. 144-47). It has been assumed that the association of Bībī Khanom's name with this mosque was a much later development. However, there are good reasons both for the earlier confusion and for supposing that its association with Bībī Khanom may well have been contemporary.

Yazdī also mentions a *madrasa* of Sarāy-Molk Khanom, which was opposite



the Jāme‘, in which Tīmūr stayed on a number of occasions (II, pp. 145, 421, 448, 449). This is the building which is referred to by Clavijo as the palace of the mother of the Khanom (pp. 234, 281-82). He mentions that, unlike most palaces in Samarkand, it had very many separate apartments (i.e., cells for the students). He also refers to an attached chapel in which the mother of the Khanom was buried; this must be the dome chamber known as the mausoleum of Bībī Khanom which is still standing in a ruined condition opposite the Jāme‘. The remains of three females were found to have been interred in it, and since it became standard in the Timurid period for mausoleums to be attached to *madrasas*, this leaves no room for doubt that this was indeed part of Sarāy-Molk Khanom’s *madrasa*.

Clavijo also has an interesting report of Tīmūr’s dissatisfaction with the mosque’s size upon his return from India in 807/1404 and his personal involvement in its rebuilding on a grander scale. Clavijo refers to this mosque as one which Tīmūr has caused to be erected in memory of the mother of his wife. If, as seems likely, he made the same mistake as he had with the *madrasa* of ascribing it to her mother instead of to Sarāy-Molk Khanom herself, then it seems that Tīmūr indeed had the intention of honoring his wife with its erection. This is made more likely by its location immediately opposite her already existing *madrasa*, since pairs of buildings by the same patron, such as Moḥammad Solṭān’s *madrasa* and *kānaqāh*, were already popular with the Timurids.

The Jāme‘ has several notable features. It can be seen as a massive version of the classical Iranian mosque plan, with a huge *pīšṭāq* leading into a courtyard with four *ayvāns*, a *qebla* dome chamber, and lower domed arcades filling the space between the four *ayvāns*. A major change is the addition of two smaller dome chambers behind the side *ayvāns*, an arrangement which provided a model for their similar emplacement in the Masjed-e Šāh in Isfahan. There was also an unusual amount of stonecarving employed in the building, including, according to Yazdī, 480 stone columns each seven *gaz* (cubits) high, carved by 200 masons from Azarbaijan, Fārs, and India. The stone portal in the mosque survived intact until the 1890s (Hill and Grabar, fig. 41), while the stone foundation inscription above the entrance to the *qebla* dome chamber is still extant. The remainder of the decoration, all of the highest quality, consisted of tilework of various kinds: *cuerda seca*, mosaic-faience, and *bannā’ī*-technique. The latter also employs tiles in dark green, a rare color in this technique known only on two other buildings.



Tīmūr's insistence on rebuilding the mosque meant that it was left unfinished, but its towering remains still dominate the town of Samarkand. Whether or not it should be correctly called the mosque of Bibī Khanom, it still inspires the awe which undoubtedly was the reason for its erection on such a grand scale.

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bibi khanom masjid masjid bibi khaoum masjid e beebie khaoum