

A Glance at the Construction of Oqsaroy

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Abstract. This article discusses the Oqsaroy building from the 14th-15th centuries, one of the most unique architectural monuments of Amir Temur and the Timurid era. Renowned for its beauty and grandeur, Oqsaroy stands as a remarkable medieval landmark, comparable to other architectural masterpieces in attracting foreign travelers. The article highlights certain construction details of the complex, relying on historical sources and literature from that period.

Keywords: Oqsaroy, Amir Temur, Kesh, architecture, UNESCO, libraries, madrasas, historical monuments, Kok Gumbaz, mausoleums.

In his speech at the opening ceremony of the International Maqom Art Forum held in Shahrisabz on September 6, 2018, the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, stated: "Shahrisabz, with its 2700-year ancient history, has endured severe and challenging trials, tumultuous times. However, no era of difficulty—be it wars, invasions, or natural disasters—could erase it from the pages of history. Shahrisabz is world-renowned as the esteemed place where the great commander, statesman, and patron of culture and art, Sahibqiron Amir Temur, reached his prime. For centuries, this city has been famous for its great scholars, poets, artists, craftsmen, and skilled artisans. Its unique architectural monuments and rare relics vividly confirm this truth. Today, thanks to the constructive potential and dedicated efforts of our people, Shahrisabz is transforming into one of the most flourishing locations in our country, becoming a modern cultural and tourism center, which fills us with joy" [1, p. 2]. The ancient city of Kesh, known today as Shahrisabz, has a history spanning nearly three millennia. It stands alongside historical cities such as Rome, Paris, Athens, and Cairo in Europe, and Samarkand, Qarshi, Merv, and Termez in Central Asia. Around 300 geographical sites within Shahrisabz have been included in UNESCO's "World Heritage" list, gaining recognition as a global cultural value [5, p. 3]. The efforts to determine the age of Qarshi and Shahrisabz in the Kashkadarya region and to achieve global acknowledgment required significant dedication and intellectual effort from archaeologists and historians.

Among the scholars who contributed to this significant task were R. Sulaymonov, P. Ravshanov, B. Yaqubov, M. Hasanov, N. Khushvaqtov, and A. Toshev. Their efforts revealed that the development of urban planning in the Kesh valley was directly linked to Sahibqiron Amir Temur's rise to the political stage of Mawarannahr's history. Amir Temur played an unparalleled role in spreading the fame of Kesh throughout the world and transforming it into one of the most beautiful cities globally. During this period, Shahrisabz underwent unprecedented positive changes. The city expanded, its perimeter was fortified with strong walls, and notable architectural structures were built. These included the Kok Gumbaz Mosque, Chubin Madrasa, Chorsu Market, Dorut-Tilovat, Dorus-Saodat, and the world-renowned Oqsaroy Palace.

The Oqsaroy structure is considered the largest and most unique monument among 14th-15th century architectural landmarks. Its construction dates back to 1379, coinciding with Amir Temur's fourth military campaign to Khorezm. After capturing Urgench, the capital of Khorezm, all skilled craftsmen, builders, and artisans from there were brought to the city of Kesh to work on the

construction of the Oqsaroy [2, p. 11].

Several legends surround the construction of the Oqsaroy. According to one, when Amir Temur planned to build a grand palace in Shahrisabz, he summoned the chief architect to share his vision. The architect requested to be taken to the state treasury. In front of Amir Temur, he mixed gold coins with clay to make bricks, explaining that these bricks would be used for the foundation of the future palace. Seeing this, Amir Temur observed the process with curiosity. Later, the architect smashed the bricks and returned the gold to the treasury. When asked why he did this, the architect explained that he wanted to confirm the strength of Amir Temur's desire to build such a magnificent palace. He added that constructing such a grand structure would require immense resources, and only after ensuring Amir Temur's commitment could the construction work begin [2, p. 76].

In its time, the Oqsaroy Palace was nearly 70 meters tall, though the remaining structure preserved today measures about 38 meters [6, p. 21]. Describing the exterior of Oqsaroy, special attention was given to intricate decorative techniques featuring religious and philosophical inscriptions. Research has revealed and translated many of these Arabic and Persian inscriptions. The elongated, ornate panels on the façade feature words in Arabic written in the "Kufic" style, often gilded with gold. Below the arches, there are small, windowless rooms with surfaces covered in ceramic tiles. Following these are paved courtyards with white stone flooring and richly decorated arcades.

At the center of the courtyard lies a large pool, and the courtyard spans an area of 300 paces. Through the courtyard, one could access the palace's largest building. This building's entrance also had a grand, tall door, masterfully adorned with gold, lapis lazuli, and tiles. Passing through this entrance led to the reception hall (kutubkhona). The walls of the reception hall were also decorated with gold, lapis lazuli, and tiles, gilded to perfection. Almost all the decorative work in this area was executed in gold [3, p. 68].

During archaeological excavations, numerous architectural artifacts were discovered that once adorned the palace's interiors. These included fragments of limestone cornices with gilding, embossed ceramic tiles, and decorative elements made of clay and plaster. The palace was traditionally designed, with a rectangular courtyard surrounded by arcades (ayvons). The courtyard measured 120 meters in width and 240–250 meters in length [6, p. 601]. The palace itself was a large structure in terms of both volume and the area it occupied. This layout was characteristic not only of residential, public, and cultural-architectural buildings of the time but also of palaces with central courtyards surrounded by arcades, as was the case with Oqsaroy. Archaeological evidence suggests that the architectural design of these structures continued the traditions of previous centuries while adapting to specific climatic conditions. These designs typically included rectangular courtyards with grand arcades, reception halls, and servant quarters. In the medieval period, it was common to construct palaces with monumental entrance portals and central courtyards. The massive remains of Oqsaroy's entrance portal columns attest to the palace's extraordinary scale, unparalleled in the Near East. Its grandeur and magnificence can be envisioned not only through the surviving architectural elements but also through the excavated remains, which further illustrate the immense scale and beauty of this historical structure.

Since its construction, the Oqsaroy Palace has been mentioned by many travelers in their memoirs, describing this magnificent building. Notably, in 1403, Ruy González de Clavijo, an envoy of King Henry III of Castile to Amir Temur's court, observed the surroundings of Shahrisabz and provided a detailed description of the Oqsaroy architectural monument in his book *The History of Great Timur*. He wrote: "Work here had continued without interruption for twenty years, and even now many craftsmen were still working. The palace had an extraordinarily long corridor and a remarkably tall gate. At the entrance, on both the right and left sides, there were brick arches decorated with tiles arranged in intricate patterns of various designs" [5, p. 179]. In another section of his memoirs, Clavijo noted that the Oqsaroy was composed of three interconnected sections based on its layout, construction, and functionality. These included an administrative section at the entrance, a reception hall in the middle, and residential quarters along with gardens [4, p. 82].

During the reign of Amir Temur and the Timurids, two types of palace structures were prevalent in Central Asia and Afghanistan: first, official and administrative palaces used for governance and state functions, and second, countryside retreats designed for relaxation. The Oqsaroy clearly belonged to the first category, serving as a political, administrative, and ideological center. Its location within the city walls highlights its central role in governance and administration.

Most palace structures from the Timurids' era in Central Asia have survived only in ruins. The Oqsaroy, too, reached the 20th century with only partial remains of its brick walls and structures. During the Soviet era, particularly in the 1920s, cultural heritage faced neglect and destruction; the Oqsaroy itself was fired upon with a cannon called "Benbin," causing significant damage. Despite this, the Oqsaroy, an unparalleled monument of grandeur, has survived into the 21st century with remnants of its walls and bricks.

Overall, the Oqsaroy has always attracted visitors to Shahrisabz, both during the Timurid era and in modern times. Since Uzbekistan's independence, special attention has been given to uncovering and restoring architectural monuments. Efforts have been made to reconstruct the historical structures of Shahrisabz, develop the city as a tourism hub, and create numerous conveniences for international tourists. Today, Oqsaroy remains a timeless example of extraordinary talent and architectural innovation, representing the pinnacle of folk craftsmanship and architectural exploration in Central Asian history.

References

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