

## TABRIZI WOODCARVINGS IN TIMURID IRAN\*

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The entrance doors to the Yeşil Türbe in Bursa of western Anatolia are artefacts of manifold interest for the study of the importance of the city of Tabriz in Iran of the Timurid era. Was Tabriz a center of invention, trade and crafts for the western Muslim world at this time?

The doors to this particular tomb-shrine can be dated to the early 15th century, having been carved and constructed for the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed I who died in the month of Jumādā I, 824 A.H. corresponding to May, 1421 A.D., giving us a very clear chronological indicator. The doors' inscription mentions a certain 'Alī b. Ḥājjī Aḥmad al-Tabrīzī,<sup>1</sup> hence raising the issue of a significant relationship between early Ottoman and Timurid woodworking. Unfortunately, this particular name has not yet been found on any other Ottoman or Persian artefact from the first half of the 15th Century (see below). (figs. 1–2).

Looking first at the central and dominating ornamentation on both wings of the door we see a 10-pointed star surrounded by hexagons. This was a widespread pattern that appeared not only on Timurid<sup>2</sup> and Mamluk woodwork but also one that had found expression on Anatolian woods of the late 14th century,<sup>3</sup> though not predominantly so.

Far more interesting is the design on the frames of each wing. Here we find calligraphic oval medaillons (cartouches) entwined together with curves and swells to fill the surface completely. This specific order of inscriptions is unusual because inscriptions are usually placed on the

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<sup>1</sup> Both the door and the inscription were published by Franz Taeschner. One could also render this as Hajji 'Ali b. Ahmad. See Franz Taeschner, "Beiträge zur frühosmanischen Epigraphik und Archäologie," *Der Islam* 20 (1932): 146–7, Pl. 2, fig. 5 (right door wing); Katharina Otto-Dorn, *Türkische Keramik* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1957), 62, fn. 121, also Leo Ary Mayer, *Islamic Woodcarvers and their Works* (Geneva: Kundig, 1958), 33 (with numerous bibliographical references.)

<sup>2</sup> For the numerous Persian woodworks which utilised this design in the 14th–16th centuries with provenance from a variety of provinces see the catalogue of the author's study "Woodwork of the Timurid Period in Iran and Central Asia" (in preparation).

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., the door of the minbar of the Ulu Cami in Bursa which dates from 802 A.H./1399–1400 A.D. (Ayla Ersoy, *XV. Yüzyıl Osmanlı Ağaç İşçiliği* (Istanbul: University of Marmara, 1993), 9–10, fig. 1 with a mistaken caption.)





Figs. 1–2: Bursa, Yeşil Türbe, entrance doors. © Das Bild des Orients, Berlin/  
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smaller panels above and below the wings' main fields. The closest example of a similar design can be seen on an undated door now preserved in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA, M.73.5.790a–b) (fig. 3).<sup>4</sup> A further example would be the 14th century doors preserved in the Museum of Islamic Art in Teheran (Inv. 3293) on which the frame's design is also composed of entwined inscription cartouches (fig. 4).<sup>5</sup>

With the Yeşil Türbe doors of Bursa it appears we have a unique example of this type of decoration for early Ottoman times. Additionally there is no other example of a master signature of Persian origin (here: *al-Tabrīzī*) on any other Ottoman woodcarvings. That is not to say that Persian master craftsmen did not work on early Ottoman buildings. Especially in the creation of fayence works we have some examples. This particular "master" from Tabriz is hardly in that sense unique. For example we find signatures from ceramics masters in the nearby Yeşil Cami in Bursa, where the signature "made by the Masters from Tabriz" appears on the pillars of the splendid fayence mihrab.<sup>6</sup>

What about the contemporary woodcarvings from Tabriz itself? Unfortunately no comparable works are known from the surviving Timurid buildings:<sup>7</sup> whether doors, tympana, windows or other wooden screens, minbars, or even cenotaphs. However, there do exist three Persian woodcarvings from the 15th century found in Iran at locations outside Tabriz that carry a master's signature including the *nisba* "al-Tabrīzī."

Taking the first example, in Lahijan (Province of Gilan) at the Buq'a Chahār Pādshāh complex is an entry door of the *marqad* Sayyid Khūrkiyā that has an inscription naming a number of craftsmen or masters.

<sup>4</sup> This extremely interesting high quality door was available on the art market several decades ago and was for a long time only known from a picture in the photo collection of the Museum für Islamische Kunst in Berlin.

<sup>5</sup> To my knowledge this woodwork remains unpublished and the inscription undeciphered. The work is variously dated to 1320 (Museum caption), 754 A.H./1353–54 A.D. (Photo by Würfel, Photo collection of the Museum für Islamische Kunst, Berlin).

<sup>6</sup> See Otto-Dorn, *Türkische Keramik*, 62. Another signature was found in the Sultan's loge of the same mosque, reading: "made by Mohammad al-Majnun." Eadem, 62. For a more recent and thorough discussion of Tabrizi ceramic masters in Ottoman Anatolia see Gülru Necipoğlu, "From International Timurid to Ottoman: A Change of Taste in Sixteenth-Century Ceramic Tiles," *Muqarnas* 20 (1990): 136–170, and especially Lisa Golombek, "Timurid Potters Abroad," in *La civiltà Timuride Come Fenomeno Internazionale*, ed. Michele Bernardini (Roma: Istituto per l'oriente C.A. Nallino, 1996), 577–586.

<sup>7</sup> The relevant monuments are found in Lisa Golombek and Donald Newton Wilber, *Timurid Architecture in Iran and Turan*. 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).



Fig. 3: Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA, M.73-5-790a-b), doors.  
Image: Courtesy of the National Museums, Museum of Islamic Art, Berlin, image  
collection



Fig. 4: Tehran, Museum of Islamic Art (Inv. 3293), door wing. © Das Bild des Orients, Berlin/ Joachim Gierlichs

There is a Master Bayazid (*'amal-i ustād Bāyazīd*)<sup>8</sup> and also the signature of a woodworker (*najjār*) named 'Alī from Tabriz (*'amal-i 'Alī najjār al-Tabrīzī*).<sup>9</sup> Finally there is still a third name, the one who might have been responsible for the carved calligraphy, having authored the text or carved it or both. This name is 'Abd al-Kātib Khvājaki al-Kirmānī.<sup>10</sup> The *nisba* of al-Kirmānī tells us that this specialist came from Kerman in the southeast of Iran. The inscription has no date, however the door can be dated to the 15th century by virtue of its technical and stylistic attributes. (figs. 5–6)

This is a relatively small door, each wing measuring 165 × 42 cm. Each wing has the classical division into three fields with the largest bordered on the top and bottom by two smaller rectangular fields. Here the middle field is especially long and filled with a geometrically-ornamented design of some complexity. There is a six-pointed Rosetta at the centre encircled by six narrow and elongated pentagons. Dragons fill the resulting corner spaces so that the surface forms another large hexagon.<sup>11</sup>

The (now rather old) photograph made by L.A. Mayer<sup>12</sup> shows the upper part of the right wing and the middle beam in their original condition. The two wings were later rebuilt to fit to a larger (higher) door when the original doors in this opening were removed to the Iran Bastan Museum.<sup>13</sup> The original placement of these two wings, i.e. on which room of the complex the doors may have been, is not known and can no longer be reconstructed.

Now, although the artefact itself no longer exists, we know of a second woodcarving carrying the name of a craftsman from Tabriz.<sup>14</sup> The cenotaph from Buq'a Sayyid 'Alī Ghaznavī in Tijin Guka<sup>15</sup> near Astane

<sup>8</sup> The signature is probably on the upper surface of the middle beam ("damagh-i dar"); see Manūchihr Sutūda, *Az Astārā tā Astārabād* (Tehran: Anjuman-i Āthār-i Milli, 1351/1972), 2: 109, l. 12.

<sup>9</sup> On the lower panel of the same wing; see Sutūda, *Az Astārā tā Astārabād*, 2: 110.

<sup>10</sup> On the lower panel of the same wing; see Sutūda, *Az Astārā tā Astārabād*, 2: 110.

<sup>11</sup> Research project, photographic records: IR 95/XIII/11–12, XIV/1–3.

<sup>12</sup> See Mayer, *Islamic Woodcarvers*, Pl. XII, without provenance.

<sup>13</sup> For a number of years now the former Islamic division of the Iran Bastan Museum in Teheran forms the Museum of Islamic Art, Inv. Nr. 3312 (see Sutūda, *Az Astārā tā Astārabād*, 2, figs. 79, 81).

<sup>14</sup> The older badly damaged cenotaph was apparently removed in 1341–42 Shamsi/1962–63 A.D. (Information provided by members of the local population in 1995). The Imamzadeh was rebuilt from the ground up.

<sup>15</sup> There are a variety of ways in which the names of this place are written: "Tijin Gukeh," "Tajan Guka." Bernerd O'Kane, *Timurid Architecture in Khurasan* (Costa Mesa, California: Mazda, 1987), 378–79, gives the name as "Astana Imamzadeh Sayyid 'Ali Ghaznavi b. Imam





Figs. 5–6: Lahijan (Gilan), Buq'a-yi Chahār Pādshāh, Marqad-i Sayyid Khurkiya, entrance door © Das Bild des Orients, Berlin/ Joachim Gierlichs

(Āstāna) not far from Gilan Province (Lahijan) is inscribed with the date 871 A.H./1466–67 A.D. and with the name of the master *Ustād Muḥammad b. Yādgār b. Ḥājji Musāfir Tabrīzī*, as well as the name of the buried person *‘Alī b. Muḥammad al-Ḥusaynī*.<sup>16</sup>

This large cenotaph (94 × 237 × 111 cm) was built in the so-called “frame-filled construction” (“Rahmenfüllungskonstruktion”). The front side of this wooden pseudo-sarcophagus was divided into three fields depicting a mihrab niche (with the inscription) in the centre framed by two fields of geometric designs: a central six-pointed star captured within four pentagons and two hexagons. This design is repeated on at least one of the two narrower sides. The design on the second narrow side as well as on

Ja‘far al-Sadiq,” and Mayer, *Islamic Woodcarvers*, 60 (referring to Dorn and Rabino) uses “Imamzadeh Ali b. Muhammad al-Husaini [descendant of Imam Ja‘far].”

<sup>16</sup> See Sutūda, *Az Astārā tā Astārabād*, 2: 171–72.

the rear side cannot be established due to the absence of information and documentation.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, we have a third wooden artefact made by craftsmen from Tabriz. This is a cenotaph dated to 807 A.H./ 1404–05 AD of Qazvīn which is, however, today no longer to be found. When Eugène Flandin travelled twice to Iran in 1839–41<sup>18</sup> he reported the following of interest to us: “Encountering no resistance I continued into the shrine to an enclosure, and looking through a window, saw a large catafalque, gilt and hung with silk.”<sup>19</sup> This would have been the cenotaph of Imāmzāda Ḥusayn (*Āstāna-yi Shahzāda Ḥusayn*)<sup>20</sup> for which, according to the inscription, two brothers from Tabriz are responsible. They were *ustād Bāyazīd b. Bābā Khvāja Tabrizī* and *ustād ‘Alī b. Bābā Khvāja Tabrizī*,<sup>21</sup> apparently two sons of Baba Khvaja of Tabriz, called masters. But these were not necessarily woodworkers (*najjār* or *darūdgar*). Hence it is not entirely clear what role they played in the construction of the cenotaph.

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What conclusions can we draw from this research? The material remains of woodwork from the Timurid era attributable to Tabriz are extremely rare. From this city of great political and cultural importance we have no

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g. Bernhard Dorn, *Atlas zu Bemerkungen [auf Anlass] einer wissenschaftlichen Reise in den Kaukasus und den südlichen Küstenländern des Kaspischen Meeres in den Jahren 1860–1861* (St. Petersburg: Buchdruckerei der Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1895), 2nd Division, Pl. XI; Hyacinth Louis Rabino, *Mázandarán and Astarábád* (London: Luzac, 1928), 7 (text in Persian); Mayer, *Islamic Woodcarvers*, 60; Sutūda, *Az Astārā tā Astārabād*, 2: 171–72, figs. 133–137; O’Kane, *Timurid Architecture*, 379.

<sup>18</sup> The traveller’s report appeared in 1851; see Eugène Flandin and Pascal Coste, *Voyage en Perse de MM. Eugène Flandin, peintre, et Pascal Coste, architecte, attachés à l’ambassade de France en Perse pendant les années 1840 et 1841: entrepris par ordre de M. le ministre des affaires étrangères, d’après les instructions dressées par l’Institut* (Paris: Gide et Jules Baudry, 1851), 1: 217.

<sup>19</sup> Cited from the German translation by H.L. Teweleit; see Eugène Flandin, *Die persische Reise*, trans. Horst Lothar Teweleit (Berlin: Rütten & Loening, 1991), 90.

<sup>20</sup> Shahzāda Husein is the son of the 8th century A.H. Imam Ali Reza; the former died in the 9th century A.H. His grave built in Safavid times (1588 A.D.) was so radically restored by Fath Ali Shah that it could be seen as a Kajari site. (J. Scarce in: *Cambridge History of Iran* 7, 924.) R. Boulanger, *Mittlerer Osten* (“Die Blauen Führer”), 856 mentions a “cenotaph made of wooden inlay work from the Safavid era.” During a visit to the mausoleum in 1995 the site was under (re)construction and the location of the cenotaph could not be ascertained.

<sup>21</sup> The cenotaph is mentioned by Ḥusayn Mudarris Ṭabaṭabā’ī, *Bargī az tārikh-i Qazvīn* (Qum: Kitābkhāna-yi ‘Umūmī-yi Ḥaẓrat-i Āyat Allāh al-‘Uzmā Najafī Mar’ashī, 1361/1982), 42 and by O’Kane, *Timurid Architecture*, 372, though no published image of it appears to exist.

door, no tympanon, no window screen or any other wooden barrier made of wood, not to mention a minbar or a cenotaph. All we have are these three woodworks from outside Tabriz naming craftsmen coming from Tabriz. These pieces were found in Lahijan or its region, that is in the forest and wooded province of Gilan south of the Caspian Sea—Mazandaran and Gilan being the two regions of Iran from which come the greater portion of the woodcarvings from Timurid (1370–1506) and Safavid (1501–1722) times.<sup>22</sup> One of these mentions more than one craftsman which would not be unusual but also not the standard practice. The inscription on the wooden door in Buq'a Pādshāh in Lahijan names not only an 'Alī, with the addition of "carpenter from Tabriz", but also another master by the name of Bāyazīd, with no further identification. It would be purely speculative to assume that this Bāyazīd was therefore a person of local origin, perhaps from Lahijan or its vicinity. Additionally an *'Abd al-Karīm from Kerman* is also named, Kerman being at that time an important city in the southwest of this large country. 'Abd al-Karīm could very well have been the author of the inscription, i.e. not a woodworker at all.

The originally very high quality cenotaph from Tijin Guka, also from the province of Gilan, is unfortunately now completely lost. On this piece the name of the master (*ustād*) Muḥammad b. Yādgar b. Ḥājjī Musāfir Tabrīzī was inscribed. Given this formulation it is not clear whether it is the artist himself or his grandfather who is the one from Tabriz. Also this inscription could give an indication that wood specialists (as well as other master workers) during the Timurid era travelled widely to pursue their commissions, especially because the word *musafir* literally means "the traveller."

Unfortunately there is no photographic record of the third piece, the cenotaph from Qazvīn. But knowledge of it is helpful. We learn that in the year 807 A.H./1407 A.D. two brothers identified as master workers were active in this province not all that distant from Tabriz, working on a wooden sarcophagus, though whether as carpenters or as carvers is not clear.

<sup>22</sup> A first overview can be found in Joachim Gierlich, "Timurid Woodfurnishings in Iran and Central Asia," in *Islamic Art Resources in Central & Eastern Europe and Central Asia: Proceedings of the 5th International Seminar on Islamic Art and Architecture, Al al-Bayt-University, Mafrāq, 19–24 April 1996*, edited by Wijdan Ali and Khalid Deemer (al-Mafrāq: Āl al-Bayt-University, 1421/2000), 149–155. The percentage of known woodwork from North Iran (Mazandaran and Gilan) in relation to that from other provinces has shifted as a result of this research. See in more details, Joachim Gierlich, *Holzarbeiten der Timuridenzeit in Iran und Mittelasien* (forthcoming).

The woodwork found at the Yeşil Türbe in Bursa—which was the departure point for our investigation—is, therefore, very interesting. That such an important shrine would be inscribed with the name of a Persian master, here a Tabrizi, may well be the link for which we are searching. This otherwise unique example of woodcarving—nothing similar yet to be discovered for early Ottoman Anatolia—made by a master from Tabriz who carved the frames with inscribed cartouches (or perhaps even brought the design with him from Tabriz) is clearly an important piece of evidence, indicating that Tabriz may well have been a centre of artistic innovation for the eastern Muslim world at this time.

Was there a “Tabriz School” of woodwork in the 15th century? Given the poor evidential remains, as already discussed, we really cannot establish such a phenomenon. The same can be said for the possibility that there may have been artistic relations between Tabriz and western Anatolia and particularly Bursa, the cradle of Ottoman civilization. These are the larger issues which cannot be pursued here and remain for historians yet to answer.

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