Bernard O’Kane. “From Atelier Floor to Monument Wall: How Were Tiles Placed Correctly?”

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Bernard O’Kane. “From Atelier Floor to Monument Wall: How Were Tiles Placed Correctly?”, *Bulletin of the International Institute for Central Asian Studies*, 29 (2020), p. 44-64. DOI: 10.34920/1694-5794-2020-13

- 1 This article is the reprinted version of one of the author’s conference papers, originally published online in the proceedings of the international conference, *Against Gravity: Building Practices in the Pre-Industrial World*, edited by Robert Ousterhout, Dorian Borbonus and Elisha Dumser (Philadelphia: Center for Ancient Studies, University of Pennsylvania, 2016; <https://www.sas.upenn.edu/ancient/publications.html>). Given that this article is concerned with Khorezm – an important historical oasis region, currently divided between Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, it would make sense to republish it in Central Asia as an academic journal article.
- 2 While a number of studies have been conducted to investigate technological aspects of medieval and post-medieval Persian tilework in the past, little attention has so far been paid to the process of installation. Some examples of tilework were made on site, whereas others were manufactured in an offsite workshop. In the latter case especially, the question arises: how tiles could be assembled on site and placed according to the exact design scheme. In addition to motifs and inscriptions, distinctive shapes may have been used as visual aids to guide craftsmen to place tiles correctly.
- 3 Touching upon one of the fundamental questions regarding building practices in the medieval Islamic world, this article introduces rare examples of mounting marks (letters or numbers) on tile revetments that have been applied to the exterior of the

mausoleum of Najm ad-Din Kubra in Kuhna-Urgench (c. 1330), one of the architectural remnants of the Golden Horde in medieval Khorezm, now located in Turkmenistan, and the cenotaph of the Shrine of 'Ala' al-Din in Khiva (c. 1340), another fourteenth-century monument, now located in Uzbekistan. By offering comparative examples of medieval tile panels which have been incorrectly laid out due to a lack of assembly marks, this article demonstrates that the mounting marks enabled complex sections of tile decoration to be built up in the correct order. Furthermore, this article also features nineteenth-century tiled buildings of Khiva, in order to establish stylistic links between medieval and post-medieval building construction traditions in the region.

- 4 The overall subject of this article echoes the role of assembly marks in the construction process of medieval Europe, a type of numerical markings or symbols which were widely used among carpenters and stonemasons in order to identify individual timbers or stones and to place them in order. In addition to their practical usage, such marks also functioned as the signature of stonemasons for payment in Europe.
- 5 This carefully crafted article offers a convincing argument for the exceptionality of mounting marks in the architectural decoration of Khorezm. Together with some thirty photographs of high quality and appropriate citations of Russian sources, this article should be consulted by those who are interested in the building practices of medieval and post-medieval Central Asia.

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