



Tursunali KUZIEV
Professor
Uzbekistan State University of
World Languages
t.kuziev@gmail.com

ON THE HISTORY OF MINARETS

1. History has shown that progressive transformations and attainments are part and parcel of the development and prosperity of nations and civilizations.

Often these transformations are most vividly manifested in architecture – in its beauty, design, originality and dimensions, its striking grandeur and scale. Turning into the most powerful arguments in the leadership race, architectural structures came to prove the success of nations and individuals.

One area in this creative self-expression is the construction of towers and skyscrapers. High-rise structures became symbols of the power of human thought, technical capabilities, and majesty of wise rulers who were the patrons of arts.

Due to their uniqueness, some of the prominent ancient structures became the Wonders of the World, and a very special among them was the Lighthouse at Alexandria (285 B.C.) on Pharos peninsula (Egypt).

Every year the list of contemporary Wonders, including the Eiffel Tower in Paris (France), The Big Ben in London (UK), and the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), is complemented with new rarities that become universally recognized national symbols of different capital cities.

Very recently there has been another addition to this number – the tallest 160-floor skyscraper Burj Khalifa (818 m) in Dubai (UAE), and soon the leader in the race will be another, still more transcendental structure that is being built in the capital of Kuwait. It received a fabulous name of “1001 Night” reflecting the number of meters going up in the sky.

The history shows that building high-rise structures has centuries-old traditions and was practiced by many a nation. These were primarily pillar-columns, towers and minarets.

Among them are some truly unique and world-famous creations of human hands,



such as the mysterious column of a legendary king Chandragupta II (reigned in 380-413/415 BC), made of pure iron that never rusts (it is considered mysterious because man learned to manufacture stainless steel only in the 20th century, through the discovery of powder metallurgy!); and the world's tallest (72.5 or 77 m) four-tier polygonal minaret Kutab-Minar (1199/1200) in Delhi. These structures became the most important symbols of Indian capital and remarkable achievements of engineering and scientific thought of the nation.

Column of the king Chandragupta II

In the 14th century an Arab traveller Ibn Battuta noted that the aforementioned minaret “is unparalleled in the entire Muslim world”; and 500 years later James Ferguson wrote enthusiastically about “the poeticism of the concept and exquisite finishing of the details” of this structure (16, pp. 227-233; 29, p.11).

Quite remarkable in its own way is the Kutlug-Temur minaret (1321-1326) in Kunya-Urgench that is considered to be the tallest (62 m) in all Central Asia.

It has a steeply narrowing round “shaft” (base diameter is about 12 m, and the top is about two) that used to be crowned with a wooden lantern, of which only the beams survived. Inside there is a spiral staircase of 145 steps, which could only be accessed from the roof of a mosques that no longer exists

Minaret is one of the most interesting and mysterious forms of Oriental architecture.



Minaret kutab-Minar

There are many stories about the origin of these ancient tower-like structures. The word ‘minaret’ or Arabic ‘minara’ means ‘place where something is lit’, or ‘emanating light’ – that is, a kind of a “tower of light”.

The Kutlug-Temur minaret



In relation to minarets it was longer the light of a lighthouse, but spiritual light in a deeper philosophic sense and understanding of the word; the light that symbolises human soul aspiring to enlightenment through a dialogue with the Most High.

It is remarkable that the principle behind the construction of three-tier minarets common in Egypt and Near and Middle Eastern countries is apparently borrowed from the builders of the ancient lighthouse at Alexandria that was erected as a three-tier tower (120 m high) with a massive rectangular base and upper sections, octagonal and circular in plane. This is proved by the upper part of the minarets that is similar to a lighthouse “lantern”, and also by the fact that some of these structures have shapes of a similar configuration.

2. For more than a millennium minarets have dominated the urban skyline in the Muslim East. They have become signature landmarks representing many cities and their cult and education institutions such as mosques and madrasahs.

In independent Uzbekistan these unique creations of medieval memor, the architects, having acquired a special status of cultural heritage sites, are protected by state and restored.

At the same time, similar contemporary structures are erected taking into account ancient ideas in combination with modern urban development.

Two symmetrically positioned majestic yet laconically decorated minarets of a new Khazrat (Khast) Imam mosque built in 2007 in the old part of Tashkent are the example of a very sound approach, namely the combination of traditional and contemporary architecture in the urbanistic culture of our time. Therefore, there is no dissonance with their majestic outline that has become a gem in the surrounding city landscape.



Minarets of a new Khazrat Imam mosque



Chor-minor in Bukhara

Minarets were studied by world-famous scholars from Uzbekistan, namely M. E. Masson, G. A. Pugachenkova, L. Y. Mankovskaya, and other national and foreign researchers.

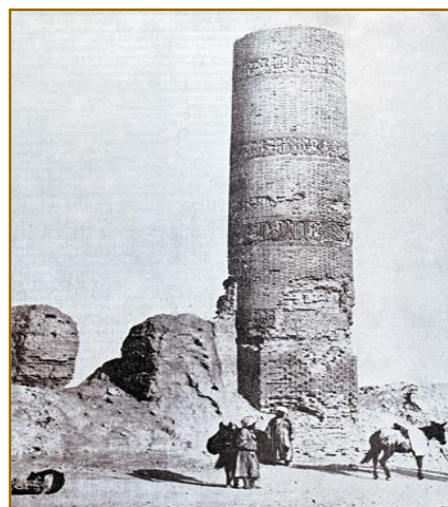
The earliest mentioning of single-standing minarets on the territory of Central Asia is found in the texts of Narshakhi, the medieval author of “The History of Bukhara”: this “minaret with wooden top, built in Bukhara next to the cathedral mosque by the order of the vizier Abu Ubaidulla Jeikhani in 306 year of hijra (918/9 AD). The structure suffered from fire during the siege of Shems-al-Mulkom city in 460” (17, p. pp; 14, p. 4).

In Samarqand, in Afrasiab ancient settlement site, during the 1904 excavations led by V. V. Bartold, on the site of ancient cathedral mosque they discovered square base and the second tier of a minaret constructed of baked brick lot later than the 10th century AD (5, p. 60-63).

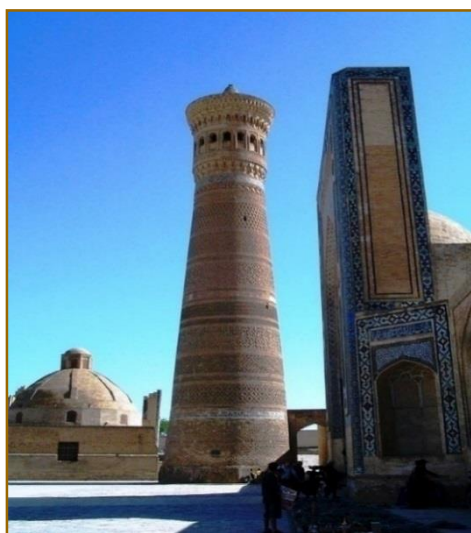
Also, among the earliest of the known surviving structures of this kind on the territory of our country are:

— the minaret in Termez (1032), one of the most ancient in Central Asia, situated in the vicinity of Chor-Sutun mosque (19-20 cc.); it was built of baked brick and had polygonal base and cylindrical shaft with two epigraphic belts (23, p. 21-22);

Dating to a later period, yet not less original structure of Bukhara is a monument, relatively small in size, with a sonorous name Chor-Minor – the structure of four minarets at the corners of a cube-like building erected in 1807.



Minaret in Termez



Kalan minaret in Bukhara

– the Kalan minaret in Bukhara (1127) – the tallest (about 50 m) and the oldest of the surviving ones. It stands out not only by its graceful outline, but also by its artful relief ornamentation.

It is noteworthy that in the time that followed almost all minarets in the Bukhara oasis were a stylized or a reduced copy of the Kalan minaret.

Still, even the largest of the similar tower-like structures in the 16th century Bukhara – Gaukushon and Vangozi – were 2-2.5 times smaller than their prototype. The distinguishing feature of Bukhara minarets is the shape of their lantern that is slightly pendent over the shaft (28).

Another early and perhaps the most unusual of the similar structures that survived to the present day is the Jarkurgan minaret (1108-1109/10) in Jarkurgan district of Surkhandarya Province; it stands in Minor village situated not far from Termez. The

structure was part of a large cathedral mosque build of baked brick, the ruins of which were discovered back in 1879 by F. N. Zhukov and recorded by a painter N. N. Karazin.

The Jarkurgan minaret is exceptional for the Central Asian architecture in a way that it is vertically segmented by decorative gauffers, similar to the tower mausoleums of Khorasan and India. It should be noted however, that the tradition of decorating walls with gauffers has more ancient roots and is known, in particular, by early medieval (6th-8th cc.) feudal castles in Central Asia. The minaret is one of the vivid evidences of various interactions that Uzbekistan had at that time with India and Iran.

In the technique of its ornamental relief brickwork the Jarkurgan minaret also bears some similarity with an earlier architectural structure – the Ismail Samani mausoleum (9th-11th cc.), and with some more contemporary structures, namely the Magoki-Attari mosque (12th c.) and Kalan minaret (1127) at the Poi Kalan mosque (the pedestal of the Great or the Most High), and also with a 12th century minaret of a similar type, where part of a figured brickwork comes forth of the wall behind the entrance to the compound with a 15th century memorial mosque build adjacently to the ziarat-khana of Kusam ibn-Abbas in Shakhi-Zinda memorial complex in Samarqand.

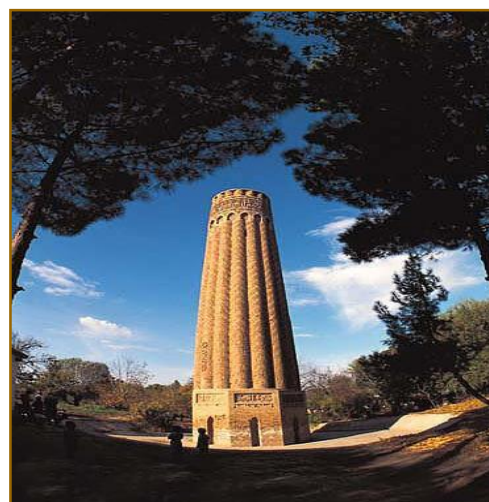
Russian travellers who visited the southern parts of Uzbekistan in early 20th century counted over ten madrasahs and minarets. However, the Jarkurgan minaret is the only one that survived in Surkhandarya Province. Other similar structures were disassembled into construction materials by local population and colonial administration back in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

3. For millennia Uzbekistan, the land of plenty, has served as a crucial link bridging civilizations of East and West, situated at the crossing of the main and shortest caravan routes as well as waterways of the Great Lazuli (III-II millennia BC) and Silk (from the late 2nd c. BC to early 16th c.) Roads connecting Asia and Europe.

Numerous states that existed here in different times in history went through their golden age and decay. Many local cities ranked among the world's largest trade, economic, academic and cultural centres that gave the world many great men, including architects.

The territory of Central Asia, with its unique natural and climatic environment and fertile land, attracted not only trade caravans, but also peoples that migrated in different times. One of the earliest examples is the known migration of Aryan peoples in the II millennium BC.

One theory suggests that it might have been the most important factor that triggered the decline of proto-urban Bronze Age civilizations on the territory of Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and Hindustan. Yet the analysis of the most recent archaeological data leaves this question open (33, p. 121-130).



Central Asia often caught the attention of foreign invaders intended to colonize its rich land and enslave local peoples. In modern speak, the region was in the sphere of interest of different nations. History has preserved quite a few evidence of this, starting from the texts that mention the excursions of legendary Queen Semiramis (Sammuramat, late 9th and early 8th cc. BC), the founder of Assyrian state, and her husband Ninus to Bactria and India, as well as Akhemenid colonization (6th-4th cc. BC) and the invasions of Alexander of Macedonia (4th c. BC).

Every invasion brought damage and destruction. Particularly drastic consequences were caused by the invasion of Genghis-khan (13th c.) whose military operations often erased entire cities from the face of the earth.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries many researchers visited the territory of Uzbekistan not only to describe its rituals, customs and nature, but also to sketch and photograph architectural monuments.

Many structures have disappeared since then, and now the artefacts recorded by photographers and artists are the only documents that confirm their existence.

Monuments got destroyed by time and natural calamities (earthquakes, etc.), and as the result of uncivilized actions of humans, including those with power and authority.

In this regard, one may turn to century-old documentary evidence confirming that Russian scholars tried to preserve architectural monuments as important elements of cultural heritage, while colonial authorities of the Russian Empire quite often and deliberately destroyed them.

For instance, Academician M. E. Masson, the founder of the school of Central Asian archaeology, in his article ‘Brief Historical Reference Note on Central Asian Minarets’ (14, p. 7-8) wrote: “One by one they turned into ruins the beauty and pride of Samarqand architecture – the graceful minarets that, with their high-rising shafts, for centuries determined the overall look of the city drowned in the green foliage of trees.

Masterpieces of Central Asian architecture perished largely due to indifference towards historical monuments of Islam, which was a prevailing sentiment in the pre-revolutionary society, and in the last years before the war also because of hostility of some high-ranking officials in the Turkistan Region administration.

Quite indicative is an incidence that took place in 1913 when Samsonov, the Governor-General of Turkistan, inspected the monuments in Samarqand.

When in Registan, archaeologist V. L. Vyatkin, who was showing the sites, mentioned the need to provide resources for repair and maintenance.

The big boss of the region responded with firm rejection, his argument being that in the interest of Russian statehood would be to destroy them rather than maintain.

This view of the Governor-General was echoed by some of his entourage, and one obsequious lieutenant, trying to make a clever suggestion, offered using artillery fire for that purpose”.

V. A. Nilsen, the well-known researcher of architecture, in his monograph ‘At the Origin of Contemporary Town-Planning of Uzbekistan in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries’ wrote:

“Time, earthquakes and even humans continued their destructive work. Minarets of Bibi-Khanym mosque, Gur-Emir and Ulugbek’s madrasah, marble facing in the Bibi-Khanym portal, the dome of Ishrat-khana mausoleum, etc. were being destroyed.

Even the authorities did not hesitate to level a monument if it was necessitated by military strategy considerations. For instance, in 1883, due to the reconstruction of Samarqand fortress, they blew up a first-class Kut-bi-Chakhar-duhum mausoleum” (21, p. 180; 18, p. 17).

Another example was given by architect Dr. M. A. Yusupova in her lecture dedicated to the Bukhara school of architecture delivered:

“Good condition of the minarets in the oasis proves that Bukhara masters knew the secrets of civil engineering.

For example, in 1923, when Bukhara was conquered by soviet troops, the 12th century Kalan minaret was damaged by artillery shells. But the minaret survived the bombardment and stood. Now Kalan minaret is the architectural symbol of the city” (28).

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To be continued.