

HIEROPHANIC INFLUENCES ON TIMURID ARCHITECTURE ALONG THE SILK ROAD

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Introduction

The paper analyses how architecture represents sacred realities. The main focus is on the architecture of the Tīmūrids as an instrument to legitimize extreme and universal power. The four-*īwān* plan is examined as a dynastic architectural tool marking the centre of the world, from which power spreads along the cardinal points to all corners of the macrosomos. For the first time, the four-*īwān* plan is discussed in terms of the hierophanic palimpsest. This approach offers comparative analysis with Buddhist and Hindu cross-axial monuments, encompassing the current theories that regard the four-*īwān* plan only as a strictly Islamic phenomenon. Examples of Tīmūrid mosques, madrasas and tombs are used to illustrate this approach. The geographical focus is on Transoxania (modern-day Uzbekistan).

Methods

The methodological approach is based on the representational theory by Mekking¹. Further parallels are drawn with existing architectural theories regarding the use of cosmological schemes and realities as discussed by Snodgrass², Koch³, Ardelan and Bakhtiar⁴, Gangler, Gaube and Petruccioli⁵.

Results

Current architectural theory analyses the existence of the four-*īwān* compounds mostly within their regional historical scope. This leads to the misinterpretation of the architectural plan, which is associated with local architectural heritage symbolism, limited only to Islam. The building tradition of the four *īwāns*, the ubiquitous plan of Tīmūrid architecture, remained virtually unchanged after the 2nd c. AD. A plausible explanation shedding more light on the lack of evolution in the four-*īwān* building tradition is the fact that the four-*īwān* plan was used

¹ Mekking, A. The Architectural Representation of Reality. The Built Environment as the Materialization of a Mental Construct. *The Global Built Environment as a Representation of Realities*, ed. A. Mekking and E. Roose. Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, pp.23-50, 2009.

² Snodgrass, A. *The Symbolism of the Stupa*. Cornell Southeast Asia Program, New York, 1985.

³ Koch, E. The Mughal Waterfront Garden. *Gardens in the Time of the Great Muslim Empires: Theory and Design*, ed. A. Petruccioli. Brill, Leiden/New York, pp.140-159, 1997.

⁴ Ardelan, N. and Bakhtiar, L. *The Sense of Unity. The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture*. Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1973.

⁵ Gangler, A.; Gaube, H. and Petruccioli, A. *Bukhara. The Eastern Dome of Islam*. Edition Axel Menges, Stuttgart/London, 2004.

only for representational buildings, commissioned by the supreme imperial and local rulers. The four-*iwān* plan was a power statement, rediscovered by the subsequent ruler trying to relate his power to a previous undisputed chief patron. For the first time, the four-*iwān* plan has been discussed in terms of the hierophanic palimpsest. This approach offers comparative analysis with Buddhist and Hindu cross-axial monuments, encompassing the current theories that regard the four-*iwān* plan only as a strictly Islamic phenomenon.

Discussion

The concept of the hierophany is used to differentiate between the elements of sacred order (the ideal world believed to be created by the primordial God) and the items of profane experience (the perception of the real world as seen by man). The hierophany is a tool to experience sacred order in a profane reality. Via the hierophany, the human transcends time and space and is transpositioned into the mythical time when the world was created. The hierophany can be regarded as a microcosmic *Axis Mundi*⁶, a sacred channel that assures man's access to the realm of God's creation. The visual representation of the hierophany is a mimetic process that denotes either a certain aspect of God (manifestation of the sacred) or an element of God's creation (sacred rivers and mountains, the cosmic ocean). The process of hierophanic visualization can be analyzed as an attempt to reproduce God's creation on earth by profane means and in a profane environment.

The basic hierophany of the four elements combined with a central element can be found in all mythologies and religions of the world. The most prominent representations are related to the four cardinal points: the Cosmic Cross and its cosmic centre: the *Axis Mundi*. In this paper, I argue that the Cosmic Cross defines orthogonal axes of the *iwāns* in the four-*iwān* compounds (Fig.1).

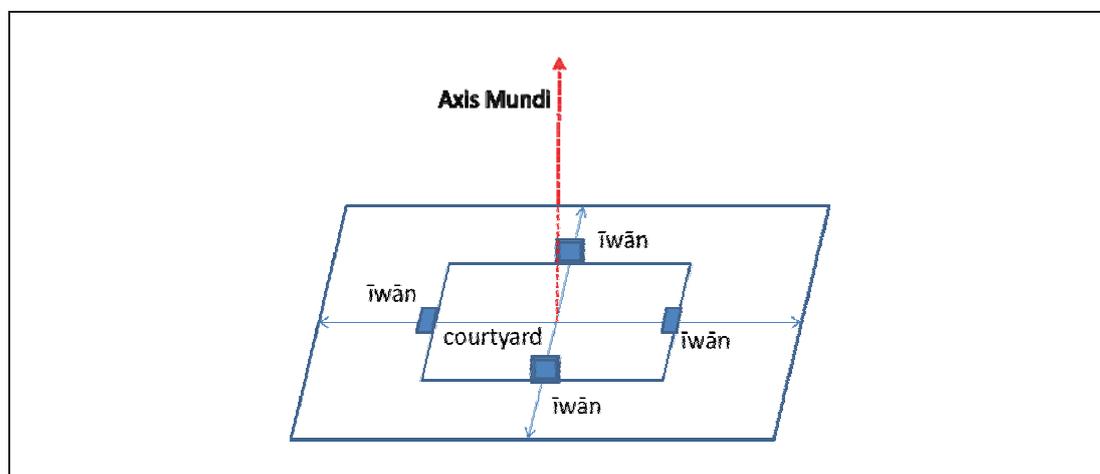


Fig. 1: Spatial orientation of the hierophany of the four and the *Axis Mundi* in a four-*iwān* plan

In the mythological thought, the hierophany of the four can be found in the representations of the four winds, the four seasons, the four elements, the four humours of the human body, the four giants holding the world, etc. In the polytheistic thought, the hierophany of the four

⁶ Cosmic axis, pillar of the world.

evolved in the representation of the four major deities plus one omnipotent central deity, the four castes; the four Vedas, etc.

Upon the ascension of monotheistic beliefs, the hierophany of the four developed further as a representation of the four evangelists (Christianity), four pillars (angels) holding the Throne of God (Islam). In the Old Testament and in the Quran, there are the four rivers of Paradise, emanating from one source (Genesis 2:10 and Sūra 47:15), the four “animalia” and the four major prophets. In the New Testament, there are the four evangelists and the four Gospels that spread across the world, the four *mysteria Christi*, the four cardinal virtues and the vision of the Throned Being amid the four living creatures (Revelation 4).

In the mystical beliefs that accompanied monotheistic thought such as Manichaeism (Christianity), Sufism (Islam), the hierophany of the four remained unchanged. In Sufi cosmology, the fortification of the four world directions has cosmic dimensions, whereby the four spiritual masters (*awtād*, “pegs” or “pillars”) are related to the east, west, north and south. Ibn `Arabī postulates that God preserves one pillar for every direction and one central “pole”, *al-qutb*, which can be interpreted as the cosmic axis (in terms of the representational themes, the equivalent of the hierophany of the *Axis Mundi*).

Along this central *Axis Mundi* humans can transcend through the three cosmic zones: starting from a.) the underworld, the unholy zone (as in the case of tombs, in which the sarcophagus is placed underground, e.g. Gur-i Amir in Samarkand), experiencing the horizontality of b.) the earthly world, the first holy zone, where the earth meets the Heavens (i.e. the building itself, the intersecting axes of the four *īwāns* marking its centre), and proceeding to the verticality of c.) the Heavens, the second or heavenly holy zone (which can be associated with the dome, rising above the point of the intersecting axes as in the *khānaqāhs*).

Since the origin of the hierophany of the four is related to the spatial orientation of man in the world, it acquired spatial representations based on a symmetrical geometrical grid used for centuries along the Silk Road. The origins of such a grid can be traced down to Plato (in the West, with his cosmological dialogue *Timaeus* - one of his best known works in early Islam) and to the mandala (in the East). The hierophany of the four, geometrically transformed in the Cosmic Cross, was adopted in the construction of quadripartite cities (*urbs dei*), palaces, temples (Buddhist stupas – Fig. 2, Hindu temples, Christian cruciform churches and martyria⁷, Islamic four-*īwān* mosques and madrasas – Fig. 3, Sufi domed four-*īwān khānaqāhs* – Fig. 4), and gardens (*čahār bahrs*). Herewith, we should differentiate between two types of sanctuaries based on the mandala. The first type is the centrally organized, square sanctuary with wall openings along the cardinal points (e.g. *vihāra*, stupa). The second type is a square sanctuary, situated in a rectangular courtyard (e.g. the Gupta Temple, the Kailasa Temple). The first type can be architecturally associated with the Islamic tombs, mausoleums and centrally-domed Sufi *khānaqāhs*. The second type can be described as a cosmic prototype of the open-courtyard four-*īwān* mosques, madrasas and caravansarays.

⁷ One of the earliest examples is the martyrium described by Saint Gregory of Nyssa (c.335-394) in Mango, C. *The Art of the Byzantine Empire (312-1453). Sources and Documents*. Prentice-Hall, Englewood, pp.27-28, 1973. It had an octagonal sanctuary inscribed in a circle and four cruciform naves.

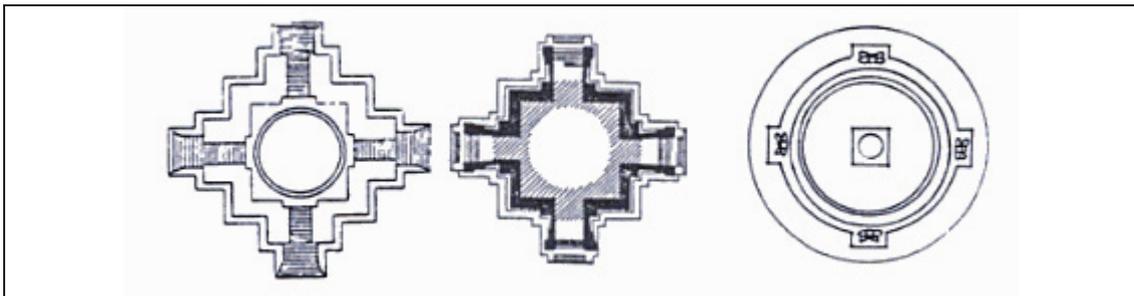


Fig. 2: Plans of stupas with four stairways or four Buddha images in the cardinal points after Snodgrass

Source: Snodgrass: *The Stupa*, 1985, p.132, Fig.75



Fig. 3: Samarkand, isometry of the major Tīmūrid Congregational Mosque Bībī Khānum (1399-1405) after Borodina

Source: Borodina: *Central Asia*, 1985, p.70

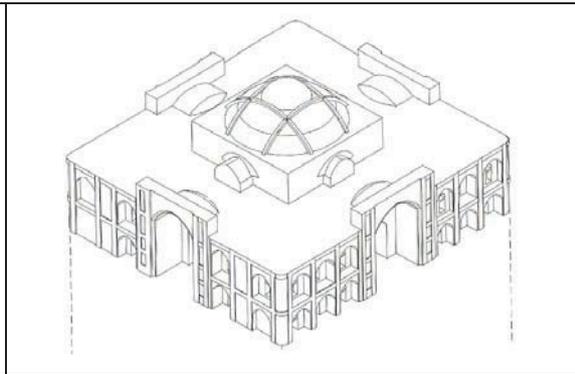


Fig. 4: Bukhara, Bahauddin khānaqāh 16th c. AD, isometry after Gangler, Gaube and Petruccioli

Source: Gangler, Gaube and Petruccioli: *Bukhara*, 2004, p.150

Medieval Islamic architecture can be directly related to Buddhism. One of the best examples that testifies the influence of Buddhist architecture on the development of the four-īwān plan is the Buddhist monastery at Adzhina Tēpa⁸ from the 7th-8th c. AD in present-day Tajikistan (Fig. 5), which consists of two four-īwān courtyards, oriented along the intercardinal points.

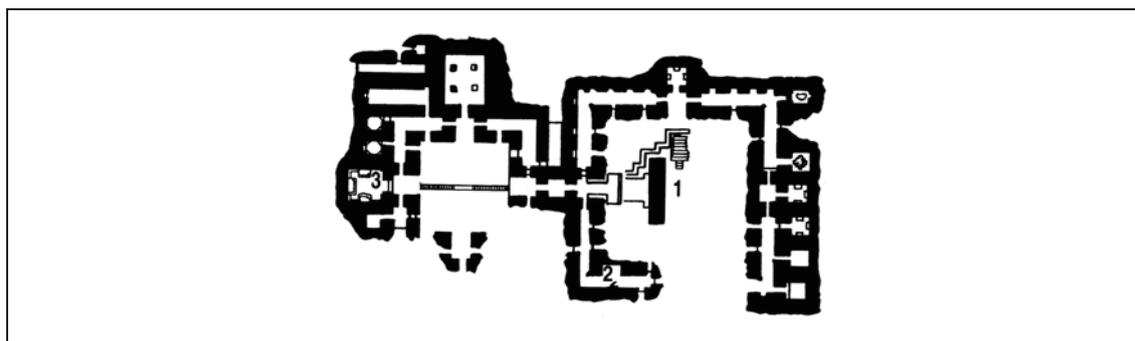


Fig. 5: Adzhina Tēpa, plan of the two courtyards: the monastery to the south-east (to the left) and the main sanctuary with the cross-axial stupa to the northwest (to the right) after Pander

Source: Pander: *Zentralsasien*, 1966, p.42

⁸ Meaning "Devil's Hill".

The main sanctuary has a cross axial stupa in the centre of the four-*īwān* courtyard and two smaller votive cross-axial stupa's in two side chambers. The smaller four-*īwān* courtyard had a residential function and accommodated Buddhist monks. The Buddhist monastery at Adzhina Tepa is very important for the history of the four-*īwān* plan since it underlines the coexistence of Buddhist and Islamic architectural iconography as late as the 7th-8th c. AD. Adzhina Tepa brings forward two major arguments: a) the four-*īwān* plan co-existed with cruciform Buddhist stupas based on the hierophany of the Cosmic Cross and the *Axis Mundi* as late as the 7th-8th c. AD and b) the four-*īwān* plan might have had an Eastern origin related to Buddhism.

I argue that the four-*īwān* plan with the four gates (*īwāns*), ideally denoting the four cardinal points, is a visual representation of the hierophany of the four: the Cosmic Cross and the hierophany of the cosmic centre: the *Axis Mundi*. As I have shown above, the hierophany of the four is very complex and includes many different visual representations, which have evolved in a hierophanic palimpsest throughout time and beyond mythological and religious thought. To analyze the existence and the quintessence of the four-*īwān* plan in terms of exclusively Islamic iconography and architectural morphology would be a limitation, depriving the hierophany of the four of its broader and extremely complex meaning.

In the Buddhist stupas and in the Hindu temples the *Axis Mundi* is clearly represented by the horizontal centre of the mandala and by the verticality of the mountain-like tower. However, the four-*īwān* plan reveals two potential *loci* for the *Axis Mundi*. The one is of course in the centre of the courtyard, which is the geometrical centre of the compound and the intersecting point of the two orthogonal axes (Fig. 1). The second one is the *mīhrāb*, situated in the sanctuary along the *qibla* axis. On the one hand, the imam or the shaykh carrying out the service assumes the function of the cosmic man in the *mīhrāb* and connects metaphorically with the Heavens. On the other hand, the congregation in the courtyard as a whole acts as an *Axis Mundi* and unobstructed by any architectural settings (lack of a cupola) directly connects with the divine reality. These two architectural centers: the centre of the courtyard and the *mīhrāb* can be explained with the hierophanic palimpsest. Primarily, the orthogonal centre of the courtyard was also the locus of the *Axis Mundi* and the most sacred place. However, with the advent of monotheistic thought and with the Islamic necessity to incorporate the *mīhrāb* in the *qibla* as the most sacred locus in the compound, the four-*īwān* plan acquired two hierophanic centres: the centre of the courtyard, marked by the water basin, and the *mīhrāb* niche as the most sacred part of the *qibla*.

All of the above presented architectural sites had clear rectangular boundaries, defined by two intersecting orthogonal axes denoting the four cardinal or semi-cardinal points. The geometrical principles of symmetry were applied ubiquitously to create a representation of the built environment as similar as possible to the creation of the world by God. The geometrical organization of space (as attributed to God) is opposed to the chaos of the profane, unorganized space (in opposition to God's perfection). Creating order in the chaos by means of symmetry is regarded as an ideal topography, the only one that fully represents order and is subject only to God's rules of perfection. The four-*īwān* plan was used to represent political agendas and imperial ambitions. Its hierophanic essence has been utilized to relate to the glorious imperial past by re-evoking the imagery of Paradise in a four-*īwān* setting. The ruler professes his omnipotent divine power as a commissioner of a pious building based on a paradisiacal plan, situated at the centre of an orthogonal imperial capital, representing in turn the totality of the macrocosmic world on a microcosmic scale.

Conclusion

The concept of the *hierophanic palimpsest*, presented above, only stresses the obvious parallels between the Buddhist, Hindu and Islamic orthogonal compounds and opens the debate on the hierophanic essence of their architectural plans. The hierophanies of the *Axis Mundi* and the Cosmic Cross represent architectural traditions based on the same anthropomorphic and physiomorphic beliefs and cosmological schemes that form the architectural heritage along the Silk Road.

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