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## Written Monuments of the Post-Golden Horde Period: Arabic Script Epigraphy at the Arystan-Bab Mausoleum

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**Түйін сөздер:** жазба ескерткіштер,  
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**Ключевые слова:** письменные  
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### Written Monuments of the Post-Golden Horde Period: Arabic Script Epigraphy at the Arystan-Bab Mausoleum

The article presents the results of a study of Arabic-script inscriptions discovered at the Arystan-Bab complex. This complex is an architectural site built near the medieval town of Otrar. Arystan-Bab is known among Islamic preachers as an important figure and a companion of the Prophet Muhammad, as well as the first teacher of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi. It should be noted that the construction of the Arystan-Bab mausoleum consists of four main stages: (1) the 12<sup>th</sup> century; (2) the 14<sup>th</sup> century; (3) the 18<sup>th</sup> century; and (4) the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The aim of the article is to study the epigraphic inscriptions carved on the façade of the mausoleum and found within it. The research materials include data collected by the staff of the Suleimenov Institute of Oriental Studies in the Turkistan region in 2023. The research methods employed in the article include image documentation, inscription deciphering, literal translation, and reconstruction of the semantic phrases carved into the stone. The results of the study involve familiarization with the inscriptions, identification of their nature, and an attempt to characterize the authors of these epigraphic monuments. The conclusions of the research are directed toward the study and introduction of new data obtained from the study of the Arystan-Bab mausoleum inscriptions into the scientific discourse.

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**Алтын Орда кезеңінен кейінгі  
жазба ескерткіштер:  
Арыстан баб кесенесінің  
арабжазулы эпиграфикасы**

Мақалада Арыстан баб кешенінен табылған араб жазуларын зерттеу нәтижелері берілген. Ол орта-ғасырлық Отырар қаласына жақын жерге салынған архитектуралық құрылыс. Арыстан баб ислам дінін уағыздаушылар арасында маңызды тұлға әрі Мұхаммед пайғамбардың сахабасы, Қожа Ахмет Ясауидің алғашқы ұстазы ретінде белгілі. Арыстан баб кесенесінің құрылысы негізгі төрт кезеңнен тұрады: 1) XII ғасыр; 2) XIV ғасыр; 3) XVIII ғасыр; 4) XX ғасыр. Мақаланың мақсаты – кесененің қасбетіне қашалған және ішінен табылған эпиграфиялық жазуларды зерттеу. Зерттеу материалдары – Р.Б. Сүлейменов атындағы Шығыстану институты қызметкерлерінің 2023 жылы Түркістан облысына іссапары кезінде жиналған мәліметтер. Мақалада қолданылатын зерттеу әдістері – суреттерді құжаттау, жазулардың мәнін ашу, сөзбе-сөз аудару және тастарға ойылған семантикалық сөз тіркестерін қайта құру. Зерттеу нәтижелері жазулардың сипатын анықтау және онымен танысу, сондай-ақ, осы эпиграфиялық ескерткіштердің авторларын сипаттауға тырысу болып табылады. Зерттеу қорытындылары Арыстан баб кесенесіндегі жазуларды зерделеу барысында алынған жаңа деректерді зерттеуге және ғылыми айналымға енгізуге бағытталған.

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## 1 Introduction

Epigraphy studies the forms and content of inscriptions made on hard surfaces, such as stone, clay, and metal. It is an auxiliary discipline in both history and philology. Kazakhstan, as a rich region for epigraphic monuments, holds significant cultural heritage in its inscriptions. These monuments serve as valuable sources for understanding tribal societies and their historical habitats.

The history of epigraphy in Kazakhstan is divided into three distinct periods: (1) Ancient monuments of the Turkic Khaganate period (6<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> centuries), which include Orkhon-Yenisei inscriptions, often referred

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**Письменные памятники  
постзолотоордынского периода:  
арабописьменная эпиграфика  
мавзолея Арыстан-Баб**

В статье представлены результаты изучения арабописьменных надписей, обнаруженных в комплексе Арыстан-Баб. Он представляет собой архитектурное сооружение, построенное недалеко от средневекового городища Оtrar. Арыстан-Баб известен среди проповедников ислама как важная фигура и сподвижник пророка Мухаммеда, первого учителя Ходжи Ахмеда Ясави. Отметим, что строительство мавзолея Арыстан-Баб включает четыре основных этапа: 1) XII век; 2) XIV век; 3) XVIII век; 4) XX век. Цель статьи заключается в изучении эпиграфических надписей, высеченных на фасаде мавзолея и обнаруженных внутри. Материалами исследования являются данные, собранные сотрудниками Института востоковедения им. Р.Б. Сүлейменова в Туркестанской области в 2023 году. Методы исследования, используемые в статье, включают документирование изображений, расшифровку надписей, дословный перевод и воссоздание семантических фраз, высеченных в камне. Результаты исследования заключаются в ознакомлении с надписями и определении их характера, а также в попытке охарактеризовать авторов этих эпиграфических памятников. Выводы исследования направлены на изучение и введение в научный оборот новых данных, полученных в ходе изучения надписей мавзолея Арыстан-Баб.

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to as Turkic runic monuments in Central Asia; (2) Monuments of the Middle Ages (9<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> centuries), created by tribes such as the Kipchaks, Oghuzes, and Kanglys, particularly near the Syr Darya and Amu Darya rivers; (3) Monuments of the Kipchak-Kazakh period (13<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> centuries), dating to the late Middle Ages [Margulan 1997: 33]. This research paper focuses on the study of monuments from the last period, which was divided into three stages by academic A. Margulan.

In particular, the epigraphic monuments in the Arabic script located in the Turkistan region of Southern Kazakhstan remain largely unexplored, while the lapidary heritage of Western Kazakhstan, especially its tombstones, has been thoroughly studied. Recent Kazakhstani scholars, such as A. Muminov, A. Nurmanova, and B. Dyussenov, have made significant contributions to the study, publication, and introduction of texts from epigraphic monuments into scholarly discourse. Their contributions are of great importance in this field. For example, significant publications have emerged from their work, such as *Shaqpaq-Ata: Inscriptions of the Underground Mosque and Necropolis* (2009), *Arabographic Inscriptions of Sisem Ata Necropolis* (2015), and *Epigraphic Monuments in Arabic Script from Abat-Baytaq Necropolis* (2023). These publications represent groundbreaking efforts in the professional and academic study of Arabic-scripted epigraphic monuments in the Kazakh Steppe.

Among the few scientific studies on the epigraphic monuments in the south of Kazakhstan, the book-album *Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi* (2010) occupies a special place. This work is a valuable contribution to the study of the architectural epigraphy of Ahmed Yasawi's mausoleum. There are other books, such as *Arystan Bab and his Mausoleum* by M. Qozhaev [Qozhaev 1996], *The tombstone in the cemetery of Arystan Bab* by S. Aqylbek [Aqylbek 2000] and *Historical figures buried in Turkistan* by M. Tuyaqbayev [Tuyaqbaev 2000]. Beyond these monographs, several academic articles on related topics have also been published. Of particular note is the article by D. Baigunakov and G. Sabdenova titled *Muslim Tombstones of Karnak (Turkistan Region) as a Historical-Archaeological Source* [Baigunakov, Sabdenova 2021], which offers a detailed classification of gravestone forms from the Karnak cemetery, categorizing them into nine distinct groups.

The study of Arabic-script epigraphic monuments preserved in Southern Kazakhstan represents a highly relevant and urgent area of research. Historically, it is well-documented that burial practices near sacred sites – such as the Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi in Turkistan, the Imam Bakhili cemetery near Karnak, and the Arystan-Bab Mausoleum near Otrar – held significant religious and cultural value for Muslim communities. Several of the epigraphic monuments in the Turkistan region have been researched and published; however, many gravestones remain unexamined, awaiting scholarly attention. To address this gap, we have initiated a study of the epigraphy of the Arystan-Bab Mausoleum, focusing on inscriptions from the post-Golden Horde period. Although the original structure of the Arystan-Bab Mausoleum dates back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, no inscriptions from that time have survived. Fieldwork conducted at the site of the Arystan-Bab Mausoleum near Otrar has yielded the discovery of three gravestones. By analyzing and translating the texts of these gravestones, along with the inscriptions on the mausoleum's façade, and introducing them into academic discourse, this research aims to provide new insights into the Islamic civilization, literary culture, stone-carving craftsmanship, and social conditions that prevailed in the region. Moreover, this work seeks to uncover previously unknown aspects of Kazakhstan's history, offering new primary sources that will support future research in the field.

As a result of the study, it was established that the tombstones of some historical figures buried in the mausoleum of Khoja Akhmet Yasawi in Turkistan were buried in the Arystan-Bab cemetery near the city of Otrar. The names of these people are included in the list of historical figures buried in Turkistan, according to their descendants.



## **2 Research material and methods**

### **2.1 Research methods**

The research methodology applied in the study of epigraphic monuments include a comprehensive range of historical, source-critical, philological, paleographic, textual, chronological, ethnolinguistic, and comparative analytical techniques. Relevant works by foreign, Soviet, and Kazakh scholars in the field of Eastern epigraphy were systematically utilized, ensuring the proper alignment and contextual relevance of these sources. The collected data were critically analyzed, categorized, and evaluated, leading to the formulation of informed recommendations based on the findings. Furthermore, the examination of written artifacts from the post-Golden Horde period – specifically the gravestone inscriptions of the successor states of the Zhoshy Ulysy – employed methods of transcription, translation, comparative analysis, and interpretation, all of which contributed significantly to the scientific rigor and outcomes of the research.

**2.2** Modern analog of photofixation has significantly facilitated the work of scholars studying epigraphic monuments. The colored photographs analyzed in this article were captured during a scientific expedition, and the methodology applied combines photographic reproduction with transcription and translation. In the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, the predominant research methods include photography and transcription of inscriptions. To ensure the accuracy of photographic documentation, researchers worked to minimize light aberrations that could distort the clarity of the images. As a result, inscriptions were read directly during the photofixation process. Key factors such as image contrast, optimal camera positioning, and an assessment of the carving depth were considered to make certain the inscriptions could be read accurately. Importantly, the integrity of the text was maintained because the monument is under state protection, ensuring that the inscriptions were not exposed to contamination [Gainullin et al. 2023].

**2.3** In addition to photofixation, the study applied the principle of experimental repeatability to confirm that the text was translated literally and without distortion. This method allowed for the remote examination of the monument's inscriptions. As part of a comprehensive study, a comparative analysis was conducted on the epigraphic monuments located inside the Arystan-Bab mausoleum and those found on its exterior. These inscriptions vary significantly, having been produced by different individuals at different times. Additionally, the researchers sought to systematize historical records and investigate Islamic manuscripts that mention the construction of the mausoleum. In this context, historical analysis was essential for comparing the events related to the construction and successive reconstructions of the Arystan-Bab mausoleum, a monument dedicated to one of Central Asia's revered Muslim saints.

### **2.4 Research materials**

The primary materials for this study were obtained during an expedition conducted in 2023 by the staff of the Suleimenov Institute of Oriental Studies, aimed at investigating the epigraphic monuments of the Turkistan region. The fieldwork materials underwent thorough post-field analysis. The sources used in this research include inscriptions found on the façade of the Arystan-Bab Mausoleum, as well as on stelas (gravestones) located within the structure. Specifically, the study focuses on reading, translating, and analyzing three gravestones preserved on the mausoleum's façade and inside the building. These monuments date back to the 20<sup>th</sup> century reconstruction of the mausoleum. Several stone stelas inside the mausoleum bear Arabic inscriptions, each corresponding to a particular phase of the monument's restoration.

Folklore and legends passed down through generations confirm that the tomb dates to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, while the mausoleum itself was constructed in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Additional evidence includes a manuscript book by Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, *Divan-i Hikmet*, which is preserved in the Otrar Museum Reserve [Yasawi



1281]. In this manuscript, it is mentioned that the saint was buried near the “Qabugh Yariq – قَبوُغ يَارِيْق” an ancient canal. Indeed, a well is located near the mausoleum, further corroborating this account.

### 3 Discussion

The article draws attention to the inscription on the façade of the Arystan-Bab Mausoleum. Consequently, it also necessitates addressing the stages of the mausoleum’s construction and exploring the historical question of who Arystan-Bab was. The burial process, the construction of the mausoleum, and its subsequent restorations span over a millennium. Each restoration left its mark, as the restorers inscribed texts documenting the work done up to certain periods.

Arystan-Bab is a semi-legendary figure for Muslims in Central Asia. His cult is associated with natural forces and water sources, and his image evolved through various influences, including legends from the Qahtanites and Kaysanites, as well as theological contributions from scholars such as Najm ad-Din al-Nasafi (who died in 1142). According to these legends, Arystan-Bab lived for approximately 340 years, loved cultivating fruit trees, and was described as a tall man. The phenomenon of Shaikh longevity in Otrar was noted by a fairly early source – *Al-Kand fi Zikir ‘ulama’ Samarkand* by Abu Hafis al-Nasafi. It reports that in Farab (Otrar) in the 11<sup>th</sup> century there lived an elderly (he was 340 years old or more) companion of the Prophet Yahya ibn Nasturr al-Rumi. He transmitted 14 hadiths directly from the Prophet [Muminov 2016: 691].

One of the most famous legends depicts the meeting between the Prophet Muhammad and Arystan-Bab. According to the story, when a persimmon fell from the Prophet’s plate, he received a prophecy about a future Muslim named Ahmed, who would be born 400 years later. The Prophet asked his companions to deliver the persimmon to Ahmed, and Arystan-Bab volunteered. After living for 400 years, Arystan-Bab fulfilled his promise by giving the persimmon to the young Khoja Ahmed Yasawi. [Köprülü 2016: 28].

In this legend, the persimmon symbolizes the spiritual legacy of the Prophet Muhammad. When Arystan-Bab gave the “persimmon preserved in his mouth” to Ahmed, it signified the transmission of Sufi wisdom and divine knowledge from the Prophet to his spiritual successor [Bice 2016: 68]. This is particularly significant in Yasawi teachings, where expressions involving food often convey Sufi ideas [Yasawi 2021: 9].

The original mausoleum of Arystan-Bab, built in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, was destroyed during the Mongol invasions. However, Timur’s 14<sup>th</sup> century efforts to build a mausoleum for Khoja Ahmed Yasawi renewed attention on the site of Arystan-Bab. According to legend, each time builders tried to erect the Yasawi Mausoleum, a mysterious green bull would appear and destroy the walls. Finally, Timur had a dream in which he was instructed to first build a mausoleum for Arystan-Bab. After fulfilling this task, construction on the Yasawi Mausoleum proceeded without any difficulties [Masson 1930: 21]. Numerous similar legends about Arystan-Bab exist among the people. As the renowned American scholar Devin DeWeese notes, Arystan-Bab remains an “enigmatic figure” [DeWeese 2001: 220].

The mausoleum of Arystan-Bab has been studied by various researchers over the years, contributing to the understanding of its historical and architectural significance. In 1898, I.T. Poslavsky mentioned it in his article *Ruins of the City of Otrar*, focusing on its location and characteristics [Poslavsky 1898]. A few years later, in 1903, A. Cherkasov, from the Turkistan Club of Amateur Archaeologists, provided a report that highlighted his astonishment at the tombstone’s large size, suggesting that the saint might have had an equally imposing stature [Cherkasov 1903: 71–72]. Josef-Antoine Castagné also mentioned the mausoleum before its 1909 reconstruction in his work *Antiquities of the Kyrgyz Steppe and the Orenburg Region* [Castagné 1910: 178].





In the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, a new wave of studies began. V. Konstantinova initiated her research on the mausoleum in 1948, and her findings were published in 1950 [Konstantinova 1950]. In 1959, M.M. Mendikulov expanded on this work as part of the Central and South Kazakhstan expeditions, adding more details about the architectural complex [Mendikulov 2010: 190–192].

By the 1970s, researchers like G. Isabaev examined the mausoleum from an architectural perspective, noting features of Islamic architecture from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. He observed that certain modernist elements were present in the structure [Isabaev 1990: 40–45]. Y. Yolgin proposed that the mausoleum's architecture combined influences from Central Asia, the Volga region, and European styles such as Gothic and Renaissance, reflecting an eclectic mix of styles in a single building [Yolgin 2012: 152].

In 1987, M. Sembin explored the mausoleum's long history, dating its origin back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century. His research also focused on an inscription in one of the niches that dated back to 1327 AH (1909 AD), which is discussed further in the results section [Sembin 1987: 42].

Inside the mausoleum, three gravestones made from the material known to the Kazakh people as “Samarkand blue stone” have been preserved. Similar gravestone examples can be found at the Khoja Ahmed Yasawi Mausoleum [Tuyaqbayev 2000] and among the stones preserved in the town of Karnak [Baigunakov, Sabdenova 2021]. Additionally, we encountered an identical stone inside the Isabek Ishan Mausoleum located in Akkol, near Ekibastuz, Pavlodar region [Mederova et al. 2020]. These three gravestones, carved from Samarkand blue stone, are clear representatives of the so-called “Turkistan-style” epigraphic monuments. The research aims to clarify many unresolved issues related to these gravestones and their significance.

#### **4 Results**

The architectural complex of the Arystan-Bab mausoleum includes both a mosque and a tomb where the saint Arystan-Bab is buried. Restored in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the mausoleum measures 35×12 m and is constructed of burnt brick, with front brickwork walls. The elongated façade features two minarets above a two-chamber tomb. In one of the rooms lies the large grave of Arystan-Bab, while the other room holds the graves of his followers: Hermet-Hazrat, Lashyn-Bab, and Qargha-Bab [Konstantinova 1950: 23]. A corridor connects the tomb to a small room within the mosque.

The complex was built in stages, beginning with the gurkhana (tombs), which were later linked to the mosque. The mosque itself is square-shaped and consists of a spacious hall and two service rooms connected by passageways. A long corridor with an ogive connects the mosque and the gurkhana, which also includes a small hall. Over time, additional structures were added, such as a room in the center, towers at the edges of the complex, and trapezoidal supports.

The exterior is further enhanced by minarets, which primarily serve as decorative elements rather than functional ones. The left minaret is non-operational and was never used for its intended purpose. In contrast, the right minaret includes an open skylight and a wooden staircase, possibly built for the purpose of reciting the azan (call to prayer) in memory of the saint and his disciples.

In 2004, as part of the Cultural Heritage program, excavations were conducted in the mausoleum. These revealed bricks from a tomb built in the 12<sup>th</sup> century beneath the tombstone. This older tomb was oriented in an east-west direction. According to S. Aqylbek, the mausoleum built over the saint's tomb in the 14<sup>th</sup> century was reoriented by 90 degrees [Aqylbek 2009: 92]. The burial pit was lined with bricks, and inside it was a wooden coffin, a typical feature of Turkic tribes. However, due to the numerous reconstructions, the polychrome cladding from the Timur era has not survived.

Precise information regarding the final construction of the Arystan-Bab Mausoleum is found in an Arabic epigraphic inscription on the building's wall. According to Josef-Antoine Castagné, earlier



inscriptions have not survived [Castagné 1910: 179]. V. Konstantinova miscalculated the date on the mausoleum's signboard, translating it as 1907 instead of 1909 [Konstantinova 1950]. Notably, the mausoleum had been rebuilt at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century after the earlier structure was destroyed, as noted by M. Mendikulov [Mendikulov 2010: 191].

In his work on Arystan-Bab, M. Sembin referred to O. Dastanov's book, *The Truth about the Holy Places* [Dastanov 1967: 43], which credits Iskender Hadji from Tashkent as the architect of the mausoleum. An inscription on the mausoleum's wall reads, "1327. Master Khalmyrza ibn Mussafir Turkistani," as translated from Arabic by S. Ergobekov, following a request from the scholar Mukhtar Qozhaev [Qozhaev 1996: 20].

During an expedition from May 2 to May 12, 2023, the team from the Suleimenov Institute of Oriental Studies documented the epigraphic monuments of the Arystan-Bab complex. This expedition included photographing and translating inscriptions from Arabic (translated by Bagdat Dyussenov). The name of the master responsible for the mausoleum's reconstruction is carved above the façade. While the translation of this inscription has been known to both local residents and specialists for some time, the Arabic script itself had not been fully published or clearly read. This study aims to present the materials gathered during the expedition.

The complex consists of two primary parts: the mosque and the gurkhana. At the entrance to the complex, the main aiwan features an Arabic inscription carved into a grey stone known internationally as the "Samarkand blue stone." The inscription on the qulpytas reads "Hijri sana 1327 – ١٣٢٧ هجري سنة", where "sana" means "year" in Arabic (fig. 1)\* (\*Photos taken by Bagdat Dyussenov). The photograph of this inscription has been processed with computer cleaning to enhance its clarity for study.



Fig. 1. Mausoleum of Arystan-Bab. Inscription on the entrance portal  
1-сур. Арыстан-Баб кесенесі. Кіреберіс маңдайшадағы жазба  
Рис. 1. Мавзолей Арыстан-Баб. Надпись на портале при входе

The inscriptions on the facade of the building, carved by the original craftsmen, differ from the modern inscription displayed on the signboard. The year of construction, 1327, is inscribed on the facade in Arabic script, corresponding to 1909. However, the contemporary inscription reads: "The Arystan-Bab Mausoleum, dated to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, was reconstructed in 1907. The monument is under state protection" (fig. 2). This statement is factually incorrect.

In our opinion, the modern signboard, which incorrectly indicates 1907 as the year of reconstruction instead of 1909, should either be removed or replaced with a new one bearing the following text: "The Arystan-Bab Mausoleum, dated to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, was reconstructed in 1909 by the master Khalmyrza, the son of Musafir of Turkistan."



Fig. 2. Mausoleum of Arystan-Bab. Inscription on the left side of the entrance  
2-сур. Арыстан-Баб кесенесі. Кіреберіс сол жақтағы жазба  
Рис. 2. Мавзолей Арыстан-Баб. Надпись на левой стороне при входе

On the side wall of the building, there is an inscription carved in five rows, naming the master who reconstructed the mausoleum. The first row contains the year ۱۳۲۷, corresponding to 1327. This corresponds to the year 1909 in the Gregorian calendar. The numbers are inscribed on the top brick. On the subsequent bricks (second, third, and fourth), a calligraphic inscription in the nasta‘liq style provides the surname, name, and patronymic of the master who undertook the reconstruction. The fifth and final row

contains the word *ترکستانی*, meaning “Turkistani.” The full inscription on the side wall of the building appears as follows:

An inscription carved on the facade of the mausoleum of Arystan-Bab (fig. 3).

Text:

- |           |    |
|-----------|----|
| ۱۳۲۷      | .1 |
| اوستا     | .2 |
| خالمیرزا  | .3 |
| بن موسافر | .4 |
| ترکستانی  | .5 |

Transcription: 1327/1909. Ustā Ḥālmīrẓā ibn Mūsāfir Turkistānī.

Translation: 1327/1909. The master of Khalmyrza, the son of Musafir of Turkistan.

There is limited information regarding master Khalmyrza, the son of Musafir (fig. 4)\* (\*Photo from the Archive of the Mausoleum of Arystan-Bab), who oversaw the construction of the Arystan-Bab Mausoleum. At the



Fig. 3. Mausoleum of Arystan-Bab. Inscription at the top  
3-сур. Арыстан-Баб кесенесі. Жоғарғы бөліктегі жазба  
Рис. 3. Мавзолей Арыстан-Баб. Надпись в верхней части





age of six, Khalmyrza began creating household items and later became renowned as an architect and artist. In 1903, with the commencement of the Turkistan railway project, he worked as a master builder. Between 1907 and 1909, he constructed the Arystan-Bab Mosque-Mausoleum. Subsequently, Khalmyrza, the son of Musafir undertook the reconstruction of the Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi. From 1931 to 1936, he was responsible for building the Zhambyl Secondary School in the city of Shaulder. In 1937, after reading in a newspaper about the opening of a marble factory in Ghazelkent, Bostandyq District, Uzbekistan (currently), he relocated there. He continued to contribute to the construction of schools, mausoleums, and mosques until the end of his life.

According to Gulnara Daurenkulova, a researcher at the Republican State-Financed Enterprise “Otrar State Archaeological Reserve Museum” Khalmyrza’s wife, Sara, still resides in Tashkent. According to Grandmother Sara, a year before his death, that is, in 1960, Khalmyrza instructed his eldest son to dig a wide grave for him. He wrapped three bags of ancient books stored in the mausoleum of Arystan-Bab in a white cloth, put them in this grave and walled up the surface of the grave with temporary bricks. In 1961, in the month of Ramadan, Khalmyrza died and was buried according to his will in this grave [Babtardying baby 2018]. A small museum has been established in one of the rooms of the Arystan-Bab Mausoleum, where a copy of master Khalmyrza’s shirt, his portrait, and a photo of the mosque named after him are displayed.

According to studies on the construction of the mausoleum, the building went through four distinct phases. However, the exact reason behind the construction of the final stage in 1909 is not clearly stated. Local oral history suggests that the earlier construction from Timur’s era was damaged by an earthquake. In its place, a two-room mausoleum was built in 1860. By 1907, Sherimbek Azder began collecting funds from the local population and commissioned a craftsman from Tashkent, Eskendir Haji, to carry out restoration work. However, the restoration was not completed. In 1909, a new structure was built on the site of the mausoleum.



Fig. 4. Portrait of the Master Khalmyrza Musafiruly Turkistani  
4-сур. Халмырза Мұсафирұлы Түркістани ұстаның портреті

Рис. 4. Портрет мастера Халмырза Мусафирулы Туркестани

This final phase of construction demonstrates influences from Russian architectural styles of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, a departure from the traditional designs seen in religious buildings across Kazakhstan and Central Asia. This marks the uniqueness of the Arystan-Bab Mausoleum compared to earlier religious structures in the region. The majority of the mausoleum was constructed using rectangular and square-shaped baked bricks characteristic of Tsarist-era architecture.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the goal of reconstructing the ruined mausoleum, a local Muslim organization from Otrar in the Turkistan region raised funds for the project, with Khalmyrza Musafiruly chosen as the lead builder.

At this time, Kazakhstan was under the full colonial control of the Russian Empire, and the religious climate in the country was varied. In certain areas, missionary groups from Russia, supported by the Tsarist government, sought to suppress Islam and promote Christianity, opening parish schools to this end. At the same time, Jadidism, a modernist movement within Islam, was gaining ground in Central Asia with the backing of the Russian Empire, leading to conflicts with the traditionalist Qadim school of thought [Shagyrbay 2022: 134–135]. It seems likely that the local Muslim



organization, led by descendants of Sherimbek Azder, who served as the mausoleum's caretaker, initiated the reconstruction of the Arystan-Bab Mausoleum as part of a broader effort to preserve the integrity of Islamic practices and heritage in the region.

To undertake this construction, permission from the Russian authorities was necessary. Although no formal letters requesting permission have been found, a document titled *Project of the Existing Mosque in Timur, Chimkent Uyezd* was discovered in 1911. According to M. Qozhaev, who uncovered this drawing, "This project represents the official approval of the building by the Syr Darya provincial construction department after the mosque was completed" [Qozhaev 1996: 28]. This suggests that after the construction was finished with the funds collected from the population, the project was formally approved through such documentation.

The construction was led by Khalmyrza Musafiruly, a local Kazakh craftsman. From this work, it is evident that the Kazakh people had a tradition of building mausoleums, tombs, and other sacred structures, showcasing their architectural skills. The Arystan-Bab Mausoleum stands as a clear testament to this local tradition of craftsmanship and architectural ingenuity.

The cemetery surrounding the Arystan-Bab Mausoleum covers an area of approximately 11 hectares, encompassing nearly the entire vicinity of the mausoleum, except for its northwestern part. The cemetery contains graves dating back to the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. According to local legend, Arystan-Bab was buried where the camel carrying his body came to a halt. Archaeological excavations have revealed an ancient cemetery near the Quiryq Tobe settlement, with burials dating from the 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, indicating the subsequent expansion of the burial site. Scholar S. Aqylbek has suggested that the cemetery near the mausoleum was established following the saint's burial, likely during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. In his research, S. Aqylbek examines approximately 94 tombstones with epitaphs located in the old Muslim cemetery. His classification is based on the stone processing techniques, calligraphy, and stylistic features of the epitaphs.

The oldest qulpytas belongs to Bakhtiyar, the son of Yelkondy, and dates to 1130 (1718), while the most recent ones date to 1336 (1914). Among tombstones, the Bosagha and Baqan tamgas (tribal symbols) of the Naiman tribes, as well as the Qos Alyp and Ashamay tamgas of the Kipchak and Kerey tribes, are inscribed. The epitaphs are written in the nasta'liq calligraphy style. Additionally, solar symbols, represented as stars, are carved on some tombstones, which were used in burial rituals [Aqylbek 2000: 8].

S. Aqylbek's work, *Gravestones on the Grave of Arystan-Bab*, is the first dedicated study of the tombstones within the Arystan-Bab complex. Out of 94 tombstones studied, the inscriptions on two stones (No. 7 and 68) have not been deciphered due to significant erosion. Furthermore, as there are no photographs of these stones in Aqylbek's book, it remains unclear whether the Arabic text has been correctly interpreted. While the book includes images of several tombstones, some inscriptions are repeated. For instance, the photos of tombstones No. 13 [Aqylbek 2000: fig. 2] and No. 53 [Aqylbek 2000: fig. 12, a, b] are of the same stone, with the inclusion of No. 13 seemingly due to an editorial error [Aqylbek 2000: 17, 29].

Although our expedition thoroughly examined the cemetery near the Arystan-Bab Mausoleum, no tombstones bearing Arabic inscriptions attributed to Arystan-Bab himself were found. Inside the mausoleum, we found three tombstones with Arabic inscriptions, documented, translated and analyzed them. In the book mentioned above, Aqylbek reports that "94 tombstones were discovered, three of which were brought to the mausoleum by unknown persons" [Aqylbek 2000: 7], but it is unclear exactly which stones.

The shape of *Tombstone No. 1* (fig. 5), preserved within the Arystan-Bab mausoleum, is triangular, with its edges worn down and not sharp. The tombstone measures 70.05 cm in length and 10.03 cm in



width. On the front face of the stone, a carved frame consisting of three sections contains the inscription of a person's name. Outside the frame, the “Bosagha” tamga of the Qongyrat tribe is carved, followed by the year, and further below, the Muslim “Kalima” (Islamic creed) is inscribed. The inscriptions and the emblem on the stone are engraved in relief. There are no inscriptions or symbols on the other two sides of the tombstone.



Fig. 5. Front side of the qulpytas No. 1  
5-сур. № 1 құлпытастың алдыңғы беті  
Рис. 5. Лицевая сторона құлпытаса № 1

An epitaph is engraved on the front side of the gravestone monument (fig. 5).

Text:

1. منكه ه ابن باى سيد ۱۲۸۰ لا اله الا الله محمد رسول الله

Transcription: Mönke ibn Bāy Seyid 1280 (1864). Lā ilāha illā Allāh Muhammad Rasūl Allāh

Translation: Monke ibn Bai-Seyid 1280 (1864). There is no deity but Allāh; Muhammad is the Messenger of God.

According to our analysis, this stela belongs to Monke, the son of Baiseit, a conclusion that aligns with S. Aqylbek's findings. However, the text on the other two qulpytases diverges from Aqylbek's interpretation.

*Tombstone No. 2* (fig. 6) is divided into two parts. On the front face of the triangular monument, Arabic script is engraved within a single cartouche. On both sides of the cartouche, there are representations of a seven-pointed sun symbol within a circle, which is a widespread official symbol frequently found on stones referred to as “Samarkand blue stone”. The tombstone measures 80.05 cm in length and 10.03 cm in width.



Fig. 6. Front side of the qulpytas No. 2  
6-сур. № 2 құлпытастың алдыңғы беті  
Рис. 6. Лицевая сторона құлпытаса № 2



An epitaph is engraved on the front surface of the second qulpytas (fig. 6).

Text:

1. بسم ملا بن شالكاه باى...

Transcription: Bism... Mullā bin Šālkāhbāy...

Translation: Bismi [Built in the name of] ... Mullā, the son of Shalkebay ...

In the list of stones translated by S. Aqylbek, there is a similar tombstone marked with the No. 38 [Aqylbek 2000: 25]. Since he describes that the stone is split in two, there are inscriptions on both sides, the description is similar in all respects, but he concludes that the inscriptions on the front surface are unreadable. The photo of the stone is not presented. That's why we don't know if it's this stone or not.

There are inscriptions on both edges of the tombstone. On the *right side of tombstone No. 2* (fig. 7) is written the Muslim “Kalima”. The stone is carved in a trapezoidal shape with a flattened front side and a smaller lower side, due to which the stone appears to be triangular in shape.



Fig. 7. Right side of the qulpytas No. 2  
7-сур. № 2-құлпытастың оң жақ қыры  
Рис. 7. Правая сторона құлпытаса № 2

Text:

1. لا اله الا الله محمد رسول الله

Translation: There is no deity but Allāh; Muhammad is the Messenger of God

*The left side of tombstone No. 2:*



Fig. 8. Left side of the qulpytas No. 2  
8-сур. № 2 құлпытастың сол жақ қыры  
Рис. 8. Левая сторона құлпытаса № 2





Text (fig. 8):

1. بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم الله لا اله الا هو الحي القيوم لا تأخذه سنة ولا نوم له ما في السماوات وما في الارض
2. من ذا الذي يشفع عنده الا باذنه يعلم ما بين ايديهم وما خلفهم ولا يحيطون بشيء من علمه الا بما شاء
3. وسع كرسيه السموات والارض ولا يؤده حفظهما وهو العلي العظيم

Translation of “Āyatal-Kursī” (Coran 2: 255):

In the Name of Allah, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful. Allah – there is no deity except Him, the Ever-Living, the Sustainer of [all] existence. Neither drowsiness overtakes Him nor sleep. To Him belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth. Who is it that can intercede with Him except by His permission? He knows what is [presently] before them and what will be after them, and they encompass not a thing of His knowledge except for what He wills. His Kursi extends over the heavens and the earth, and their preservation tires Him not. And He is the Most High, the Most Great [Surah-translation].

*Tombstone No. 3* found inside the mausoleum (fig. 9) is triangular. Decorating this stone is very simple. On the front of the stone there is a Muslim “Kalima” text and the name and year of the owner of the stone. There is no inscription on the other two sides of the stone. The epitaph on the front surface of the stone is engraved. The length of the tombstone is 70.05 cm, the width is 10.03 cm.



Fig. 9. Left side of the qulpytas No. 3  
9-сур. № 3 құлпытасың сол жақ қыры  
Рис. 9. Левая сторона кулпытаса № 3

Text (fig. 9):

1. لا اله الا الله محمد رسول الله اشهد ان لا اله الا الله و اشهد ان...
2. اوزغر بن حرچن خواجه بن جهانكر ۱۲۱۰ سنه

Translation:

There is no deity but Allāh; Muhammad is the Messenger of God.  
I bear witness that there is no god, but Allah and I bear witness that...  
Ozghyr ibn Khorshun Khoja ibn Jahangir, 1210 (1795).

Since the inscription on the stone is not clearly visible, it takes a lot of practice to read people’s names correctly. “Turkic onomastics in funerary epigraphy is undoubtedly one of the most challenging areas of study. Epigraphists typically approach these issues in various ways, often consulting the indexes of academic dictionary publications, including those on onomastics, as well as editions of Turkic epic literature.” [Babadjanov, Kurumbaev 2023: 627–628]. If we consider this tombstone in accordance with these requirements, then we can notice the names of two noble families: Genghisids (Jahangir) and Khojas (Khorshun Khoja), whom the Kazakhs called “ақ сүйек – white bone, meaning aristocrat”. In those days, there were Genghisids who followed the path of Tariqa. Three social strata of Kazakhs are represented on this tombstone: son Ozgyr (in Turkic, “be ahead”), father Khorshun Khoja (name of Khoja), grandfather Jahangir (name of Genghisids). Analyzing these anthroponyms, it is possible to understand how the names



of people reflected the political, spiritual, genealogical, and social conditions in the country.

The study of gravestones may necessitate revisions to the classifications established in previous research. Notably, the esteemed scholar B. Babadjanov has articulated the following perspective: “The investigation of the epigraphy of tombstones introduces its own corrections to the accepted classification” [Babadjanov 2023: 209]. “However, the use of the term *qulpytas* to “tombstones” – stone structures of horizontally stepped design directly above the grave (which is present in a number of dictionaries of the Kazakh language, individual publications) – is incorrect: the term *qabir tas* (lit. “grave/tombstone”) is more acceptable for designating “stone tombstones” [Azhigaly 2023: 24]. In the Turkistan region, gravestones are represented by horizontal stepped structures. However, in both popular usage and research works, they are often referred to as “*qulpytas*.” Professor S. Azhigali’s suggestion is well-founded. Nevertheless, in our study, we used the term “*qulpytas*” as this was the term employed by specialists who studied gravestones in this region. We chose the term “*qulpytas*” to avoid misunderstandings during the research process. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the term “*qabir tas*” has not gained scientific recognition among Kazakhstani researchers [Qozhaev, 1996; Tuyaqbaev 2000; Aqylbek 2000; Baigunakov, Sabdenova 2021]. We believe that to define these terms and reach a consensus, it would be advisable to hold a specialized conference.

The type of gravestone commonly referred to as “Samarkand blue stone” is predominantly found in the southern regions of Kazakhstan. While researchers of the gravestones of Karnak may not have paid sufficient attention to the epigraphic texts inscribed on the stones in the southern region of Kazakhstan, they have conducted extensive studies on their forms, categorizing them into nine distinct groups. The gravestones we are examining are referred to as “Samarkand blue stones”. In Southern Kazakhstan, these stones were particularly popular but less accessible to the general populace. The “blue stones” were crafted from serpentinite marble, and their installation was typically reserved for individuals of considerable means [Baigunakov, Sabdenova 2021: 173–174]. These authors note that “blue stones” are often encountered in open-air cemeteries.

It is important to recognize that the “Samarkand blue stones” should ideally be preserved in mausoleums, shrines, and covered burial sites, such as domed structures. Due to the fact that these stones are not buried in the ground, there are numerous instances of them being displaced from their original locations. Consequently, over time, these stones have been relocated, making it difficult to ascertain which gravestone corresponds to a specific grave. As a result, many of these stones are found lying near the graves of Lashyn-Bab and Qargha-Bab within the mausoleum. Ideally, these gravestones should be situated in the burial grounds outside the mausoleum. To prevent their loss, it is likely that some individuals have placed them inside the mausoleum.

The inscriptions on the tombstones located both on the facade of the Arystan-Bab Mausoleum and on the *qulpytas*es inside have not been previously published or clearly translated, thus warranting their introduction into scholarly discourse. Moreover, the mausoleum of Arystan-Bab, a key figure in Central Asian Islamic tradition, serves not only as a religious site but also as an important historical and archaeological monument.

The immense significance of the sacred site of Arystan-Bab for history, culture, and spirituality is underscored by the popular proverb: “Stay overnight at Arystan-Bab [Mausoleum] and ask [for wishes to come true] from Khoja Akhmet” (“Арыстан Бабаға түне, Қожа Ахметтен тіле”). In recent years, the mausoleum has become a major destination for pilgrimage tourism, symbolically central to history and culture.

In 2006, a special site near the Arystan-Bab Mausoleum was allocated for the reburial of remains brought from the graves of the great sons of the Dasht-i Kipchak steppe, Abu Nasr al-Farabi (950–951) and Sultan Baybars (1260–1277). To carry out this honorable mission, a delegation traveled to the Syrian



Arab Republic, including the Chairman of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan, Mufti Absattar Haji Derbisali, Rector of Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Professor Tolegen Qozhamqulov, Akim of the Otrar District of South Kazakhstan Region Alimzhan Kurtaev, employee of the Al-Farabi Museum in Otrar Abdolla Zhumashov, and Director of the Republican Publishing House “Bilim” Zharylqasyn Nusqabaiuly.

Indeed, the 12<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries marked a period in which Turkic Muslim culture and literature were forming and flourishing across vast territories stretching from Turkistan and Dasht-i Kipchak to Egypt and Syria. A striking testimony to this is found in Arabic-Kipchak dictionaries. “In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, unique mixed written languages emerged, and literature developed on these mixed languages in the territories of the Golden Horde, Central Asia, and Egypt” [Nadzhip 1965: 14]. After the fall of the Golden Horde, many literary and cultural figures were forced to leave the region and move to other countries. Most of them relocated to Asia Minor, Syria, and Egypt. By the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the literary and cultural center of the Turkic world shifted to Egypt [Nadzhip 1979: 32].

One of the cultural phenomena of Egypt and Syria under the Mamluk rulers (1250–1517) was the spread and development of Turkic-language literature. Much of this consisted of Arabic-Turkic dictionaries, including works such as: *Kitab Majmu‘ Tarjuman Turki wa ‘Ajami wa Mughali wa Farsi* by Khalil ibn Muhammad al-Qunawi; *Kitab al-Idrak li-Lisan al-Atrak* by Athir al-Din Abu Hayyan Muhammad ibn Yusuf al-Gharnati (654–745/1256–1344); *Kitab Bulghat al-Mushtaq fi Lughat al-Turk wa al-Qiffaq* by Jamal al-Din Abu Muhammad ‘Abdallah al-Turki; *al-Durra al-Mudiya fi-l-Lugha al-Turkiya* by an anonymous author; and *al-Shudhur al-Dhahabiya wa al-Qita‘ al-Ahmadiya fi-l-Lugha al-Turkiya* by Ibn Mulla Muhammad Salih (written around 1619 in Egypt). These dictionaries bear features largely associated with Central Asian culture. Linguists have determined that much of the vocabulary is of Kipchak and Golden Horde origin.

The Arystan-Bab complex is classified as a sacred site, preserving the cultural and historical heritage of the Karakhanid State, Golden Horde, and subsequent periods. It retains cultural layers from many eras, which is why conducting interregional comparative studies has become a pressing task. In this regard, the epigraphic monuments of Kazakhstan (particularly in the Syr Darya basin) and countries of the Middle East are of value. Additionally, Kipchak-Arabic dictionaries created in medieval Egypt remain an underutilized source for research on the history of the Kazakh language.

## 5 Conclusion

The mausoleum of Arystan-Bab is a unique architectural complex located in the current-day Turkistan region, shrouded in mystery and folklore. The construction history of the mausoleum mirrors that of many similar structures across the country. Typically, after the death of notable and revered figures, they were first buried in graves, with mausoleums erected later. Over time, these mausoleums would deteriorate due to natural conditions, resulting in their destruction and subsequent reconstruction. The architectural style of each mausoleum was influenced by the religious and cultural traditions of their respective periods. Moreover, the design often reflected not only the social status of the deceased but also the vision of the donors and builders, shaping what they believed a mazar (sacred place) should represent.

The mazar of the Muslim saint Arystan-Bab, who played a significant role in promoting Islamic values in Kazakhstan, was constructed in accordance with Islamic canons. However, it also incorporates elements typical of medieval Central Asian architecture. Although the current structure dates to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, archaeological evidence has confirmed that the grave of Arystan-Bab itself is authentic, dating back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The mausoleum underwent several phases of destruction and rebuilding, notably in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, leading to architectural modifications over time.

Regarding the epigraphic monuments, research has shown that the inscriptions carved on the mausoleum’s walls are directly related to the structure itself. Notably, there are inscriptions on the portal



and the façade of the building, providing information about the date of construction and the name of the architect responsible. However, the administration made an error in the explanatory plaque, which misrepresents certain historical facts.

The qulpytases found inside the mausoleum appear to have been placed there without clear purpose, as no corresponding graves have been located within the mausoleum. Further archaeological investigation is required to determine their origin, but it is likely they were brought from a nearby cemetery. Based on the inscriptions, these tombstones date to the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the individuals commemorated have no direct connection to the construction or reconstruction of the mausoleum. Despite this, the main epigraphic monuments carved on the mausoleum of Arystan-Bab are unique and hold immense historical and cultural value for Kazakhstan. The study of Arabic-script epigraphic monuments in the southern region of Kazakhstan holds significant potential for future research. These monuments, as invaluable artifacts of Islamic civilization and the writing culture of the Kazakh people, represent a rich heritage within the field of architectural history. It is expected that efforts to further explore and elucidate these cultural treasures will continue, contributing to a deeper understanding of their historical and cultural significance.

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