An ancient edifice called the mausoleum of Muhammad Bosharo stands in the village of Mazar-i Sharif in the Zeravshan River valley, not far from the city of Panjikent. In this mountainous area many architectural monuments of pre-Islamic and early Islamic culture have been preserved. The mausoleum of Muhammad Bosharo, one of the most noteworthy among them, gave its name to the village in which it stands; Mazar-i Sharif means “noble sanctuary.”

Although the mausoleum was mentioned in scholarly works as early as the 1930’s, it did not become the subject of special scholarly attention until more recently. The first paper devoted to it and based on measurements and research on the site was published by L. Bretanitskii in 1958. His article points out, among other things, that the various parts of the structure were built at different times, and he mentions some peculiarities of its layout and disposition on the site. Bretanitskii hypothesized that the portal of the mausoleum (one of the most beautiful in all Central Asia, it bears the original construction date of 1342-43) was erected later than the main structure, which he attributed to the late eleventh or early twelfth century.

A second article on the mausoleum, based on new measurements and further research, was published by V. Voronina and K. Kriukov in 1978. The authors introduced some new data regarding the architecture and published work on the tombs and the mihrab found inside the mausoleum. They also put forward a version of the sanctuary’s construction history that was rather different from that offered by Bretanitskii.

I shall attempt here to investigate the problem of the building’s construction on the basis of my own observations. The mausoleum of Muhammad Bosharo is a monument of great historical and artistic significance, and in many respects it is unique. It is also a site little known to architectural historians outside the Soviet Union, and therefore solving the problem of its typology is not merely of regional interest.

The structure stands on a raised platform reinforced with stone, on the bank of a stream that goes dry in the summer. Its main façade faces the northwest, that is, toward the stream. The rear of the structure is cut into a wooded mountain slope. Nearby, the graves of an ancient cemetery are visible (fig. 1). The rather low, rectangular body of the structure, crowned by a large central dome, consists of three parts sharply set off from one another (fig. 2).

A square domed hall serves as the center of the middle and largest section. The dome has a diameter of 7.6 meters and is supported by corner arches that, together with the piers (which are construed as niches of the same type as the arch supports), form a perfect octagon. The dome is set off from the lower walls of the hall by a horizontal ledge or molding (fig. 3). The dome itself has been rebuilt several times, and the present one, put up in 1964, is at least the third.

Broad arched niches stretch across the axis of the hall, and each of them has its own function. The front niche is cut through to form the entrance and is framed on the outside by a high portal; the rear niche forms a

2. Façade (above) and layout (below) of the mausoleum as it is today.