



Herat from the 10th to the 14th Century

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Political Background – A Summary¹

The history of Herat during the first decades of the Islamic era is still rather poorly known. After the capitulation of Zaranj in 642, Sistan became the springboard for the Arab armies to move into India and Khorasan, at first bypassing Herat.² The city surrendered in 651/52 CE and a peace treaty was drawn for Herat, Badghis, and Bushanj. Although Herat remained a political, administrative and economic centre, it was of secondary importance for a long time compared to Nishapur and Merv.³ The subsequent decades are marked by unrests, economic constraints on the population, shifting political alliances among local rulers and with the Umayyad government, and by religious conflicts, particularly in the context of the Kharijite sedition.⁴ The Hephthalites⁵ and Turk tribes remained a strong threat to Arab supremacy. From the early 8th century to the end of Umayyad rule, Khorasan was centrally administered by a governor residing in Merv, while sub-governors were installed in regional centres, including Herat.⁶

The toppling of the Umayyads and the subsequent shift of power towards the east deeply affected the region. Abu Muslim, a protagonist and major military figure in the Abbasid movement, established his centre in Merv in 747, soon after his emissaries had driven the representative of the last Umayyad governor out of Herat. Due to his conciliatory politics, Abu Muslim received strong support throughout Khorasan, also from Shiites, Sunnis, Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians. His murder in 755 during a visit to the caliph al-Mansur in al-Mada'in fostered major upheavals and led to intermittent rules by various parties over smaller areas.⁷ One of the larger opposition movements was led by Ostadhsis in 767 or 768. His role, background and religious affiliation⁸ are unclear, but he is mentioned as 'Ruler of Herat'⁹, and was reportedly able to muster 300,000 supporters, including Turks from Badghis and Kharijites of Sistan. Larger Kharijite settlements existed in Herat and its environs apparently until the 10th century.¹⁰

The appointment of Tahir Husayn Dhu'l-yaminayn as governor of Khorasan in 820/1 gave rise to a strong regional development. His family, *dehqans* of local Persian descent, had ruled in Bushanj and Herat¹¹ already in the 8th century. Under the Tahirids, Nishapur replaced Merv and Balkh¹² as capital, and yielded the highest tax revenue in Khorasan in 827/8, along with Merv and Herat.¹³

Tahirid primacy was challenged after 862 by the Saffarids from Sistan who repeatedly beleaguered and finally took first Herat, then Kabul in 871, Khorasan in 873, and even advanced almost as far as Baghdad in 876. Their primacy, however, was unstable and, at least in Khorasan, short: defeated in 900 at Balkh by the Samanid governors of Herat, they were swept out of Khorasan, but maintained their hold on Sistan for a long time.

The Samanids, also a noble Persian *dehqan* family, had already ruled as Tahirid governors in Transoxania, Shash, Fergana, and Herat since the early 9th century. Taking advantage of the conflicts and rivalries, they became *de facto* independent in Transoxania, where they governed directly, and then expanded their power to Khorasan, where they were represented by governors. Acting in accordance with the Abbasid caliph as supreme sovereignty and in line with the Sunni orthodoxy, their rule ultimately brought a longer period of relative peace and prosperity within this domain of the caliphate, despite internal disputes and external military campaigns. The implementation of an efficient administration, which served as a model for subsequent dynasties,

1 This contribution provides a brief summary of the historical development from the beginning of the Islamic era to the arrival of the Timurids. The urban topography and development of Herat are summarised in Volume 2 of the Ancient Herat series, while its hinterland is discussed in Volume 1. For an initial approach to these topics see Franke 2015.

2 Tate 1910. – Spuler 1952, 18.

3 However, caliphal silver coins minted in Herat are known from e.g. 646/47 and 686/87, and, after the reform, 709/10 (Spuler 1952, 413; 415).

4 Szuppe 2004.

5 Spuler 1952, 51. They had sacked Herat in 484 following their victory over the Sasanian king Peroz. In the late 6th century, Herat served as base in the fight against the Turks, but had slipped from Sasanian hegemony by the early 7th century (Christiansen 1993, 198). In the 7th and 8th century, a number of military expeditions to the northern and northeastern regions of Khorasan were conducted to push back the Hephthalites and re-install Arab rule.

6 Similar in extent and location of the administrative centres in Sasanian times (Spuler 1952, 307).

7 Spuler 1952, 34–54.

8 Whether with a neo-Zoroastrian background, as mentioned by Bosworth 2007, 154, is not clear (Daniel 1979, 133–136. – Szuppe 2004, 207).

9 According to Ya'qubi and others, see Daniel 1979, 113.

10 Spuler 1952, 169. – Bosworth 19633, 163.

11 Caliphal silver coins minted in Herat date between 808 and 821 (Spuler 1952, 418).

12 Spuler 1952, 308.

13 Christensen 1993, 197, quoting Ibn Hauqal and others: c. 4 million Dirham from Nishapur, 1,147 million from Merv and 1,159 million from Herat.



Fig. 1 Bowl with a Kufic inscription in Arabic: 'The free is free even if struck by a loss. Good luck.' 10th century. Museum für Islamische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Inv. No. I. 26/60



Fig. 2 Octagonal Senmurv plate. Gilded silver, 9th/10th century, Iran. Museum für Islamische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Inv. No. I. 4926

prompted economic wealth from trade, commerce, and agricultural estates, while tribute was paid to Baghdad.¹⁴

Their cultural legacy is the creation of a Persianate Islamic culture. Of Persian origin with a Zoroastrian background and allegedly stemming from one of the Seven Great Houses of the Sasanian Empire¹⁵, the Samanids converted to Islam in the early 8th century. The first translation of the Qur'an into Persian supported the Islamisation of large parts of the populace. Yet, while still using the Arabic language, for example in beneficiary inscriptions on ceramics and metalwork (Fig. 1), but also in literature, they strongly promoted the formation of a Persian and local identity and fostered the establishment of New Persian as a literary language, with Rudaki and Bal'ami as prominent protagonists.¹⁶ The ideal of a Sasanian renaissance noted for the 8th to 10th century¹⁷, is reflected in the visual arts (Fig. 2), science and literature, providing the grounds for great scholars such as al-Biruni, Ibn Sina and Ferdowsi.

In the late 10th century, increasing conflicts and territorial losses to Turk confederations culminated in the disposal of the Samanids by the Qarakhanids.¹⁸ When they captured Bukhara in 992, the Samanids had to call on their Turkish governor Sübüktigin, descendent of Alp Tigin, a military commander in Khorasan, who ruled quite independently in Ghazna and Herat, and his son Mahmud for military support, offering them in return to govern all of Khorasan under Samanid suzerainty. Following a period of political twists

14 Spuler 1952, 81. Morgan (1988, 23) states that no tribute was paid.

15 Yarshater 1968, xlii. The Samanid ruler Isma'il ibn Ahmad (r. 892–907) was likened by later writers to the legendary King Khosrou Anoushervan due to his virtues and justice (Morgan 1988, 22).

16 A process that was already initiated by the Saffarids (Spuler 1952, 234). According to Morgan (1988, 23) they also claimed their descent from Sasanian kings to legitimise their rule and distinguish themselves from the Arab Abbasids. In contrast, according to a much later source, the Tahirid ruler Emir 'Abd 'Allah refused to accept a book on the rulings of King Anoushervan, obviously written in Persian, and had it thrown into the water (Spuler 1952, 23, 562: Daulatshah, written 1487).

17 Morgan 1988, 22. – Spuler 1952, 235.

18 Or the Al Afrasiyab, featuring prominently in the Shah-name of Ferdousi.

and interior as well as exterior conflicts, however, Mahmud himself took over Khorasan in 998, residing first in Balkh, later in Ghazna and Lashkari Bazar. Transoxania stayed with the Qarakhanids, but the situation remained shaky, particularly in the borderlands to which also Herat belonged, to the extent that the Samanid prince Isma'il Muntasir temporarily regained power in Nishapur and Samarqand. His death in 1005 marked the ultimate demise of the Samanid Empire.

Under the Ghaznavids, Herat remained privileged as governor's seat and important military base.¹⁹ Mas'ud I, son of Mahmud and governor of Herat in 1017/18, had allegedly reconstructed the 'Adnani palace and built a siesta-house in its garden: "This house was cooled by water dripping down the hangings within it, and its walls were adorned with lascivious paintings of nude men and women in various convivial scenes..."²⁰ The city retained its mint²¹ and, although it was not one of the large staple markets, it prospered as a regional hub, bringing in supplies for its own needs and as producer of iron, silk, textiles, crops, dried fruits, grapes, and raisins.²² That mention is made of prestigious gold and silver items from Herat that were exchanged as gifts among rulers or presented to the nobility by their lords attests to the superior quality of its products.²³

Herat was given as fiefdom, for example to merited military leaders (*sahib*), at least between 1010/11 and 1038/39. In order to finance the extensive Ghaznavid building programmes and

19 Herat was the 2nd row of defense with Arab and Kurdish soldiers based there. Mas'ud was exiled to Multan after a rift with his father just before the latter's death.

20 Bosworth 1963, 62; 128; 140). The assessment in the historic sources that the women of Herat were particularly voluptuous (Spuler 1952, 259) might be related to such murals.

21 While Samanid coins were minted predominantly in Transoxania, Herat was one of the Ghaznavid mints (Spuler 1952, 421. – Szuppe 2004).

22 Spuler 1952, 402; 405; 406; 408. The city depended on external supplies to cater for the subsistence needs of its population (Bosworth 1963, 152–157; 260). The city had famines at least in the years 794/95 and 833/34. According to Ya'qubi and Ibn Rosteh, in the 9th and 10th century 400 villages belonged to the city (Christensen 1993, 198).

23 Spuler 1952, 368, referring to Tabari II, 1636–38; but also mentioned by Esfzari and Ya'qubi (Christensen 1993, 198).



Fig. 3 Lashkari Bazar, wall paintings (after D. Schlumberger/J. Sourdel-Thomine, *Lashkari Bazar: une résidence royale ghaznévide et ghoride*, Paris 1978, Pl. 122b)



Fig. 4 Glazed frit- and earthen wares, Herat Museum, 11th–12th century

military campaigns to Persia and the Indus Valley, but also against the 'infidel tribes' inhabiting Ghur, heavy taxes were levied, draining the land-based elites and the commerce in Sistan and Herat.²⁴ It is still mentioned as central city in

24 "Yet the Sultan's avarice was unquenchable, and when the Vizier could squeeze the people of Herat no further and he refused to make up from his own pocket, Mahmud tortured him to death." (Bosworth 1963, 71).



Fig. 5 *Qala'-e Ekhtyaruddin, view from north-east*

Khorasan in 1033²⁵, but its citizens looked forward to a change: in 1038 they offered the city to the Saljuqs, hoping for financial and structural recovery and better protection. Punitive measures and a tax of one million dirhams for Herat, Badghis and Ganj Rostaq, collected directly by a raiding Ghaznavid army, did not prevent the loss of the area and the region to the Saljuqs.²⁶

The Saljuqs, a clan of the large Oghuz or Turkmen tribal confederation migrating from their homelands near the Aral Sea and Kazakhstan, had embraced Islam in the late 9th century and moved far into Transoxania and Khorasan; they made Nishapur their capital (1037) and approached the Ghaznavid heartland. Having established their suzerainty over the eastern lands, Herat became the centre of Eastern Khorasan.²⁷ In 1040, the Ghaznavids abandoned the region and retreated to India, while the Saljuqs moved on to Persia and, ultimately, Baghdad (1055). Although conceived as uncivilised barbarians²⁸, their rule is also seen as a period of recovery after decades of armed conflict and destruction.

However, being entangled in various conflicts across a large territory, their primacy in the east was challenged by the Qarakhanids and the Shansabani Ghurids, who advanced on Ghazna and Herat in 1147 and sacked Ghazna in 1150, after their territory had been a buffer zone between warring opponents for some time. The Ghurids are believed to be a tribal society with Tajik background, speaking a dialect that required an interpreter for the Persian-speaking Mas'ud of Ghazna. They were a source of mountaineers, warfare experts and of slaves for the markets in Herat and Sistan, at least before their conversion to Islam in the early 11th century.²⁹ The extension of the military

25 Spuler 1952, 308; 312.

26 The same had happened before in Nishapur and Merv (Bosworth 1963, 265–266).

27 Szuppe 2004.

28 Bosworth 1963, 266–268, a view that might also reflect an innate fear of uncivilised Asiatic nomadic hordes, expressed in the ancient sources and exemplified e. g. by the Huns.

29 See Thomas 2012, 120–127, also on the problems of the geographic, ethnographic and linguistic implications of the term 'Ghur' as reflected by the historical sources, quoting i.a. Juszani and Istakhri.

installations and defence structures turned out to be as advantageous as the inaccessible location of their capital Firozkoh in a rugged mountainous landscape. Yet, defeated by the Saljuq Sultan Sanjar in 1152 in the battle of Nab, somewhere at the Hari Rud, 'Ala al-Din then first concentrated on internally re-enforcing his claims of supremacy – an attempt made difficult by the large number of fortresses and watch towers.³⁰ Ghiyath al-Din, who ascended the throne in 1163, repelled an attack from Herat, where the body of his predecessor Sayf al-Din was left behind on the march towards Bamiyan in 1164. He acquired a more permanent control over Ghazna and Herat only in 1175. These conquests prepared his way into Sistan, Kerman, Balkh, and Transoxania, and, ultimately, towards India and – though very briefly – Baghdad.

For the Ghurids, Herat and Ghazna were of essential strategic importance for the control of the fertile plains and the cross-routes linking their remote homeland with Iran and Transoxania, regions that provided a multitude of natural resources and supplies as well as valuables. Al-Mustawfi's report that Herat in the late 12th century had 6,000 baths, 12,000 shops, and 440,000 dwellings is probably exaggerated³¹, but the importance of the town is indicated, for example by the fact that Ghiyath al-Din Muhammad (r. 1163–1203) had the dynastic

30 Thomas 2012, 125.

31 Christensen 1993, 198.

mausoleum built next to the Friday Mosque, which he had thoroughly refurbished after a fire (title image; Figs. 6–8).³²

As a political and economic Ghurid centre and seat of their Kart representatives, Herat was strongly afflicted with subsequent power struggles between Ghurids, post-Saljuq rulers and Khorezm Shahs. The city, still well defended under the Ghaznavids³³, was besieged and its towers and walls breached in 1175/76, 1202, and 1204. In 1206, when the Ghurid viceroy of Herat, who had handed over the city to the Khorezm Sultan Mohammad, switched sides again, he was killed in revenge and the town sacked and heavily damaged once more. Although Yaqut³⁴ described Herat in 1217 as the richest and largest city he had ever seen, standing in the midst of a fertile country, these raids must have left massive scars.

Peace was not to last for long. When in 1221 the Khorezm governor of Herat rejected the offer of Tolui, son of Djinghis Khan, to surrender the town peacefully to his approaching army, it was taken by force, the citadel destroyed and allegedly 12,000 soldiers killed.³⁵ When soon after Tolui's representatives were murdered in the Friday Mosque, Djinghis Khan sent back an army of 80,000 to set an example. Herat was captured after a six month's siege, the population killed, and the agricultural oasis and its irrigation system devastated.³⁶ Repairs of the channels, essential for the water and food supply of the city, began only in 1236, allegedly by a group of weavers.³⁷

The recovery and development of Herat after this disruption of urban life and economy are usually attributed to the Kart. Claiming

32 See below 'Cultural Heritage'. Simpson 2012, 113

33 Bosworth 1963, 262.

34 Probably quoting from an older source (Le Strange 1905, 409).

35 Szuppe 2004, 208.

36 Summarising the historical references provided by Ibn Rosteh, al-Mustawfi, Sayf Heravi, and Hafez-e Abru, Szuppe (2004, 208) states that before the Mongol conquest the city could muster 190,000 soldiers, and while 400 villages belonged to the Herat *villayat* in the 10th century, there were only 200 in the early 15th century. Sayf Heravi, who wrote 100 years later, stated that 1,6 million people were killed up to Badghis (Christensen 1993).

37 According to Sayf Heravi, quoted in Szuppe 2004, 209.



Fig. 6 *Eastern façade of the mausoleum of Ghiyath al-Din Muhammad (d. 1203), attached to the northern wall of the Friday Mosque in Herat. The cupola collapsed in 1833 and the building was turned down in 1944 (notes of R. Stuckert and B. Glatzer. Photo: R. Stuckert 1942)*



Fig. 7 *Interior chamber of the mausoleum of Ghiyath al-Din Muhammad (d. 1203) and his family (Photo: R. Stuckert 1942).*

ancestry of the Shansabani Ghurids and being linked with them through marriage, they were installed as high-ranking officials in Herat since 1202. Under Möngke Khan and the subsequent Ilkhanid rulers Hülagu and Abaqa Khan they governed Herat, Balkh, Sistan, and the lands as far as India after