



Herat in the Timurid Period. Political History, Internal and External Relations, Economic Conditions

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Fig. 1 The Friday Mosque of Herat

Under Timur's youngest son, Shahrokh (born 799/1377), the old commercial centre and provincial capital Herat rose to a marvellous metropolis, rivalling Samarqand and constituting an eastern counterpart to Tabriz among the Iranian towns. In accordance with the Mongol-Turkic institution of princely residences in the provinces of the empire, Shahrokh had been governor in Herat since 1397, while Timur in his last years developed Samarqand as a capital for his multifaceted conquests in an amazing speed. The hub created then in political and other respects is impressively described by the Spanish ambassador Clavijo. In 1404, for example, he met his Chinese colleague there and witnessed the flabbergasting intercultural luxury of the mixed Mongol-Turkic nomadic and Iranian urban high society.

For his succession Timur had nominated a son of his oldest son, Pir Mohammad bin Jahangir. He was governor in Kandahar, the old capital of the Turkic Ghaznavids, but found no further support when his time came. Mongol-Turkish rules entitled the entire family of a dynasty – also powerful women could interfere to a certain extent – and the supporting tribal heads to choose a male member as their leader, but the complexity of political, ethnic and cultural diversification within this circle never allowed for smooth solutions. 15th-century

Iranian historians describe the years after Timur's death (807/1405) under Khalil Soltan as a period of decay resulting from political incompetence and waste of power and resources until Shahrokh's final enthronisation. But throughout the 'Timurid century' this happened always in situations that would have demanded an extremely able person and the support of various factions. Even though this other grandson of Timur was a rather successful military leader, his style was perhaps not regarded as compatible with the Iranian royal conduct and was openly attacked by Sufi leaders – also with regard to his romantic love for his wife Shad-e Molk. Her suicide at the death of Khalil Soltan (814/1411) does not resemble that of Shirin in the Iranian love story of King Khosrou, but happened in conscience with the revenge of many old leaders of Timur's period who felt ill-treated. The situation in Samarqand may rather have been poisoned among irreconcilable factions, so that the opportunity for a person from outside would have been greater.

When, after some military clashes, Shahrokh was generally accepted as supreme ruler (*soltan*) in 811/1409, he shifted the active political institutions to Herat. The city's topographical situation had always made it the ideal crossing point of east-west and north-south routes in commerce and culture. Both directions connected regions rich in resources and development in this period and enabled the considerable growth of the population in the town (Fig. 2). Throughout the 15th century Herat was – with some interruptions – steadily growing and experienced urban embellishment, after Shahrokh's period and again a little under Abu Sa'id (intermittently in Herat 861–873/1457–69), and especially Hosayn Bayqara (ruled 873–912/1469–1506). It remained the central government seat, except for ceremonial acts as i.e. coronations of rulers, and also for the two-year residence of Shahrokh's successor Ulugh Beg in Samarqand.

Herat's location along the old Iranian caravan cities with a strong mercantile population increased further the abandonment of Mongol customs. So Shahrokh did not regularly use the Turkic title of *khan* and



Fig. 2 View over Herat City towards the Mosalla Complex

most of the time he apparently wore a high white turban instead of the Mongol warriors' cap. But the Eastern Turkic (*Chaghatay*) language resurged as a literary language at court and was repeatedly further enriched by great poets, as later by Mir Ali Shir Nawa'i. The Iranian sources applaud the new ruler and his court with many Iranian long-period officials, as Jalal al-din Firuzshah, highlighting his rigid Islamic piety. Among his sons, Baysonghur (1397–1433) remained mostly in Herat and stepped into the ruler's position when his father was away for campaigns. He became venerated and famous as a talented calligrapher, and promoting the arts he is credited mainly with the fame of Herat as a cultural centre. In his literary circle some classical Persian texts were edited in new versions and beautiful manuscripts, as i.e. Ferdousi's *Shah-name*. His older brother Soltan Ebrahim (died 1434) was governor of the province Fars with residence in Shiraz and had similar artistic preferences, but these should not overshadow their father's merits in cultural affairs. Shahrokh had to constantly defend his vast dominion, mainly against other Timurid pretenders, also in Iran, and against some pre-Mongol Iranian local leaders. But altogether the manifold and multi-ethnic character of Timur's empire was preserved at Shahrokh's death in 1447, even after the loss of all Arab and many Central Asian regions to other Turkish and Mongol empires.

Shahrokh's piety deserves special attention as he was an ardent applicant of the Sunni *shari'a*, and his connection with the dervish orders was influential in Central Asia, while the Naqshbandiyya and rests of the Kubrawiyya were less visible in Herat and seem not to have left significant traces in the literature. But Shahrokh is recorded to have enlarged the shrine for the Shi'ite Khoja Abdallah Ansari in Gazorgah (in 829/1426. See title image), much venerated

in Herat, and to have built a few dervish lodges (*khanqah*). The Old Friday Mosque of Herat (Fig. 1) had been enlarged before and only small additions or restorations occurred in this period, but the foundations of the mosque and madrasa complex named *Mosalla* by his wife Gouhar Shad with her mausoleum (erected 820–841/1417–1436) created a new bright urban highlight – it is, however, reported controversially whether this was a new Friday Mosque (Figs. 2–5). Also, the building of new palace gardens contributed to the competition with Samarqand. It is unknown whether Shahrokh intended to erect a mausoleum in Herat – his body was taken to Samarqand by Ulugh Beg in 1448 and buried in the dynasty mausoleum for Timur, the Gur-e Mir.

Shahrokh's son Ulugh Beg remained in his princely government residence in Samarqand at his succession. He is recorded as not much attached to the religious laws, but as an adherer of Mongol traditions and especially of his grandfather Timur. The sources about him were interpreted very favourably by Soviet historians, and this image was not much adjusted by modern Uzbek writers. While his court had been a magnet for artists and scholars before,

especially for scientists such as the ingenious mathematician Ghiyas al-din Jamshid al-Kashi (d. 832/1429), he was not so successful in his rule (1447–49). Fighting against several competing pretenders to the throne, he had his son Abdullatif conquer Herat, where his mother Gouhar Shad kept an impressive impact on political and cultural affairs. Her grandson Abdullatif took advantage of public and military mistrust, fought against his father and removed him from rule, had Gouhar Shad imprisoned and his father killed on the *hajj*. His own short rule (1449/50) and that of two further pretenders from his family did not affect affairs in Herat, where a grandson of Shahrokh, Abu 'l-Qasem Babor b. Baysonghur, held office as governor (852–861/1449–1457), but with own claims to central rule.

Only Abu Sa'id from the line of Timur's second son Miranshah was able to maintain the throne over a longer period of time, mainly based in Samarqand (855–873/1451–68). He was the last Sultan in command of both parts of the Timurid Empire, of regions in Western and Central Asia and in Iran. He conquered Herat several times, and had Gouhar Shad sentenced to death in 861/1457. His main work in the metropolis is the canal *Juy-e Soltani*, which allowed irrigation of foundations and possessions east of Herat. But he lost most of Iran to a tribe that had earlier been subject to the Timurids: the Turkmen Qaraqoyunlu princes. Their leader Jahan Shah and his son Pir Budaq briefly even occupied Herat in 862/1458. Abu Sa'id, an ally of the Qaraqoyunlu, later fell victim to their rivals, the Aqqoyunlu tribe, in Western Iran and was beheaded in revenge by a great-grandson of Gouhar Shad who stayed in their camp. Khorasan remained the only Iranian region in the shrinking Timurid Empire. Its Central Asian parts were also constantly threatened by a new force, the Shaybanid Khans from regions east of the Syr Darya/Jaxartes River. The Turkmen dynasties, however, were not able to expand their own claims to Khorasan. Too strong was the local support for Hosayn Bayqara in Herat, from the line of Timur's third son Omar Shaykh (873–912/1469–1506). He conceded Samarqand and the remaining Central Asian regions to a son of Abdullatif, Soltan Ahmad (ruled 873–899/1469–1494),



Fig. 3 Tomb of Gouhar Shad, Mosalla Complex



Fig. 4 Interior decoration of Gouhar Shad's tomb

with the Amu Darya/Oxus River as border. Under the pressure of Uzbek tribes the sons of Hosayn Bayqara were unable to defend the inherited province, and their Khan Mohammad Shaybani (ruled 1500–1510) conquered Balkh and Herat in 1506. Yet even stronger was the new Shi'ite army under the charismatic young Shah Esma'il (ruled 1501–1524), founder of the Safavid dynasty, which brought longer peaceful periods, but attracted the most famous artists to move from Herat to other courts in Iran.

Nonetheless, the affluence of persons and people to the new imperial centre Herat raised prosperity and caused infrastructural ameliorations, especially in the period of that last major Timurid ruler in Herat, and his counsellor and friend Mir Ali Shir Nawa'i. New irrigation work on canals began and new gardens and farms were founded, and the city expanded in nearly all directions (Fig. 6). The Timurid system of territorial grants to the courtiers' exempt from taxation (*soyurghal*) had created a growing upper class, which contributed greatly to the patronage. Herat seems to have been an example for a landed aristocracy, who felt attracted to live in the

periphery of the city and to contribute to its urban prosperity. Since the period of Shahrokh and Gouhar Shad, the extension of the north-south axis (*khiyaban*) of the old circum-walled town towards the north was embellished

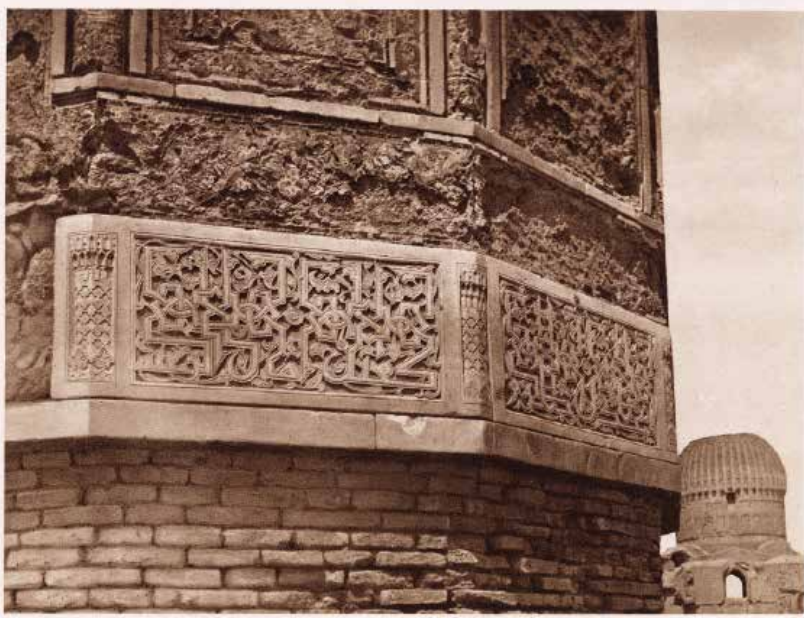


Fig. 5 Marble from a minaret in the Mosalla Complex (Niedermayer/Diez 1924, Fig. 161)

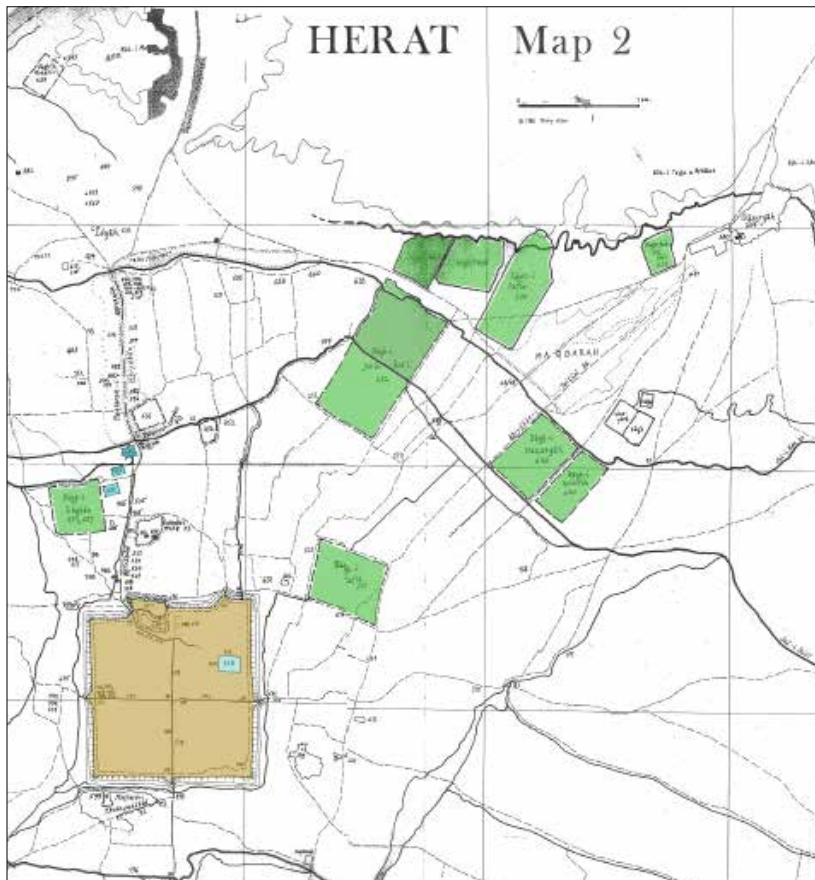


Fig. 6 Map of Timurid Herat, with gardens (green. Allen 1983, Map 2)

not only by royal public buildings, but also by many private foundations (Fig. 6). From the 1470s onwards the same development was extended to the south. Ali Shir Nawa'i may have been an exception as a close friend of Hosayn Bayqara since earliest childhood, but according to T. Allen¹ the dimensions of more than 370 large and small buildings, three parks, and a bazaar listed in one source may have given the incentive for many other of the total of 678 foundations recorded in Herat. The *soyurghal*-grants were not only reserved for the military but given also to bureaucrats, 'secretaries', and especially also to religious leaders, among them some leading dervish sheikhs. The latter had for a long time benefitted from the pious donations (*vaqf*), which could comprise estates as well and were also tax-exempt. This created considerable economic strength and influence of this new aristocracy, which lasted well into the Safavid period of the 16th century. Some initiatives of Soltan Hosayn Bayqara are recorded to have reduced the *soyurghal*-system, but he was apparently not successful in this attempt.

The overall image of the Timurid political and cultural history of Herat is rather positive. The many military strives and clashes of the rulers did not prevent longer periods of great prosperity for the city, its urban shape and the well-being of its inhabitants. This speaks for a continuously well-organised administration and the extremely efficient logistics in the mixed Iranian and Mongol traditions. Manpower, technology, arts and crafts rose to great effectiveness. The court ateliers (*kitab-khane*) produced new aesthetic expressions in the arts, in figurative and ornamental styles, which after the political end of Timurid rule were handed down to the Shaybanid and Safavid successors and initiated further innovations. In spite of its fame, not many economic contacts with Europe are recorded for Herat, but this may be a matter of further research on the basis of new evidence. The more interesting is the obvious presence of Chinese representatives and Indian craftsmen, whose images even appear in paintings from this period.

1 Allen 1981; Allen 1983.