



## Herat from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century

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### Introduction

When it came to describing the centrality of their capital city, Timurid authors generally established a connection between the natural setting and royal intervention. In their view, ecological and political factors reinforced one another and, in combination, contributed to the uniqueness of Herat. In the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, Hafez-e Abru pointed to the temperate climate of the oasis: Situated in the middle of the fourth clime and comprising both warm and cold zones, it was blessed with a uniquely balanced and healthy climate and was secure against the outbreak of epidemics. Yet, Hafez-e Abru also made it clear that this favorable setting could only develop its full potential under the protective umbrella of Timurid rule: "Under the auspices of the august and fortunate reign [of Shah Rokh, r. 1409–1447], the affairs of Khorasan, and Herat in particular, have been blessed with an utmost degree of splendour and order."<sup>1</sup>

Writing in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century and at the height of Timurid grandeur, Mo'in al-Din Mohammad Zamchi Esfzari seemingly inverted this relationship. In the introduction to his *'Rawzat al-jannat fi ausaf madinat Harat'*, he posited that it was the unique setting that attracted rulers and scholars alike. Nurturing religious seekers and attracting mighty kings, Herat was a cynosure that brought together the sacred and worldly realms:

"Throughout time, Herat has been the pleasure ground for [all] groups of people and the gem among [all] the cities and citadels of the regions of the world. Its pure water has thrown the dust of jealousy into the eye of the Tasnim fountain of Paradise [...] Its wind has kindled the flames of shame in the spirit of the winds of Paradise and the breezes of [the angel of fire] Ordibehesht. It is the gathering

place of renowned ulama, the residence of the scholars of the time, the goal of famous kings, the resort of exalted emperors, the refuge of men of gnosis, the abode of the compassionate, the asylum of ascetics and devotees, the dwelling of disciples and preceptors, the halting place of the men of God, the descending place of truth and awakesness, the centre of circumambulation of the world-traversing travellers, the target of conquering monarchs, the source of divine emanation, the manifestation of unlimited blessings, and the radiant rising place of divine effulgence and heavenly favours."<sup>2</sup>

In Esfzari's portrayal, the combination of natural fecundity and benign rule predestined Herat to literally nurture large groups of people. He extolled the ability of the oasis to accommodate and supply large armies: The prices for bread and slaves, the two main indicators of economic welfare, remained stable even at times when numerous soldiers had to be entertained.<sup>3</sup> The immense wealth of the oasis town and its rich produce embodied the ease and stability of Timurid rule. The protection afforded by established dynasties stood in a stark contrast to the destruction wrought by invading forces. Twenty years after Esfzari praised the riches of Herat province, the Herati historian Ghiyath al-Din Khand Amir (1475–1535/36) recorded the hardships brought about by the Safavid invasion:

"Due to the passage of armies, constant strife, inattention to agriculture, dispersal of the peasantry, and the lack of both divine grace and royal attention, toward the end of the year 919 [March 9, 1513 – February 25, 1514] extreme famine struck Khorasan, particularly the capital of Herat, and all were afflicted with hunger. Day by day the situation grew worse, and from morning to night nothing but moans of starvation came from any house. Search as they might, there was no food to be had. No one of any class had bread of any kind, and everyone who could turned in desperation to eating dogs and cats. Some of the wealthy boiled calves' and goats' leather and drank it, and others made do with kernels of cotton seed and bread made from millet and corn, while the poor and needy could not obtain such things even by begging. Every day huge numbers of people died in the districts of Herat. Beggars died of starvation, and the wealthy, their income exhausted by inflation, took their place.

The situation persisted into the following year, with large numbers dying of starvation. During the two years, whenever the occasional load of grain was brought to Herat from the provinces, the rich bought it for six or seven thousand Tabrizi dinars. Concurrently, in the quarters inside and outside the city, rogues and brigands ate human flesh. Lying in ambush in the lanes, they assaulted unwary passers-by, dragged them into houses or ruins, killed them, boiled them, stored the fat, and consumed the flesh amidst great revelry [...] The famine and inflation reached such a pitch in Herat and the surrounding

<sup>1</sup> Krawulsky 1982, 14; Krawulsky 1984, 18.

<sup>2</sup> Esfzari 1959–60, 19–20.

<sup>3</sup> Esfzari 1959–60, 23–24.



Fig. 1 Aerial view of Herat oasis, from south (2005)

area that dead bodies lay putrefying in the lanes and streets because the poor had no opportunity to prepare their children and relatives for a decent burial."<sup>4</sup>

The following historical description will pick up the thread in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century and trace the changes the city and its hinterland underwent under Safavid, Afsharid and Dorrani auspices. Based on Persian chronicles and travelogues, it will focus on Herat's position within the imperial framework and its embedment in the region of Khorasan.<sup>5</sup> By their very nature, the Persian chronicles highlight certain aspects of the political tableau while ignoring others. A primary concern is the intimate connection between court life and military activity. The common people, by contrast, are mentioned in general terms and merely figure as part of the landscape and general economic setting. As the above quote by Khand Amir suggests, it is only at grave historical junctures that the fate of the city's population is considered worth mentioning. The detailed description of the famine of 1514 and the individual suffering it brought about serves to illustrate the destruction of local resources caused by the intense military activity accompanying the Safavid rise to power.

## Herat under the Safavids (1501–1717): Changing Imperial Framework

During Timurid times, Herat served as the capital, the *dar al-saltane*, of a mighty empire, which, at the height of its power, covered the entire expanse from Transoxiana in the east to the Euphrates and the Caucasus in the west (see map: Timurid Empire). From the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards, however, the rise of Turkmen dynasties of the Qara Qoyunlu and Aq Qoyunlu implied the division of Iran into an eastern and western force field. In 1469, during an unsuccessful attempt to regain Azerbaijan from Uzun Hasan Aq Qoyunlu (r. 1457–1478), the Timurid ruler Abu Sa'id was captured and put

4 Thackston 1994, 475–476.

5 For a comprehensive treatment of this topic, see Noelle-Karimi 2013b.

to death. His successor, Sultan Hosayn Bayqara, (r. 1469–1506), temporarily found himself displaced from Herat, but was eventually able to establish a stable rule over a reduced realm extending from Balkh in the east to Bestam and Damghan in the west, and from Khvarazm in the north to Kandahar and Sistan in the south.<sup>6</sup>

While Herat flourished as Timurid capital under Sultan Hosayn Bayqara, Tabriz, also carrying the title of *dar al-saltane*, was the most important metropolis of western Iran. Established as seat of government by the Ilkhanids (1256–1335), Tabriz maintained its eminent status under the dynasties of the Jalayerids (c. 1330–1380), the Qara Qoyunlus (1380–1469) and Aq Qoyunlus (1396–1508), and may therefore be described as Iran's most stable capital in pre-modern times.<sup>7</sup> The early Safavids likewise concentrated their resources in this region. Shah Esmā'il I (r. 1501–1524) originally designated Tabriz as his capital. Owing to Ottoman pressure, Shah Tahmasp I (r. 1524–1576) shifted his headquarters to Qazvin in the 1540s. Eventually, in 1006/1597–98, Shah 'Abbas I (r. 1587–1629) established Isfahan as seat of government.<sup>8</sup>

With the disintegration of the Timurid realm in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, Herat became an embattled zone between the interests of the Safavids and the Shaybanids based in Tashkent, Ferghana, Samarqand, and Bukhara. In December 1510, Shah Esmā'il I defeated and killed Mohammad Shaybani near Marv and subsequently designated the Oxus as borderline between the Safavid and Shaybanid dominions.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, Mohammad Shaybani's nephew 'Obaydullah b. Mahmud (1476–1540) continued Shaybanid military activities in Khorasan for the next three decades. While famine was a regular feature in the tug-of-war between the Safavids and Shaybanids, the city of Herat suffered most during 'Obaydullah Khan's final occupation from August 1536 until January 1537, during which

6 The northern Timurid lands of Samarqand, Bukhara, Ferghana, Badakhshan, Termedh, Chaghaniyan and Hesar were held by the descendants of Abu Sa'id (Manz 2000, 514).

7 Fragner 2006, 72–75.

8 Haneda/Matthee 2006, 651. - McChesney 1988, 109.

9 Sarwar 1975, 60–63. - Savory 1978, 61. - Szuppe 1992, 81.

he destroyed the central bazaar and removed the treasury from the citadel of Ekhtiyar al-Din.<sup>10</sup> With the death of 'Obaydullah Khan in 1540, Safavid authority became firmly established in Herat. Uzbek activity in Khorasan climaxed for a final time between 1588 and 1598 under the last two Shaybanid leaders: 'Abdollah Khan (r. 1583–1598) and his son 'Abd al-Mo'men (d. 1598).<sup>11</sup>

Shah Esmā'il I employed religious policies to carve out a distinct identity for his realm and legitimize Safavid rule. He declared the *Ithna 'Ashari* form of Shi'i Islam as the official religion of his realm, thereby setting it off against its Sunni neighbours, the Ottomans in the west and the Shaybanids in the east.<sup>12</sup> Like other rulers of the time, the Safavid dynastic family based its claim to legitimacy and authority on genealogical reasoning. Harking back to the reasoning adopted by their Sufi forebears, the Safavids traced themselves to Musa al-Kazem (d. 799), the seventh Imam of *Ithna 'Asharism*.<sup>13</sup> This connection underpinned the religious standing which Shah Esmā'il's family had enjoyed since his more immediate ancestor Safi al-Din (1252–1334) had founded a mystical order in the northwestern town of Ardabil in 1301.<sup>14</sup>

The religious origins of the Safavids also brought forth a specific form of military organisation. Being venerated as a living emanation of the godhead, Shah Esmā'il I was able to mobilize Qezelbash military-administrative organisations (*uymaq*), which were bound to him as adherents of a supreme spiritual leader (*morshed-e kamele*). Drawn from the Turkmen tribes of eastern Anatolia and Syria, the Ostajlu, Shamlu, Rumlu, Tekelu, Dhu al-Qadr, Qaramanlu, Afshar and Qajar confederacies figured most prominently in Shah Esmā'il I's military forces. Of special importance were the *ahl-e ekhtesas*, a small group of trusted adherents who had accompanied and protected the future king

10 Szuppe 1992, 115.

11 For a detailed account of Abdollah Khan's conquest of Herat in February 1588, see McChesney 1993 and Müller 1964, 42–44.

12 Savory 1995, 765.

13 Quinn 2000, 72; 84–85.

14 For an example of the genealogical reasoning employed, see Amini Haravi 1383/2004, 69–70. See also Morimoto 2010. - Sohrweide 1965, 96.



Fig. 2 View of Qala'-e Ekhtyaruddin, from northeast (2010)



Fig. 3 Friday mosque, Herat (2010)

during his early career. The Qezelbash impact in shaping the concept of the Safavid domain is reflected by the terminology employed well into the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Shah 'Abbas's historiographer Eskandar Monshi alternately referred to the Safavid territory as the Qezelbash 'realm' (*qalamraw-ye Qezelbash*), 'state' (*dawlat-e Qezelbash*), and 'kingdom' (*mamlakat-e Qezelbash*).<sup>15</sup>

The tribal mode of rule soon revealed its limitations, as in the following generations the relationship between the Qezelbash elite and their Safavid masters changed from one of unquestioning loyalty to the tenuous bond that typically united the interests of the local aristocrats with those of the royal family. Shah Esmā'il I's successors Shah Tahmasp I (r. 1524–1576) and Shah 'Abbas I (r. 1587–1629) sought to diminish the Qezelbash prerogatives by introducing Georgian and Circassian slaves. Initially serving as military slaves (*gholams*), many of these tribal outsiders gained administrative posts and effectively displaced the Qezelbash elite.<sup>16</sup>

Though located on the northwestern fringe of their future domain, the Safavids readily adopted existing notions of territory. Shah Esmā'il's contemporary Amini Haravi understood the military activities of the first Safavid ruler to be guided by the territorial notion of Iran as comprising the

15 Aubin 1984, 3–4; 7. - Braun 1969, 183. - Haneda 1987, 31–44. - McChesney 1993, 73. - Roemer 1985, 230–231. - Savory 2002, 5.

16 Babaie et al. 2004, 6–7. - Savory 1960, 91; Savory 1986, 364–365.



Fig. 4a-b Shrine of Abu al-Qasem, Kohandez (2005)

two 'Iraqs' and Azerbaijan in the west and Khorasan in the east. According to his biographer, Shah Esma'il reached for both entities in 1505. As a native of Herat, Amini highlighted the centrality of his province, describing Khorasan as 'throne', which was coveted by the kings of the world.<sup>17</sup> After the conquest of Khorasan, Shah Esma'il duplicated the existing administrative divisions and designated Herat as provincial capital. Its governor assumed the title of *beglerbegi* and enjoyed a position superior to the other local governors of Khorasan. In the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, he was in charge of appointing the governors of Mashhad, Esfarayen and Astarabad. The first religious supervisor (*sadr*) assigned to Khorasan in 1515 had his seat in Herat, and his jurisdiction over religious affairs covered the entire area from the borders of Persian Iraq and Azerbaijan to Tokharestan, that is the region bounded by the upper and middle course of the Oxus.<sup>18</sup>

17 Amini Haravi 1383/2004, 241–242.

18 Röhrborn 1966, 16–17.

The central position of Herat is also highlighted by the fact that it became the seat of the Safavid heir apparent. When the Shirazi author Natanzi describes Herat as the "most excellent of the regions of Khorasan", he also notes that "it is a characteristic of that proud city that every son of a *padshah* who grows up and reaches maturity there will certainly become *padshah*".<sup>19</sup> The princes were often extremely young at the time of their appointment. Real power, therefore, rested with the Qezelbash *amirs* assigned as their tutors (*lala*). The first Safavid prince appointed governor of Herat was Tahmasp Mirza, who arrived in 1516 at the age of two and held his position under the tutorship of Amir Khan Mausellu until 1521.<sup>20</sup> When Natanzi wrote about the status of Herat during the final years of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, he described a past phenomenon. His contemporary Shah 'Abbas I abolished the practice of appointing royal princes to provincial governorships in order to break the power of the Qezelbash aristocracy. Therefore, the last crown prince to hold Herat was 'Abbas himself, who was barely one year old at the time of his appointment in 980/1572–73.<sup>21</sup>

In Herat, Mohammad Khan Sharaf al-Din Tekelu's governorship from 1537–1557 initiated a switch from the previous Safavid policy of depletion to one of urban development. In the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Khorasani author Jonabadi reported that Mohammad Khan Tekelu had caused Herat to flourish: "[Bringing] the light of justice, he rescued the subjects of Khorasan from the darkness of oppression. He raised the banner of righteousness and care for his subjects to the highest heaven. He restored the deteriorated mosques, *madrasas* and charitable buildings to a state of perfection."<sup>22</sup> Another powerful Herati governor was the *beglerbeg* Hosayn Khan Shamlu (1598–1619), who revived Safavid authority in Khorasan subsequent to a ten-year Uzbek intervention. His son and

19 Natanzi 1350/1971, 248. See also McChesney 1993, 77.

20 Khand Amir 1333/1954, 553–554. - Thackston 1994, 607–608. - Amir Mahmud 1370/1991, 165–167. - Sarwar 1975, 86. - Savory 1978, 75. - Szuppe 1992, 87–93; Szuppe 1993, 280.

21 Haneda 1984, 54–57. - Roemer 1986, 276–278. - Savory 1986, 366.

22 Jonabadi 1378/1999, 502–503.

successor Hasan Khan Shamlu (1619–1638/41) erected a large domed cistern immediately southeast of the Chahar Su.<sup>23</sup> While the available Persian sources do not yield any information on this building, 19<sup>th</sup> century travellers mention it as an impressive feature in the urban landscape. Mohan Lal, a British-Indian agent who visited Herat in the summer of 1833, even characterised it as the "most beautiful and beneficial edifice" in Herat. He described it as nearly sixty feet square and thirty feet deep, containing "clear and shining" water. Lamps placed in its arches served to bring out its fine architectural features.<sup>24</sup> In 1845, the French traveller Joseph-Pierre Ferrier praised this "vast reservoir" and its dome of "bold and excellent proportions" as a chef d'oeuvre of its kind.<sup>25</sup>

From the late 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Herat was increasingly eclipsed by Mashhad. Shah 'Abbas I paid numerous visits to the grave of the eighth Imam 'Ali b. Musa al-Reza (d. 818) and made rich donations to the shrine and city. His acts of devotion and his building activity were emulated by his entourage and enhanced Mashhad's role as a leading place of pilgrimage within Iran.<sup>26</sup> To the east, Herat's position was affected by the incorporation of Kandahar into the Safavid domain in 1649. While the Safavid governor of Kandahar initially communicated with the court of Isfahan via Herat, Kandahar was eventually placed on the same footing as Herat.<sup>27</sup> The political and administrative map of Khorasan changed accordingly. Timurid authors had assigned a central role to Herat, Balkh, Nishapur and Marv;<sup>28</sup> henceforth, Kandahar and Mashhad assumed a predominant position in Safavid Khorasan.

The Persian chronicles of the time tell us little about the urban population of Herat but convey some important impressions about the tribal setting around the city. From the 16<sup>th</sup> century on, the *uymaqs* of the Jamshidis, Timuris, Firuzkuhis, Taheris, and Qepchaqs figure

23 Najimi 1982.

24 Lal 1977, 159–160.

25 Ferrier 1857, 174.

26 Melville 1996, 191–229. - Streck 1991, 713–716. - Yate 1900, 319.

27 Tumanovich 1989, 154.

28 Krawulsky 1982, 11–13.

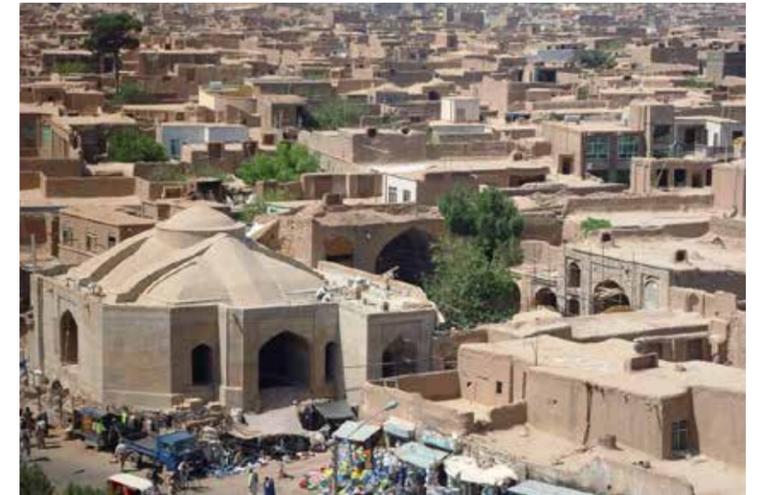


Fig. 5 Chahar Su cistern, Herat, Old City (2007)

in the political narrative of the region. From the late 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Pashtun groups began to make their influence felt in the provinces/regions (*velayat*) belonging to Herat. In particular, the Abdalis, later to become known as Dorrans, migrated between their summer camps in Badghis and their winter camps in Shafelan and Awba east of Herat, as well as Esfazar, 80 miles to the south. The Abdali leaders of Herat maintained contact with their kinsmen in Kandahar and Multan and, at certain junctures, relocated to the latter places to evade the political and military pressure exerted by the Safavid overlords.<sup>29</sup> It was this cosmopolitan network that eventually allowed the Abdalis to make the leap from a local aristocracy to imperial elite.<sup>30</sup>

## The Afsharid Period (1732–1747): Eastern Ambitions

With the decline of Safavid authority in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, a number of regional powers came into being. In present-day Afghanistan, the Hutak Ghelzais in Kandahar and the Saduzai Abdalis in Herat emerged as two local polities. In 1709, the Hutak leader Mir Wais (d. 1715) successfully challenged Safavid rule over Kandahar by killing the Georgian governor Shahnawaz Khan, also known as Gorgin Khan. Subsequently, the Hutak Ghelzais extended their military activities into Iran, and their conquest of Isfahan in 1722 spelt the demise of the Safavid Empire. Meanwhile, the Saduzai Abdalis gained ascendancy in and around Herat. In 1717, they evicted the last Safavid governor and occupied a territory roughly corresponding to the former Safavid province of Herat. A third force in the region was Nadhr Qoli Afshar (later to become known as Nader Shah) whose career initially focused on Khorasan, but soon became much larger in scope.

In their initial phase, Nader's conquests allegedly aimed at restoring Shah Tahmasp II to the Safavid Empire. He achieved this goal by establishing control over Mashhad in 1726, freeing Isfahan from Hutak rule in 1729, and

29 Mar'ashi 1362/1983, 19.

30 Noelle-Karimi 2013a.