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Women and Religious Patronage in the Timurid Empire

Nushin Arbabzadah

This chapter sheds light on the foundational Timurid period in Afghan history during the fifteenth century, which saw important and enduring religious institutions founded in the capital city of Herat and other urban centers.¹ The chapter focuses on how Timurid women of the ruling class patronized religious architecture with their own private funds. The most audacious of these female patrons was Queen Gawhar Shad, the wife and consort of the Timurid ruler Shahrukh (r. 1405–47), who spent a decade as de-facto ruler of the Timurid Empire after arranging the coronation of her young grandson upon her husband's death in 1447. Not only did Gawhar Shad dare to break the long-standing custom that prevented women from patronizing mosques by building two mosques; she also ensured that the mosques in question became not just ordinary places of worship but prestigious Friday mosques, serving as influential institutions at the intersection of political and religious power. In tracing the wider context of female religious patronage that surrounded Gawhar Shad's endowment of these mosques, this chapter draws on original Persian records alongside contemporary European scholarship. In so doing, it provides an overview of the role of elite women in shaping the religious landscape of medieval Afghanistan and its surrounding regions during the Timurid renaissance of the fifteenth century.

Strictly speaking, using the term “Afghanistan” for the medieval period is problematic. As Nile Green explains in his introduction to this volume, the name “Afghanistan” refers to the nation-state that emerged in the nineteenth century: that is, almost four hundred years after the Timurid period, the focus of this chapter. At that time, neither the state nor the term “Afghanistan” existed. But insofar as the city of Herat was the capital of the Timurid dynasty between 1405 and 1507,

and has belonged to the nation-state of Afghanistan since 1857, it is meaningful to consider not only the religious buildings of Herat but also their patrons as part of Afghanistan's religious history.

In the previous chapter, Arezou Azad has explored the first centuries after the Arab Islamic conquest of (much of) what is today Afghanistan. As she has explained, it was in this early period of Islam that we see the emergence of the first generations of native religious scholars, or *'ulama*, in the region. Characteristically, this first generation of *'ulama* were mostly self-taught and held other occupations alongside working part-time as Islamic jurists. However, by the fifteenth century, which forms the timeline of this chapter, Islam was no longer a new faith in the early stages of growth but had fully developed as the long-established religion of the Khurasan region surrounding Herat. It is also in this period that we see the particular strand of Sufi Islam consolidating its legitimacy through the system of the *silsila* (chain, dynasty), which traced the lineage of living Sufi masters back to the Prophet Muhammad. Jürgen Paul's chapter in this volume describes this process in more detail, shedding light on the wider sociopolitical context in which the influence of Sufis was consolidated by Timurid elite support. This chapter complements Paul's by explaining that through their patronage of Sufi khanaqah buildings, Timurid women of the ruling class played an equally significant role in solidifying the social and institutional power of Sufi Islam in medieval Afghanistan.

Although the Sufi khanaqah was a favorite type of building patronized by Timurid women, it was far from the only type of religious building they funded. We know from architectural evidence and historical records of the time that Timurid women's engagement in shaping the religious landscape of the medieval period was more expansive in scope. So, for example, Timurid women were engaged in developing Islamic education through their patronage of madrasas. Similarly, Gawhar Shad, the most famous Timurid woman, supported normative Sunni Islam by funding the building of two major Friday mosques. As already mentioned, other Timurid women of the ruling class helped the solidification of Sufi Islam through their patronage of khanaqahs and mausoleum shrines. It is equally fair to say that as a side effect of the even-handed distribution of their patronage, Timurid dynastic women fulfilled a diplomatic function, creating stability for the court by balancing out the power of rival religious establishments. We should not, however, conclude from our Timurid example that the patronage of alternative religious buildings such as khanaqahs and madrasas was an activity exclusive to the women of this particular dynasty, because across the centuries, the ruling-class women of various Islamic dynasties engaged in the same activity, patronizing alternative religious buildings.

The practice was common in the medieval period. Seen in this light, it becomes clear that far from being exceptional, Timurid dynastic women fitted a wider cultural pattern of the period. However, where they clearly stood out among other ruling-class Muslim women of the time was in the figure of the already-mentioned

Gawhar Shad. The consort of the ruler Shahrukh in the first half of the fifteenth century and a de-facto ruler for a decade in her own right, Gawhar Shad famously disregarded an old tradition according to which only male rulers, the sultans, had the legitimacy to patronize the building of the prestigious Friday-mosque institution. Gawhar Shad broke this established pattern twice when she patronized the building of two separate Friday mosques in key Timurid cities, one in Herat and another in Mashhad (in what is today Iran). It can be safely assumed that Gawhar Shad was inspired by an earlier Turko-Mongol female aristocrat, Qutlugh Turkan Aqa (d. 1383), Timur's older sister, who was known to have built a mosque in Samarqand.²

Still, just how unusual it was for a female ruler to patronize the prestigious institution of the Friday mosque becomes clear when we bear in mind that even centuries later, mosques built with the funding of a female patron still remain a historical oddity. Finally, when we compare the types of buildings patronized by male Timurid rulers to the ones funded by their female counterparts, we encounter another differentiation based on gender. We find that whereas male Timurid rulers patronized both secular and religious buildings, female rulers limited themselves to the patronage of religious buildings alone. This fact further highlights the importance of women's role in shaping the religious landscape of medieval Islam in parts of what is known today as Afghanistan.

THE SOURCES OF TIMURID FEMALE POWER

It is clear from the historical records of the time that Timurid women had an especially high status, and it was this status that in turn allowed them to commission the building of religious schools, khanaqahs and mausoleum shrines. This special status was based not so much on the position of women in Shari'a law as on the position of women in the Turko-Mongol sedentary societies that were in this period the heirs to the older and more egalitarian traditions of the Mongol kinship systems of the steppe. Traditionally, women played key roles in Turko-Mongol societies, particularly through the importance of genealogy and political marriages. This was particularly true of the early, foundational, period of the Timurid rule. To illustrate this point, we have to recall that Timur was granted legitimacy to rule only after he married the Chinggisid princess, Saray Mulk Khanum. Before his marriage, the rules of the political system of the steppe excluded Timur, because he was not related to Chinggis Khan (ca. 1162–1227). This absence of kinship amounted to his lacking in legitimacy to rule. It is for this reason that it was only after his marriage to Saray Mulk Khanum, a daughter of Qazan Khan (r. 1343–46), that Timur was given legitimacy to rule. More important, the legitimacy to rule was transferred to Timur after he was conferred the title of *gurigan* (son-in-law).³ Such was the significance of this title that to this date, the Persian sources that

refer to Timur call him Timur Gurigani as often as they use the better-known title Timur Lang. Saray Mulk, the woman whose marriage to Timur conferred to him both the title and the legitimacy to rule, subsequently became Timur's favorite. Her name is frequently mentioned in Timurid historiography, in works written by the two main historians of the period, Yazdi and Mirkhwand. Another testimony to Saray Mulk's standing in Timur's eyes is the fact that even though she did not bear him any children, she was still given the task of supervising the education of Timur's grandson, Prince Khalil Sultan, who later ruled over Transoxiana between 1405 and 1409.⁴

Historical sources from this early period provide further evidence that Timur entertained a close and special relationship to his female family relations. For example, the following passage from Mirkhwand's *Rawzat al-Safa* illuminates the powerful emotional impact that the death of his elder sister, Qutlugh Turkhan Aqa, had on Timur:

The Lord of the Auspicious Conjunction [i.e., Timur], who in stability and calm had not an equal under the sky, became full of anxiety and restlessness and suddenly lost the reins of patience and control.⁵

As his elder sister, Qutlugh Turkhan Aqa had given Timur refuge in her house before his coming to power, and she is known to have later exercised great influence over him.⁶ Such deep attachment between the male ruler and his female family member was typical in the Turko-Mongolian societies. We find a later example of a similarly strong attachment to the women of the family in the figure of Timur's descendant Babur, who as founder of the Mughal Empire became the ruler of northern India between 1526 and 1530. The following extract from the *Humayun-nama*, written by Babur's sister Gulbadan Bigum, illustrates Babur's careful attention to his influential female relations:⁷

And in the four years that Babur spent in Agra, every Friday he went to visit his aunts. One day, the weather was extremely hot, and my elder female relation [*aka*] said, "The weather is extremely hot: what if you don't go to visit this one Friday? The ladies [*biguman*] will not be sad." The king [Babur] said to my *aka*, "*Mahum*, I am surprised to hear this from you. The daughters of Hazrat-i Abu Sa'id Mirza are separated from their father and brothers. How can I not go and ask about their well-being?"

Not only is Timurid women's special status evident from such historical records, written at the time of the Timurid rule, but it is also reflected in their ability to patronize both multipurpose religious buildings and minor arts such as textiles, embroidery, and metalwork, and different forms of entertainment such as music, magic shows, and poetry gatherings. Timurid women were also a source of inspiration for the aspirations of Timurid men to sponsor such secular spaces as palaces and gardens as well as mosques and shrines. Such indirect influence

becomes more evident if one bears in mind that these places were often named after favorite Timurid women. For example, the great Masjid-i Bibi, in Samarkand, was named after Timur's wife Saray Mulk, while Timur and his descendants also built gardens in honor of their wives, places that were used to greet and entertain foreign visitors. Contemporary literary sources, such as poetry, historiography, and biographies of poets and saints further bear witness to the especially high status that Timurid women enjoyed. In these texts, women are represented as powerful and active agents participating in the cultural and political life of the Timurid society, whether as political agents like Gawhar Shad or as enthusiastic patrons of music and poetry like the Mughal empress Ruqiyya Bigum (1542–1626).⁸

An additional source of Timurid women's power came from certain aspects of Islam. The patronage of the wealthy had played an important role in Islamic culture since the earliest days of the faith. The ethical basis of patronage in Islam is located in the principle of *zakat* (almsgiving), the obligation of humankind to do good, and the rewards of *zakat*.⁹ As a religious duty, patronage was required especially from rulers, who often demonstrated their piety through sponsorship of mosques and other religious buildings.¹⁰ The importance of patronage in the early Islamic period is reflected in the *Madih* of Ibn al-Rumi (d. 895), an 'Abbasid poet who elaborated on the ethics of patronage by describing how patronage should ideally work.¹¹ The Herat-born historian Khwandamir (ca. 1475–1534/37) presented in his *Mukarim al-Akhlaq* a detailed listing of the buildings endowed by Herat's great literary patron Mir 'Ali Shir Nawa'i (1441–1501).¹² Khwandamir's explanation of this patronage within the moral structure of Islam shows how earlier 'Abbasid notions of patronage as part of *zakat* continued to be important in the Timurid period. Islam also facilitated female patronage of culture by allowing women a certain degree of financial independence, since the Quran specifically gives women the right to inherit property and wealth.¹³ Timurid women were special in that they had available to them two key sources of power, Islamic law and Turko-Mongol traditions. It was the combination of these two sources that enabled Timurid women not only to inherit wealth but also to make use of their wealth in funding the key religious buildings that became the focal points of the Timurid society's public life. A detailed description of the types of buildings sponsored by Timurid women is provided in the next section.

FEMALE PATRONAGE OF MOSQUES

Given the greater influence that women traditionally had in Turkic and Mongol contexts, it is worth noting that other medieval Muslim women who commissioned mosques were from the Yemeni Rasulid and Ottoman dynasties, both of which were of Turkic ancestry.¹⁴ In a book dedicated to the history of Afghanistan's

Islam, it is important to recognize that it was more likely such Turkic traditions at work in Timurid Herat than any specifically Afghan tradition. Whether in culture or kinship, whatever the source of their agency, Timurid women left an enduring mark on the religious landscape of the most important urban center in western Afghanistan. However, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, the patronage of mosques—especially of the prestigious institution of the Friday mosque—was traditionally the domain of the sultan. It was for this reason that despite their enthusiasm for architecture, medieval female patrons were reluctant to commission the construction of mosques. As a result, female rulers who built mosques were rare, representing an exception to the general rule. Timurid women were not an entirely unique exception in this time and place: between 1498 and 1500 the aforementioned Sufi, poet, and statesman Nawa'i sponsored the restoration of Herat's Friday mosque, for example.¹⁵ Indeed, during the course of his long career, Nawa'i is said to have either built or repaired no fewer than 135 buildings.¹⁶ Nonetheless, women were an unusual minority as patrons. Given this background, the fact that the Timurid queen Gawhar Shad patronized the building of two Friday mosques is remarkable. Gawhar Shad built the mosques in the two key Timurid cities of Herat and Mashhad. The Friday mosque in Mashhad was completed in 1418/9, and that in Herat in 1432, later to be repaired by Nawa'i.¹⁷ The foundation inscription of the Mashhad mosque read: "Whoever builds a mosque for God, so likewise God will build a house for him [or her!] in paradise."

As mentioned earlier, we have reason to believe that in this endeavor, Gawhar Shad was inspired by an earlier female relative, Timur's elder sister, Qutlugh Turkan Aqa, who is credited with having built a mosque in Samarqand. Gawhar Shad paid for the mosques from her own private funds. In modern times, the buildings have come to be regarded as the culmination of the Timurid style. In addition to their sheer size, they are impressive for their luxurious internal decoration and for the fact that they were designed by the most gifted architect of the time, Qawam al-Din Shirazi (d. 1438).¹⁸

The patronage of mosques was not only a means of demonstrating Gawhar Shad's personal piety. It was also a way of exercising power and control over the religious establishment. So, for example, the site chosen for the mosque in Mashhad is full of political implications. Its proximity to the tomb of the eighth Shi'i imam, Riza (d. 818), implied Gawhar Shad's goodwill and support for the Shi'i establishment. Yet the presence of the Sunni *'ulama* who were also employed at the mosque brought balance to this apparent Shi'i preference.¹⁹ In addition, Gawhar Shad commissioned Qawam al-Din Shirazi to build the *dar al-siyada* next to the Mashhad mosque, a gesture that demonstrated her respect for the Sayyid families, who drew power from their claim to be descendants of the Prophet Muhammad. From this we gather that Gawhar Shad's patronage of religious architecture was about far more than acts of personal piety. Her financing of religious buildings had

strong political implications in terms of balancing out the power of rival religious groups; and this balance, in turn, strengthened her own rule.

If Gawhar Shad's commissioning of Friday mosques was about more than a demonstration of her personal piety, according to Timurid literary sources of the time, the mosques themselves played multifunctional roles, representing far more than simply places of worship. Mosques played important social roles, because they were also places of religious education, places in which, as Jürgen Paul explains in his chapter in this volume, Sufi leaders and followers gathered and stayed. According to the Timurid court sophisticate Zayn al-Din Wasifi, mosques were also places where Herat's literati assembled.²⁰ Indeed, Gawhar Shad's mosque in Herat became a focal point for the sociocultural life of Timurid society, a public space where the religious education of future generations took place alongside cultural activities (such as poetry recital and literary criticism) and religious activities (such as private and public worship), as well as the everyday social encounters of different people. According to Wasifi, at times the mosque was even used by Herat's entertainers as a site to perform acrobatics.²¹ Gawhar Shad's concern for the future of her buildings led her to transform her mosque in Mashhad into an endowment (*waqf*). Among the items of the endowment were a seven-chambered bathhouse built of baked brick, orchards, gardens, and five hundred sheep.²²

FEMALE PATRONAGE OF KHANAQAHS

Throughout the medieval Islamic world, female patrons showed great enthusiasm for the sponsorship of khanaqahs, buildings that served as residential lodges and teaching institutions for members of the Sufi orders. The fact that women were generally banned from sponsoring mosques is bound to have played a role in directing their attention toward alternative religious buildings such as khanaqahs. Indeed, from Egypt and Anatolia all the way to Transoxiana, female patronage of khanaqahs was a common practice in the medieval period, and Timurid women were part of this wider cultural practice. Again, there was a Turkic cultural context in that most of the female patrons known to have sponsored the construction of khanaqahs in this period belonged to Turkic dynastic elites.²³

This female patronage of Sufi khanaqahs occurred at a time when Sufi Islam was in the process of establishing itself in the region under the protection of the Timurid elite. Furthermore, as Jürgen Paul explains in the next chapter, Sufi Islam comprised many public events, and sites of Sufi rituals such as khanaqahs were places where followers of Sufi masters came together in large numbers. Given the wider social purpose of such buildings, it becomes clear that with their patronage of khanaqahs, Timurid women financed and thereby shaped the creation of public spaces that were far more than mere prestige projects. This is because it was in such buildings that networks of alliances were forged, connecting Timurid rulers,

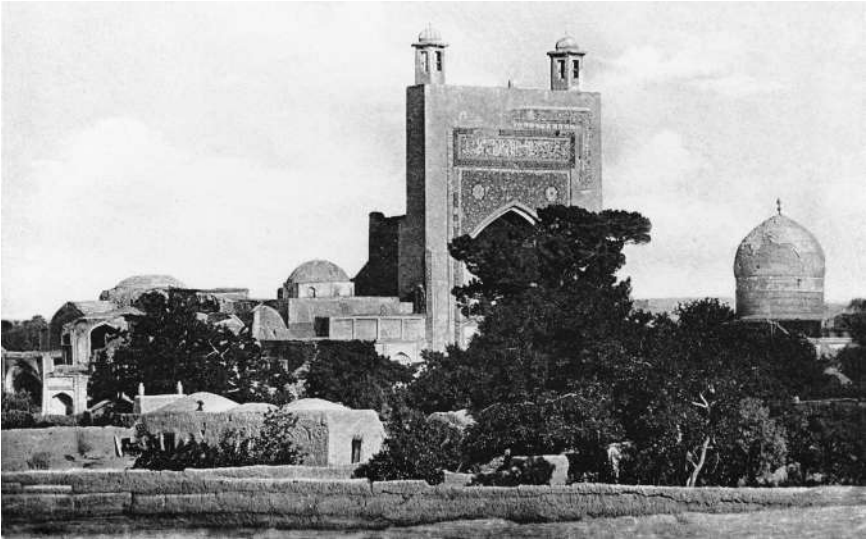


FIGURE 8. Timurid mosque and shrine, Torbat-i Jam, 1913. (From Ernst Diez, *Churasanische Baudenkmäler* [Berlin: D. Reimer, 1918])

Sufi spiritual leaders, and regular followers to one another, in the process shaping the sociopolitical dynamics of the Timurid-ruled medieval society.

All the Timurid women known to have sponsored khanaqahs belonged to the royal family. They included several generations of female elites going back to the lifetime of Timur himself. For example, Tuman Aqa, one of Timur's principal wives, was among the women known to have sponsored the building of khanaqahs.²⁴ She was a daughter of Amir Musa, whom Timur married after executing her father for supporting his rival, Amir Husayn. As such, Tuman Aqa was clearly a woman with an impressive ancestry, a fact that is reflected in the detailed description of her genealogy in her tomb complex at the Shah-i Zinda mausoleum complex, in Samarqand.²⁵ In the Timurid court history *Rawzat al-Safa*, by Mirkhwand, Tuman Aqa is often described as accompanying Timur's senior wife, Saray Mulk Khanum, and the rest of the royal entourage.²⁶ Judging by the historical records of the time, Tuman Aqa was part of the entourage that accompanied the start and end of Timur's military campaigns: she accompanied him when he set off on campaign, and welcomed him upon his return. In a pattern that reflected prior Mongol female participation in warfare, Tuman Aqa is also known to have accompanied Timur while he was on campaign.²⁷

As already mentioned, Timurid women often inspired the commissioning of secular and religious buildings. Hence, on the occasion of their marriage, in the

year 1378, Timur commissioned a garden for Tuman Aqa known as the Bagh-i Bihisht (Garden of Paradise).²⁸ According to historical sources, both the Bagh-i Bihisht and Tuman Aqa's khanaqah were located in Samarqand, but the exact date when she commissioned work on the khanaqah remains unknown. According to another Timurid source, the *Zafarnama* of Sharaf al-Din 'Ali Yazdi, Timur visited Tuman Aqa's khanaqah in the year 1399, after his campaign in India, and again in 1404 upon his return from Anatolia.²⁹ After Timur's death, in 1405, Gawhar Shad's husband, Shahrukh, invited Tuman Aqa to Herat, where she was given the town of Kusuwiya as a *siyurghal* land grant, which was a privileged type of hereditary land grant giving fiscal immunity, administrative and judicial freedom, and the right to collect taxes from the land.³⁰ Tuman Aqa is also known to have built another khanaqah at Kusuwiya.³¹ Unfortunately, these buildings have not survived, and we also lack information as to which Sufi orders they were built for. However, given the rise of the Naqshbandi order under the Timurids that is described in the next chapter, there is good reason to think that some of these khanaqahs may have been intended for the ascendant masters of the Naqshbandiyya.

Another Timurid woman known to have commissioned a Sufi khanaqah was Khanzada Bigum. Like Tuman Aqa, she was a woman of aristocratic ancestry, being a granddaughter of the Uzbek khan. Her marriage in 1373 to Timur's son Jahangir was described by the Timurid court historian Yazdi.³² According to another historian of the period, Mirkhwand, Khanzada Bigum informed Timur about Miranshah's obsession with drinking and reveling, upon which the latter lost his rule over Khurasan.³³ Significantly, her khanaqah, which was built in Herat, is the only building known to have been commissioned by her. It is likely that it was built while her second husband, Miranshah, was the governor of Khurasan.

Little is recorded about Malikat Aqa and Zubayda Aqa, the other two Timurid women known to have sponsored the building of Sufi khanaqahs. Malikat Aqa was married to Timur's sons 'Umar Shaykh and Shahrukh, whereas Zubayda Aqa was a wife of the later Timurid ruler Husayn Bayqara (r. 1469–70 and 1470–1506). However, the best known of all Timurid women, Gawhar Shad, is also known (along with her husband Shahrukh) to have donated substantial lands to the great shrine of Ahmad-i Jam, to the west of Herat (and in present-day Iran). According to a recently discovered *waqf* document dated 1426, Gawhar Shah presented the shrine with villages, land, canals, shops, and mills.³⁴ As Jürgen Paul shows in the next chapter, the shrine of Ahmad-i Jam (and the saintly family who controlled it) held enormous influence in Khurasan. Clearly, Gawhar Shad and her husband realized the importance of having such social and miraculous power brokers on side.

The obvious interest that Timurid women showed in Sufi traditions was in line with the religious culture of their dynastic kinsmen. Timur himself, for example, commissioned the huge shrine of Ahmad Yasawi (d. 1166) at Turkistan, where work was completed (or rather, abandoned) in 1399.³⁵ Similarly, Shahrukh

patronized the famous shrine of the early Sufi 'Abdullah Ansari (d. 1089) outside Herat at Gazurgah, which was completed in 1429.³⁶ Together, these shrines bear witness to the interest in and support for Sufi institutions among ruling Timurid men; their women echoed and expanded this pattern of religious endowments. Such acts of patronage made the Timurid period an era of great creativity in Sufi architecture, which developed from more utilitarian forms into aesthetic epitomes of the Timurid style.³⁷

From the male Timurids' patronage of khanaqahs we can therefore draw the conclusion that Timurid women's sponsorship of Sufi institutions was not gender-specific but was rather part of a wider pattern of Timurid religious politics. Nonetheless, it remains significant that from among a wider range of architectural possibilities secular and religious, Timurid women chose the khanaqah as their preferred focus of patronage. This preference for Sufi institutions by no means amounts to a rejection of the *'ulama*. For as we will now see, Timurid women also sponsored the construction of madrasas, in which the Arabic-based sciences of Quran interpretation and Shari'a formulation could be taught and promoted. Once again, there was political acumen in this choice of patronage, for the ruling dynasty needed not only Sufis and their increasingly popular fellowships on their side. It also needed the legal experts in religious law who might staff the Timurid bureaucracy or at least not declare the Timurids' policies or cultural practices contrary to the Shari'a, something that remained very much a possibility in a period during which Timurid elites remained attached to the Yasa customary law of their Mongol ancestors.³⁸

FEMALE PATRONAGE OF MADRASAS

Female patronage of madrasas was widespread in the medieval Islamic world. The Turkic ruling women of the Mamluk Sultanate, which ruled Egypt between 1250 and 1517, were especially renowned for their passionate patronage and supervision of madrasas.³⁹ However, women's connections to religious education go beyond patronage of building madrasas. We know from historical sources that in the early and medieval Islamic periods, ruling-class women received formal education. For example, according to al-Sakhawi's biographical dictionary of the leading figures of fifteenth-century Mamluk society, at least 411 out of 1,075 women listed in his work had received some degree of education.⁴⁰ The Mamluk period also saw women emerge as scholars of Hadith.⁴¹ It was this education that presumably inspired them to sponsor and supervise madrasas. The Timurid world represents a similar picture of women's involvement in education and educational institutions. Evidence from Timurid literature and paintings suggests that women from rich families received education.⁴² In Timurid miniature paintings, girls are often depicted studying in rooms beneath those occupied by boys, suggesting that both genders received their education in the same buildings, presumably madrasas.⁴³

As with Mamluk women, the interest of Timurid women in education was reflected in their patronage of madrasas. The most famous example of this was Gawhar Shad's madrasa in Herat, which was completed in 1432/3. The college was built as part of the larger complex that included Gawhar Shad's Friday mosque. An earlier example of this kind of mosque and madrasa ensemble was earlier endowed in Samarqand, where Timur's principal wife, Saray Mulk Khanum, had commissioned a madrasa that was built opposite the Bibi Khanum (Lady Wife) mosque. The latter mosque was itself the Friday mosque sponsored by Timur and named after Saray Mulk, the Bibi Khanum herself. It seems possible that Gawhar Shad attempted to build a similar complex so as to bring herself into symbolic proximity with such a powerful female predecessor as Saray Mulk.

An interesting feature of the madrasa is that it was simultaneously used as a college and burial ground. The Timurid historian Mirkhwand reports that many Timurid royals were buried there, including Gawhar Shad's brother Amir Sufi Tarkhan, Prince Baysunghur, Shahrukh, and Gawhar Shad herself. Indeed, this multiple usage of the same building was such that it gave rise to different names for it, such that Gawhar Shad's Madrasa also became known as the Tomb of Baysunghur.

An interesting insight into the Timurid usage of madrasas as burial places is also given in *Baburnama*, the memoirs of the Timurid founder of the Mughal Empire. Describing his visit to Herat in 1506, Babur explained that his aunts, including Payanda Bigum and Khadija Bigum, were gathered at Bayqara's Madrasa, where the Quran was read while the women visited Bayqara's own tomb. Babur further explains that Khadija Bigum's tent was set up in the southern part of the madrasa, further reinforcing the impression that Timurid madrasas fulfilled multiple functions.⁴⁴ Babur also mentions having visited Gawhar Shad's Madrasa in Herat during his tour of the city's monuments, suggesting that it belonged among Herat's places of special interest.⁴⁵

Apart from Gawhar Shad, other Timurid women—including Tuman Aqa, Malikat Aqa, Sultan Aqa (a wife of Bayqara), and Khanum Sultan Bigum (a daughter of Bayqara)—are also known to have sponsored the construction of madrasas in Khurasan. Little is known about these colleges, since none of them has survived. However, Tuman Aqa's Madrasa is known to have been situated at Kusuwiya (where her khanaqah was also built) and to have been completed in 1440/1.⁴⁶ Another interesting madrasa known to have been patronized by a woman during the Timurid period is the Parizad Madrasa, in Mashhad. According to Bernard O'Kane, the earliest reference to this building asserts that it was commissioned by a female attendant of Gawhar Shad.⁴⁷ This attribution suggests that it was not only royal women who were involved in the patronage of madrasas but that wealthy women of other classes also patronized madrasas.

In patronizing madrasas, Timurid women showed the diversity of their interests in matters of spiritual and religious education. Far from restricting their

generosity to the sponsorship of *khanaqahs*, they allowed their private funds to be used for *madrasas* where future generations of learned Timurid men and women might receive their education. However, the usage of such *madrasas* as burial places indicates that these buildings were more than purely centers of education. Through their *waqf* endowments, they also offered their founders a protected place of burial without risk of future disturbance while at the same time avoiding the impious self-aggrandizement suggested by private mausoleums.

FEMALE PATRONAGE OF MAUSOLEUMS

In contrast to Gawhar Shad, who was buried in her own *madrasa*, Timur's principal wives, his sisters, and his wet nurse were buried in the impressive mausoleum complex of Shah-i Zinda in Samarqand.⁴⁸ The site gained its importance from the belief that the Prophet's companion and cousin Qusam ibn 'Abbas was the first to bring Islam to Central Asia and was then martyred—after which he picked up his severed head and walked into a wall at the site, where he stayed alive forever. For this reason, the site was given the name Shah-i Zinda, "The Living King." Even though some buildings at Shah-i Zinda date back to the eleventh century, the major buildings were constructed for the ruling elite during the Timurid period, between 1360 and 1436.⁴⁹ An interesting feature of this burial complex is its overall structure, with the royal tombs built on both sides of a long alley leading up to the shrine of the Prophet's kinsman Qusam. In this way, the architectural form of the complex ensured that pilgrims to the shrine of Qusam, the Living King, also inevitably made a pilgrimage en route to the tombs of the dynastic Timurid dead.

The Shah-i Zinda complex is renowned not only for its beautiful architecture and bright ceramic tilework but also for the predominant role played by its female patrons. Unfortunately, the initial endowment document of Shah-i Zinda has not survived, making it impossible to know who originally endowed the land for the building of the dynastic mausoleums around the earlier tomb of Qusam. However, it seems most likely that Timur had given the land to his favorite female relations to allow them to be buried close to the venerated martyr and saint Qusam. For according to the contemporary chronicler Yazdi, Timur allotted land to his commanders (*amirs*) so that they could be buried close to his sons 'Umar Shaykh and Jahangir.⁵⁰ Considering the high esteem that Timur's sisters, wives, and daughters-in-law enjoyed, it therefore seems likely that the land was allotted to these women for similar reasons.⁵¹

One of the female Timurid mausoleums, dated from the mid-fifteenth century, is believed to have been the burial place of Timur's wet nurse and her daughter. Soviet archaeological excavations reinforced this older assumption, since two female bodies were discovered there. The structure of this mausoleum is also interesting, consisting of both a large chamber and a smaller chamber with a cenotaph.

This kind of two-room building, with a smaller room adjoining a larger room (often called the *ziyarat khana*), corresponds to the mausoleums of saints from the Khurasan region around Herat. The female patron of this mausoleum may then have wanted to give a religious aura to her own place of burial, since the style at least seems to have been well enough known and venerated to be copied. Another mausoleum at Shah-i Zinda, that of Timur's younger sister Shirin Big Aqa, is striking for two reasons. First, its high monumental portal (*pishtaq*) and superb mosaic-tile decoration, which indicate extreme wealth and are typical of the early or imperial period of Timurid architecture.⁵² Second, the inscription chosen for the mausoleum is highly unusual in its complete lack of the traditional references, whether Quranic or not, to the temporary nature of this world and the hope for a better life after death. Instead, the inscription consists of a quotation expressing the theme of man's suffering in the world that is believed to have come from Socrates, known as Suqarat in Islamic tradition.⁵³ The inscription suggests not only that Shirin Big must have been a highly educated woman but also that she must have had a certain freedom from the usual customs of orthodox funerary inscriptions.

The mausoleum of Timur's elder sister, Qutlugh Turkhan Aqa, in Shah-i Zinda, is no less impressive. It too has a high monumental portal and was richly decorated on its exterior and interior using polychrome ceramics. Both sisters seem to have commissioned the finest craftsmen of their time.⁵⁴ However, in contrast to Shirin Big, Qutlugh Turkhan's inscription is rather traditional with its reference to the transitory nature of life. Another mausoleum of special interest was patronized by the same Tuman Aqa who also patronized a madrasa and khanaqah. Her mausoleum at Shah-i Zinda encompasses a complex of a mosque, tomb, and service room. The mosque and the service room were used as places where family members and professional Quran reciters (*qari*) prayed for the soul of the deceased. Tuman Aqa appears to have been a highly religious person, a fact emphasized by her patronage of other religious buildings.

A second female burial complex in Samarqand that was patronized by Timurid women is the Ishratkhana ensemble. This burial site was originally sponsored in 1464 by Habiba Sultan, the wife of Abu Sa'id (r. 1451–69), himself a grandson of Timur. It was originally intended to be the burial place of Habiba Sultan's daughter, Sultan Khwand Big, but it later developed to become the burial place of many other Timurid women. Its richly decorated interiors and sophisticated construction plans indicate the wealth of the Timurid women who commissioned the mausoleums at this site. Habiba Sultan ensured the continuity of the Ishratkhana by transforming it into an endowment (*waqf*). Like Gawhar Shad's endowment in Mashhad, Habiba Sultan's endowment contained many additional items, including bronze vessels and decorated fabrics. This shows that the patronage of buildings also often brought with it the sponsorship of minor arts and crafts such as

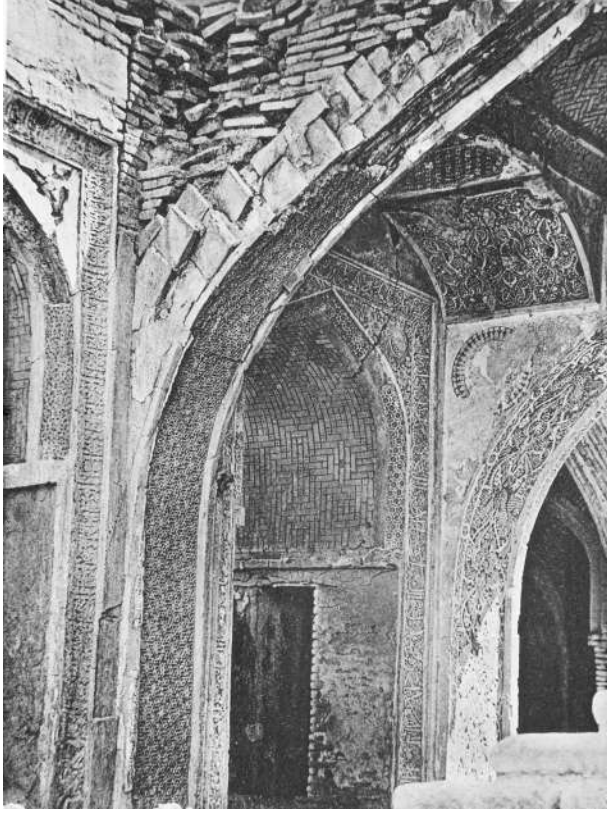


FIGURE 9. Timurid stucco decoration in the khanaqah, Torbat-i Jam, 1913. (From Ernst Diez, *Churasanische Baudenkmäler* [Berlin: D. Reimer, 1918])

embroidery and metalwork. Although it is uncertain whether the Ishratkhana site was chosen because it was also associated with a saint, in their eagerness to be buried in the proximity of a saint the Timurid women buried at Shah-i Zinda prove themselves to have been deeply rooted in Central Asian cultural tradition, with its vivid practice of the cultivation and veneration of shrines.⁵⁵ However, in their choice of size, decoration, and inscriptions, these women often showed a great deal of individuality and personal taste.

The proximity of Timurid women's tombs to the tombs of saints gave their mausoleums the aura of shrines themselves, a fact that, in addition to their luxurious decoration, impressive size, and multifunctional usage, made them highly popular among the masses as places of gathering, pilgrimage, and cultural reference. As such, these buildings were part of Timurid political propaganda reinforcing the

family's legitimacy to rule, as has been shown most comprehensively with regard to the Sufi shrine of 'Abdullah Ansari at Gazurgah, outside Herat.⁵⁶ In their patronage of mausoleums as well as madrasas and khanaqahs, Timurid women acted in accordance with wider Timurid culture.

CONCLUSIONS

The types of buildings that were sponsored by Timurid women were in accordance with their dynasty's wider political strategies and cultural values. Like their male kinsmen, Timurid women were evenhanded in their patronage, funding buildings to cater to the needs of both Sufi Islam and the legalistic learning of the *'ulama*. Some of these buildings, such as Gawhar Shad's Madrasa and her mosque in Herat, were highly popular among all classes of the Timurids and had such varied use that they were known to the public by different names.⁵⁷ Thus, the buildings patronized by Timurid rulers were multifunctional, and those sponsored by female patrons were no exception to this rule. In terms of showing off wealth by using the most prominent architects and artisans (such as Qawam al-Din Shirazi and Ustad Shams al-Din) and expensive materials (such as mosaic tile and baked brick), Timurid women acted similarly to the men of their class. The sole distinction between men and women in their forms of patronage was that women seem to have mainly sponsored religious buildings, whereas Timurid men seem to have sponsored both secular and religious buildings. This in itself points to the importance not only of women to Timurid religious life but of religious life to Timurid women.

The historical evidence left by both stonemasons and scribes leads us to conclude that the high status that Turko-Mongol tradition granted to ruling-class females allowed Timurid women to play an important role in the religious life of their era. Partly this high status was a consequence of their Turko-Mongolian heritage. And partly it was a consequence of Shari'a laws of inheritance and property, which enabled them to have their own private wealth and in turn to act as patrons. At the same time, the importance of almsgiving (*zakat*) as one of the main pillars of Islam further encouraged such patronage activity by adding a dimension of religious duty to the elite practice of patronage. These traditions later continued among Timurid women in Mughal India, as in the case of Princess Jahanara (d. 1681), the daughter of Shah Jahan and patron of various Sufis, who was buried at the Sufi shrine of Nizam al-Din Awliya (d. 1325), in Delhi.⁵⁸ As the following chapters by Jürgen Paul, R. D. McChesney, and Waleed Ziad all show, Afghanistan's premodern versions of Islam were always shared with surrounding regions in South and Central Asia. The case of elite Timurid Islam was no exception.