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Scions of Turan: Illustrated epic manuscripts of the 16th-century Abū'l-Khairid Uzbeks and their cross-dynastic exchanges

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Citation

Comstock-Skipp, J. K. (2022, October 18). *Scions of Turan: Illustrated epic manuscripts of the 16th-century Abū'l-Khairid Uzbeks and their cross-dynastic exchanges*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3483626>

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Conclusion

I. Scions of Turan

Scion: a descendant, particularly of a distinguished family. The heir to the throne. A bud or shoot, especially one destined for grafting or rooting.

Definitions of scion carry notions of maintaining tradition and perpetuating a legacy, along with the concepts of regeneration and recombination. In terms of manuscript arts, all the contemporary Turco-Persianate dynasties dominating the sixteenth century—the Abū'l-Khairids, Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals—revered and reinterpreted the earlier Timurid decorative repertoire and historiographic tradition that had created standards of high culture.⁷⁴⁷ Only the Mughals could claim full and direct Timurid continuity and sovereignty through Chaghataid descent. Lacking a Timurid connection through blood or land, Ottoman and Safavid rulers compensated by proclaiming the mantle of Timurid legitimacy in their right to rule and by appropriating its visual and literary culture.⁷⁴⁸ The Ottomans fashioned their own identity by braiding Timurid components with those from the Byzantine and Roman empires. The Safavids viewed themselves as a continuation of the Āq Quyūnlū Turkmans, the Timurids' rivals, and were keen to expand their own territorial holdings and reclaim the full extent of lands once under Timurid rule.⁷⁴⁹ The Abū'l-Khairids meanwhile positioned themselves as inheritors of the Timurid heartland in Transoxiana and dynastic restorers of Chinggis Khan's original aims. These Jūchid Abū'l-Khairids also endeavored to be custodians of the Timurid legacy through Chaghataid intermarriage. All of the eastern Islamicate empires were shaped by a similar admixture of Turkic, Persian, Mongol, and Islamic elements. What set the Abū'l-Khairids apart was their recombination of these so as to forge an identity derived from Timurid blood, land, culture, and politics.

Those chronicling the above dynasties in the sixteenth century narrated the past by imitating earlier texts as models, in particular Firdausī's successive rulers in the *Shāhnāma*, and Yazdī's individual-centric biography of Tīmūr in the *Zafarnāma*. Although these sources were significant to the

⁷⁴⁷ For a discussion of Timurid "cosmopolitan cultural unity," read Gülru Necipoğlu, "From International Timurid to Ottoman: A Change of Taste in Sixteenth-Century Ceramic Tiles," *Muqarnas* 7 (1990): 158.

⁷⁴⁸ Consult the publications of Sholeh A. Quinn.

⁷⁴⁹ The Safavids' co-opting Turkman administrative forms and supplanting the Āq Quyūnlū dynasty are noted by Bashir, "Shah Ismail and the Qizilbash: Cannibalism in the Religious History of Early Safavid Iran," 246; Wood, "*Shāhnāma-i Ismā'īl* [dissertation]," 111.

dynasties in varying proportions, the *Shāhnāma* has become the weightiest and most contested text to stake identity claims in modern times. This is however a product of the colonial age. During a few conferences I have been asked why the Abū'l-Khairids would be interested in producing a copy of the “Iranian” epic given their status as “Turks.” Implied in this remark are some tacit assumptions: 1) Firdausī’s text belongs to Iran; 2) the Abū'l-Khairids identified themselves as Turks and saw themselves mirrored in Firdausī’s literary Turanians; and 3) the paucity of Firdausian *Shāhnāma* manuscripts produced in Transoxiana can be attributed to Abū'l-Khairid governance modeled on communal Mongol customs, as opposed to centralized authority associated with Iranian kingship. I will treat these in order.

Regarding the first conjecture that the *Shāhnāma* is Iran’s right: in our age of nationalism and linguistic rigidity, it is vital to detach our contemporary interpretations of the *Shāhnāma* so that they do not color our perception of its status in eras prior to ours.⁷⁵⁰ Hamid Dabashi’s recent study on Firdausī’s text paired with nationalism is relevant. He writes:

Before its European reception, the Shahnameh was primarily a dynastic object—a text principally (but never exclusively) used and abused as an apparatus of legitimacy for one triumphant dynasty or another. . . . [By the 1800s] the state of Shahnameh studies in Ferdowsi’s own homeland was limited to very small learned cliques. But the eventual awareness of its European acceptance combined with the nascent ethnic nationalism suddenly catapulted the aging text into the political limelight.⁷⁵¹

So, the *Shāhnāma* came to “belong” to Iran only in the mid nineteenth century; in the sixteenth the work was not the prerogative of one region or dynasty, and was known and appreciated by Abū'l-Khairid, Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal elites and subjects. We as post-moderns ought not to assume the early-moderns shared our ethos to fix identities and borders based on ethnic and linguistic groupings. If today we are content with hardened delineations, those in the sixteenth century operated in a world with softer demarcations, and less stringent border patrols.

Apropos the second supposition that the Abū'l-Khairids empathized with Turkic speakers and Turanians: this is impossible to gauge from period sources, although a perusal of Appendix 3: Correspondence between Ottoman and Abū'l-Khairid rulers, ca. 1500–1598 reveals comfort in both Persian and Turki. There is no need to identify “who is who” in Firdausī’s work based on language, and a patron need not identify with one side when reading the text. Related to this, the third surmise on the

⁷⁵⁰ My gratitude goes to Christine Nölle-Karimi who made this important observation and others at the European Conference of Iranian Studies (ECIS 9) in 2019 at Freie University. Amanat touches on this concept in “Divided Patrimony.”

⁷⁵¹ Hamid Dabashi, *Persophilia: Persian Culture on the Global Scene* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 153-54.

scarcity of Firdausī's version in Abū'l-Khairid manuscript production has been asserted on political grounds. This interpretation, however, assumes Abū'l-Khairid governance and reliance on Mongol systems remained constant across the century they were in power. Rührdanz avoids arguing on linguistic and ethnic lines, and instead suggests "that it was the specific system of power sharing in the Shaibanid realm and its ideological impact that suppressed interest in the *Shahnama* [due to] the absence of the idea of centralised rule executed by a divinely ordained king."⁷⁵² This "power sharing" is true during the decades prior to 'Abdullāh Khan's mid-century unification of the Uzbek state, but not afterwards. 'Abdullāh Khan's own centralizing policies predated similar Safavid reforms; the political shift to unified leadership, characterized in older scholarship as an Irano-Islamic model as opposed to Turco-Mongol, actually took place in Transoxiana before it did in Iran.⁷⁵³

II. Abū'l-Khairid *Shāhnāma* copies

The first of its kind, this study has constituted a specific corpus of manuscripts linked by epic subject matter that expands what can be defined under the rubric of Abū'l-Khairid *Shāhnāma* copies. It has done so through several case studies, some already having been the subject of published research in prior decades, but with new materials here introduced for the first time or with provenances so closely analyzed that their interpretation is renewed by the level of nuance presented. The grouped manuscripts have included, and looked beyond, Firdausian versions to ruler-*nāma* compendia of the various figures and dynasties inhabiting Transoxiana and its environs in different centuries. The study also treated Turkic translations that might have appealed to those with limited Persian language skills, and truncated versions that emphasized popular episodes of particular heroes. I have made *Shāhnāma* the umbrella term, as opposed to ruler-*nāma*, due to the primacy of Firdausī and his impact (explicit or tacit) on the discussed works.

The acts themselves of presenting and producing a Firdausian *Shāhnāma* manuscript were opulent royal displays, and expressed power and patronage. Copies manufactured to the highest standards would be deemed appropriate as diplomatic gifts between perceived equals. Acquiring non-royal, commercial copies for personal collections also conferred erudition and status on the owner. The

⁷⁵² Rührdanz, "The Samarqand Shahnamas," 213.

⁷⁵³ Dickson, "Shah Tahmasp and the Uzbeks," 27.

choice of title neither represents the promotion of a national epic defined as such, or a uniquely Iranian code of rulership. One cannot speak on behalf of the original Abū'l-Khairids holding court, but to me, their lack of Firdausian *Shāhnāma* copies is less out of umbrage over the poet's pro-Iranian stance, and more a deference to the first Abū'l-Khairid dynastic leader Shībānī Khan's original disdain for the title. Or, perhaps, their lack of interest was itself a continuation of Sultan Ḥusain Mīrzā Bāiqarā's own neglect of the work in late-Timurid Herat. Whatever the case may be, throughout their century in power the Abū'l-Khairids did indeed engage with Firdausī's *Shāhnāma*, albeit indirectly.

At the onset of the Abū'l-Khairid dynasty, inheriting Timurid talent as well as whole manuscripts helped legitimize Abū'l-Khairid rule in the region. This functioned in the following ways: using the same artisans as the previous dynasty provided continuity and made the Abū'l-Khairids appear as the Timurids' natural inheritors. Although Shībānī Khan achieved great military victories, he did not celebrate his gains through patronizing a Firdausian *Shāhnāma*. Yet he still acknowledged that cultural and artistic prestige are intrinsic to political power, as equal to it, if not more. Firdausī's model was instrumental in Shībānī's commissioning his own parallel ruler-*nāma*, the *Fathnāma-yi khānī*. Its text and illustrations conflate his own heroics with those of Tīmūr. In analyzing its visual program, I claimed that the work employed artists who had previously worked on Firdausian *Shāhnāma* copies from the late Timurid period. By selecting compositions, figures, and subject matter that would function to equate him with the heroes and escapades of Firdausī's *Shāhnāma*, Shībānī Khan's ruler-*nāma* was a substitute and perceived improvement to it.

Later in the 1530s, despite insufficient information about their physical transfer and date of dispatch, two truncated *Shāhnāma* manuscripts written out in Transoxiana were sent to the Ottomans and finished under their auspices at the end of the century. These and other mid-century Abū'l-Khairid ruler-*nāma* reflect collective and cumulative processes of completion that challenge underlying assumptions about single-studio, single-style, and single-event processes. Notably, an eponymous *Shībānī-nāma* chronicling the life of the first Abū'l-Khairid leader carries Ottoman illustrations dating to the 1530s through the early 1540s. The object and contemporaneous epistolary documentation between the Ottoman sultan Süleyman and the ruling Abū'l-Khairid leader 'Ubaidullāh shed light on why the manuscript was finished, and the political situation between the Sublime Porte and Bukhara. The *Shībānī-nāma* and other ruler-*nāma* manuscripts illustrated in the 1540s—*Tavārīkh-i guzīda-yi*

nuṣratnāma and *Tārīkh-i Abū'l-Khair Khānī*—elevate the Abū'l-Khairid forefather Abū al-Khair Khan over the Timurids. While the *Shībānī-nāma* is akin to the older *Fatḥnāma* in terms of a single subject, the *Nuṣratnāma* and *Tārīkh-i Abū'l-Khair Khānī* connect the dynasty to its Chinggisid origins. Earlier Abū'l-Khairid ruler-*nāma* conflated Shībānī with Tīmūr to justify political control. Some later ruler-*nāma* versions extend further back to compare Shībānī's successor Kūchkūnchī to Ghāzān, one of the earlier Chinggisid converts to Islam, as a means to broadcast the dynasty's religious legitimacy.

Despite the small number of courtly Firdausian *Shāhnāma* manufactured by Abū'l-Khairid kitābkhāna staff, it was commonly accepted across the Turco-Persianate sphere that possessing and exchanging Firdausian *Shāhnāma* copies were attributes of authority and kingship. To Robinson, the commissioning of the particular title signaled a monarch's accession, although the longest-reigning Abū'l-Khairid overseer 'Abdullāh Khan had his own *Shāhnāma* manuscript (TSMK H.1488) produced within seven years of having taken Bukhara.⁷⁵⁴ The same Bukhara workshop fulfilling this and numerous other requests in the second half of the sixteenth century churned out more *Tīmūr-nāma* copies of Hātifi than of Firdausī's *Shāhnāma*. These ruler-*nāma* of the Timurid founder were arguably intended to graft 'Abdullāh Khan's victories in Transoxiana and broader Khurasan onto those of Tīmūr in prior centuries. Some of these commercial *Tīmūr-nāma* were intended for readers in Transoxiana, while others were destined for markets in India.

'Abdullāh used manuscripts from his personal collection in diplomacy, parting with the above *Shāhnāma* thirty years after its creation by giving it to the Ottomans in 1594. The object became a tool to declare his new role as a singular monarch lording over his domain to Sultan Murad III. However, entries by Ottoman authorities attendant during the receipt of this *Shāhnāma* explain the shifted political axis at odds with the camaraderie expressed earlier in the century. Alongside the dispatch of 'Abdullāh's courtly Firdausian *Shāhnāma*, a Turkic-language translation by Âmidî located in Tajikistan reflects a multi-locational process of production and collaboration spanning east and west. Posited to have been written out in the Ottoman realm in the middle of the century, I refined the provenance of its fragmentary illustrations to Khurasan in the 1580s through the 1590s when the Abū'l-Khairids had annexed a large area of eastern Iranian territory.

If correct, then the Tajikistan manuscript would have been worked on when alliances shifted, borders were contested, and distinct regional identities were established. The manuscript may have

⁷⁵⁴ B.W. Robinson, "Ismā'īl II's Copy of the Shāhnāma," *Iran* 14 (1976): 5.

been a test project to appeal to the new Abū'l-Khairid administrators in Khurasan. It is of particular significance that the object circulated across political and cultural boundaries. With similar fluidity, artisans in Khurasan came under, and were released from, different dynastic oversight. We find ourselves again faced with the conundrum over how appropriate it is to label the artist of the Tajikistan manuscript “Abū'l-Khairid,” for this individual could have previously produced manuscripts for Safavid authorities prior to 1588, then catered to Abū'l-Khairid patronage for a decade, before again securing employment working on Safavid commissions at the start of the seventeenth century all the while remaining in Herat.

Throughout dynastic transitions from Timurid to Abū'l-Khairid at the turn of the fifteenth through sixteenth centuries, and Abū'l-Khairid to Tūqāy-Tīmūrid between the sixteenth through the seventeenth, copies of Firdausī's *Shāhnāma* were peddled to non-courtly elites. In times of tumult, artisans relied on older compositional and conceptual designs and held onto these after stability within political and cultural hubs was restored. These Tūqāy-Tīmūrid Firdausian *Shāhnāma* copies were made in Samarqand to sell to buyers in Transoxiana during this juncture, and further afield in India. The Samarqandi *Shāhnāma* manuscript group has already been examined, but I have broadened and added onto this work by including the following: a specimen later given to an Imperial Russian general after victory over Tashkent, another Firdausian copy written out in Khiva, and a lavish copy evidenced by three loose folios which I have furthered existing analysis on its production and provenance. These gathered objects articulate how Abū'l-Khairid artisans both persisted in their practice and subsisted after the fall of the dynasty. Through these Samarqandi *Shāhnāma* materials and contemporaneous ruler-*nāma* versions of Tīmūr's life, we observe how some Abū'l-Khairid artisans originally working in Khurasan in the 1590s left for India. Or, they trained others who would journey southwards to contribute their talents to polities in the subcontinent. In turn, these individuals and others imported new visual models from workshops in India back to Transoxiana, manifesting the transition of Abū'l-Khairid arts of the book becoming Tūqāy-Tīmūrid.

III. Abū'l-Khairid inheritors

As an historian, the past frequently coalesces with the present, and I here ruminate from this trans-temporal vantage point. Appropriating cultural forms from select dynasties to secure political

legitimacy continues in Uzbekistan today. Whereas the Abū'l-Khairids looked to the Mongols, the Soviets wrote off the Abū'l-Khairids as nomadic, feudal, and backwards. This disregard trivialized preceding administrators once in control of the lands now forming the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic in the 1920s. The Bolshevik message downplayed positive Abū'l-Khairid contributions to the region. For seventy years, the Tīmūrids and Abū'l-Khairids alike were suppressed subjects of study and repressed figures of national pride. Post-Soviet Uzbekistan has retaliated by elevating the former dynasty with Tīmūr's statue replacing Lenin's in the streets and squares. The former president Islam Karimov (d. 2016) peppered his political speeches with allusions and references to Tīmūr that mirrored his own achievements.⁷⁵⁵

Dramatized historical events and figures in serials aired on television, as well as literary works of fiction and textbooks used in Uzbek classrooms, still glorify Tīmūr and his progeny. These denigrate the Abū'l-Khairids for bringing the splendid dynasty to an end. Around Tashkent today, there continues to be a conspicuous “absence in the public memory of the first Uzbek rulers of the territory, the [Abū'l-Khairid] Khans.”⁷⁵⁶ However, I detect a change in the winds wafting from Bukhara as local students and scholars turn their attention to this overlooked dynasty; the cast iron bodies of Abū al-Khair, Muḥammad Shībānī, and ‘Abdullāh Khan may yet adorn public spaces in the appanages of old.

⁷⁵⁵ L. Adams, *The Spectacular State: Culture and National Identity in Uzbekistan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 5.

⁷⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.