

**From *Gurgan* to Sultan:
The Omission of Timur's Wives in Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi's *Zafarnama* and the
Empresses of the Timurids
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Timur, also known as Tamerlane, was one of the most feared dictators of Central Asia after the Mongol Empire fractured. A proponent of “Mongol Restoration,” Timur himself married several women related to his inspiration, Chinggis Khan, in order to justify his rule over former Mongol lands. These women were incredibly powerful in the empire, evidenced by their immense wealth and patronage of buildings as well as the observations of ambassadors at the time. Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi’s *Zafarnama*, a biography about Timur, rarely mentions these women despite their influence.

This paper explores the reasons why Yazdi left out the women who strengthened Timur’s connection to the Chinggis Khan dynastic line. It argues that Yazdi omitted their role in Timur’s legitimacy because of the transition of the Timurid Empire to a Muslim society, which would denounce pagans such as the Mongols.

Nomadic women are well known as having a great deal more power than the average woman of the late medieval period. Whereas women of settled empires were subjected to strict patriarchy, nomadic women were given the freedoms their counterparts did not have. When nomadic empires and Islam, commonly thought of as a conservative religion for women's rights, interact, women's positions of power become unclear. Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi's *Zafarnama* is one of the pillars of Persian historical writing, detailing the rule and genealogy of Timur. The primary purpose of Yazdi's biography is to legitimize the rule of Timur and, by extension, the patron of the biography, Ibrahim Sultan. Like most rulers of his era, Timur married several women to create connections between himself and as many noble houses as possible, specifically the house of Chinggis Khan and his successors in the Chagatai dynasty. Timur's wives were distinguished diplomats and advisors in his court in Samarkand and during military campaigns. However, these women that gave Timur the right to rule over former Mongol territory are sparsely mentioned within the text. Yazdi's omission of Timur's wives in the *Zafarnama* shows the changing ideologies of the Timurids under Shahrukh's reign and the Islamification of the empire.

Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi was a historian from the city of Yazd, Iran, likely born in the 1370s. He was born into a wealthy family and a long dynastic line of intellectuals.¹ Yazdi was spared from Timur's bloodbath, as nobles and intellectuals were often taken from conquered cities to serve as members of Timur's court in Samarkand. From a young age, Yazdi approved of and thrived under the Timurid regime, writing praises about Timur and the governor appointed to Fars, where Yazdi lived.² After traveling with his mentor and friend Sa'in Al-Din Turka, Yazdi

¹ Yazdi was related to and named after famous scholar Sharaf al-Din.

² Evrim Binbaş, *Intellectual Networks in Timurid Iran: Sharaf al-Dīn 'Alī Yazdī and the Islamic Republic of Letters*, (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 40.

was called to Ibrahim Sultan's court in Shiraz in around 1390.³ Ibrahim was a calligrapher and scholar before he became Yazdi's patron, showing his own love for the arts and scholarship. Yazdi was specifically hired to review primary accounts of Timur's life by his secretaries and to create a complete history/genealogy.⁴ Timur ordered his various attendants to detail everything he deemed important, establishing a large collection of primary accounts of his life for future historians. Unfortunately, most of those accounts are lost; the only references left to them are the various histories of Timur's life, including the original *Zafarnama* by al-Shami. Despite the *Zafarnama* being labeled as a genealogy, it functions more as a narrative of Timur's life than a family tree. Timur's predecessors are only briefly mentioned. Rather than talk about Timur's parents and the history of the tribe of which his family was a member, Yazdi chooses to instead give a brief history of the dynastic line Timur usurped.

The *Zafarnama* begins by detailing the Chagatai dynasty, which was split into two in the 1340s. The Eastern khanate became Moghulistan while the Western khanate was known as Mawarannahr.⁵ Qazan, the last Chagataid Khan with any real power, ruled over the West from ca. 1343-46 and was described as "being naturally [inclined] to tyranny."⁶ He was the last Chagataid ruler with any royal blood, as he was overthrown by a member of the Qara'unas tribe, Qazaghan, who installed a puppet khan and created a line of amirs.⁷ Qazaghan had no relation to Chinggis Khan; therefore, out of respect to tradition, Qazaghan refused to take his title. After Qazan, the title of khan was just that—a title. With the khan's "blessing," amirs actually ruled

³ Binbaş, *Intellectual Networks in Timurid Iran*, 44.

⁴ Binbaş, *Intellectual Networks in Timurid Iran*, 44.

⁵ Hilda Hookham, *Tamburlaine, the Conqueror*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1962), 39.

⁶ Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi, *The History of Timur-Bec, Known by the Name of Tamerlain the Great, Emperor of the Moguls and Tartars*, (London: 1723), 2.

⁷ René Grousset, *Conqueror of the World*, (New York: Orion Press, 1967), 342; Amirs were typically lords of major tribes from the area, including the Qara'unas and the Barlas tribes. The Qara'unas was the largest and most powerful tribe in Central Asia during the Chagatai Dynasty.

Mawarannahr. In the East, similar issues of feuding nobility caused an equal amount of strife. Tughluq Temur rose from Moghulistan and provided stability to both the East and West through reunification in 1360. A direct descendant of Chagatai Khan, Tughluq managed to return command to the dynasty after Qazaghan's annexation of the Western Khanate. By bringing the royal family back into power, Tughluq returned the amirs to their original positions as local lords and tribesmen. The land was again split after his death, with the West being led under Timur and his brother-in-law Emir Husayn.

Timur came into power towards the end of Tughluq Temur's rule. Born in the Barlas tribe, his family had connections to nobility from both sides of the split khanate. He "proved himself apt at the skills of the steppe nomads" by showing military prowess, specifically on horseback, at a young age.⁸ He grew a great many supporters through military expeditions in service of his clan. In his twenties, Timur ceded to Tughluq Temur and, because of his connections and cooperation, was named ruler of a wealthy village.⁹ From early into his career, Timur refused to be second to anyone, killing even his own uncle to rule over the entire Barlas tribe. When Tughluq Temur named his son Ilyas Khoja as governor of Mawarannahr despite Timur's own vie for it, Timur left to begin a coup against his adversary.¹⁰ Timur's pattern of killing those in his path to absolute power, even allies, would continue throughout his career.

As his first step towards working his way into power over Mawarannahr, Timur formed an alliance with the grandson of Qazaghan, Emir Husayn, who ruled over provinces in Afghanistan. The two grew close, especially after Timur married Husayn's sister Olajai Turkman

⁸ Justin Marozzi, *Tamerlane: Sword of Islam, Conqueror of the World*, 1st Da Capo Press ed. (Cambridge, Mass: Da Capo Press, 2006), 39.

⁹ Marozzi, *Tamerlane*, 27.

¹⁰ Marozzi, *Tamerlane*, 30.

Agha in the 1360s.¹¹ Like the Chinggisid princesses Timur would marry in later years, Olajai's hand secured a powerful alliance for Timur. Emir Husayn was one of the most important people in Timur's young adulthood. Several chapters of the *Zafarnama* detail Husayn and Timur's adventures killing various tribal leaders and defeating Ilyas Khoja, thus gaining control of Mawarannahr. After taking over Mawarannahr, Husayn and Timur returned rule to the amirs that Tughluq had devalued with his restoration of a powerful royal dynastic line. Thanks to Olajai, Timur was successfully inserted into the new ruling family, and, as Husayn became ruler over Mawarannahr, Timur became his second.¹² As with the Barlas tribe and Ilyas Khoja, Timur did not stay satisfied with his position for long.

Alliances on the steppe tended to be temporary due to the nature of tribal leadership and power struggle; however close the two were, Timur and Husayn were no exception.¹³ The first sign of their crumbling partnership was in 1365, when Husayn fled the battlefield despite a plan that his troops would join Timur's.¹⁴ Despite this hiccup, they overthrew Samarkand together with Husayn becoming the new ruler. Timur became the hero of the people; Husayn, on the other hand, was villainized. While Timur was notoriously generous in his distribution of riches from battle, Husayn imposed heavy taxes on all of Timur's followers and the amir himself.¹⁵ To pay for them, Timur offered his wife's jewelry.¹⁶ It would have been customary for Husayn to refuse such an offer considering Timur's wife was Husayn's own sister. Instead of returning the jewelry to his sister, Husayn "had a foul base enough to forget the duty of a brother and not to [refuse

¹¹ Yazdi, *History of Timur-Bec*, 67.

¹² Hookham, *Tamburlaine*, 40.

¹³ Marozzi, *Tamerlane*, 40.

¹⁴ Marozzi, *Tamerlane*, 39.

¹⁵ Marozzi, *Tamerlane*, 41.

¹⁶ Marozzi, *Tamerlane*, 41.

them],” showing the rift between the two leaders. Olajai died in 1366, permanently severing the final thread between them.¹⁷

Olajai is only mentioned a few times within the *Zafarnama*, primarily at her death. Yazdi recognizes her only as a bridge between Timur and Husayn, rather than acknowledging her as a devoted wife and follower of her husband. Olajai was one of two people who followed Timur after his exile from Mawarannahr.¹⁸ Likely because of her early death, little is known about her other than how she and one other continued along with Timur after a miserable defeat at the hands of Khoja. Timur hid her in a “water hole” for weeks during a potential fight and the two spent months together in a dungeon.¹⁹ As a Muslim and as a Turkic woman, Olajai would have been well within her rights to return to her family, but she stayed by her husband’s side. Even faced against her brother, Olajai was a firm supporter of her husband and refused to side with Husayn. Despite being his first and most loyal follower, Yazdi only mentions Olajai as a symbol of Timur’s relationship to Husayn.

Olajai’s appearances are used to show the development of Husayn and Timur’s relationship: brothers, rivals, then finally enemies. When she first appears, it is to solidify the seemingly strong relationship between the two amirs. While most marriages at the time were merely to secure alliances, the focus of their marriage is not between Timur and the ruling family of Mawarannahr, but rather just as an alliance between him and Husayn. The fracturing of their relationship is evidenced primarily by Husayn’s disrespect towards his sister. A true brother would refuse to take his sister’s jewels as payment, much less demand more. The end of Husayn and Timur’s alliance came with Olajai’s death. Timur mourns heavily for the loss of his beloved

¹⁷ Yazdi, *The History of Timur-Bec*, 71.

¹⁸ Hookham, *Tamburlaine*, 43.

¹⁹ Hookham, *Tamburlaine*, 44.

wife and the relationship he once had with his brother-in-law, giving out alms to the poor during his grief, as was customary with Muslim widowers. On the other hand, he describes Husayn as being “more [touched] by this misfortune” because the only person that demanded civility between them was gone—indicating that Timur would soon go after him.²⁰ Yazdi uses Olajai to show Husayn’s downfall and his betrayals.

After Olajai’s death, Timur immediately began amassing an army to take Husayn down.²¹ After several failed attempts at reconciliation and betrayals, it was at the Battle of Balkh that Timur finally eliminated the last hurdle to his full control over Mawarannahr. Timur surrounded Husayn’s palace with several noble allies, showing how Timur had gathered a large and loyal following of military leaders. According to Yazdi, Timur pleaded that they “abandon this prosecution” and spare Husayn’s life as an attempt to honor the relationship they once had and the woman who connected them, though Husayn was still killed.²² Yazdi uses this moment to portray Timur as merciful and forgiving, as well as mindful of familial ties. This moment is the last reference to Olajai Agha, despite her haunting his relationship with Emir Husayn long after his death. Like Olajai, Timur’s next wives were a result of his relationship with his former brother in-law. Among Husayn’s harem, which Timur was entitled to by law, was Saray Mulk Khanum, daughter of Qazan Khan. Her marriage to Husayn was how the emir claimed his rule over Mawarannahr as legitimate and pushed Timur to second-in-command. Timur did not hesitate to claim her and raise her as his chief consort.

Genealogy was incredibly important to the Timurid dynasty. As Timur was an unknown general who grew to claim power over all Mawarannahr, he had to legitimize his rule to prevent

²⁰ Yazdi, *The History of Timur-Bec*, 71.

²¹ Yazdi, *The History of Timur-Bec*, 79.

²² Yazdi, *The History of Timur-Bec*, 128.

uprisings. His primary way of doing so was claiming “Mongol restoration.” By marrying several Chinggisid princesses, most notably Saray Mulk Khanum, Timur inserted himself in Chinggis Khan’s dynastic line and validated his claim to the former Mongol empire. This connection was so important it was engraved on Timur’s tomb and several other places in his mausoleum, Gur-i Emir.²³ The inscription is of a family tree that links Timur to Alan Qoa, the legendary grandmother of Chinggis Khan, showing the importance of women in the family tree. The family tree “emphasizes [the] prominence and supremacy of Chinggisid lineage” to the Timurids.²⁴ However, Timur himself was not the one who argued that he was related to the Chinggisid bloodline. His grandson Ulugh Beg was the one who added several family trees to the mausoleum, including the dynastic trees on Timur’s tomb. Timur himself emphasized that his dynasty were “in-laws” to the real khans. The title of “in-law” came from his marriage to Chinggisid princesses.

Saray Mulk Khanum was Timur’s Empress Consort and the key to legitimizing his rule over the Chagatai Khanate. She was the daughter of Qazan Khan, the last legitimate khan of the Chagatai and a blood relative of Genghis Khan. By marrying Saray, Timur became a member of Genghis Khan’s dynasty. He began to call himself Timur *Gurgani*, translated to “son [in law] of the Great Khan.”²⁵ The title was printed on coins used around the empire, showing his immediate latching on to his connection to the khanate. Despite the familial connection to Alan Qo’a inscribed on his tomb, Timur never “claimed the title of khan or personal descent from the golden family,” nor did his personal court historians.²⁶ The title of *gurgan* was Timur’s sole

²³ John E. Woods, “Timur’s Genealogy,” *Intellectual Studies on Islam: Essays Written in Honor of Martin B. Dickson*, ed. Michel M. Mazzaoui and Vera B. Moreen (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 1990), 85.

²⁴ Binbaş, *Intellectual Networks in Timurid Iran*, 272.

²⁵ Lisa Balabanlilar, *Imperial Identity in the Mughal Empire: Memory and Dynastic Politics in Early Modern South and Central Asia*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 9.

²⁶ Hookham, *Tamburlaine*, 71.

claim to the Chagatai dynasty other than his own merit. His continuation of a puppet khanate showed that he was well aware of his lack of royal blood, which was sacred to Mongol culture. Saray's own royal blood elevated her as his chief wife. Saray acted as Timur's empress consort and was very powerful both within the family and outside of it.

Saray is only mentioned a few times throughout the *Zafarnama*, most of said appearances being when she and Timur were first married. Yazdi only mentions her heritage once as the daughter of Qazan Khan, but makes no connection to how that adds Timur to the Chagatai khan dynasty. Despite her active role as queen, Yazdi only references her as a wife rather than as an empress. From accounts of diplomats who visited the capital of Samarkand, it is widely accepted that Saray played an important diplomatic role by securing alliances, entertaining guests, and travelling with Timur throughout the empire.²⁷ After their initial marriage, Saray is only briefly mentioned in the *Zafarnama* along with the rest of the harem during various military campaigns when Timur sends for her and the royal family to join him. Though she never gave Timur any children, Saray raised several of Timur's children and grandchildren, including future heirs Pir Muhammad and Ulugh Beg, showing his trust in her to groom them into future leaders.²⁸ Her lack of biological children also demonstrates how maternity in of itself was not a gateway to power, as the biological mothers (often concubines) of the future successors received no special treatment.²⁹ A woman's own lineage was what gave her power, not the ability to give birth. Without Saray, Timur would have had no legitimate claim to rule over the entire Chagatai khanate. Her heritage allowed Timur to reunify the East and West Khanates in his quest for "Mongol restoration" by giving him a valid connection to the entire Chagatai empire, as the royal

²⁷ Hookham, *Tamburlaine*, 75.

²⁸ Hookham, *Tamburlaine*, 71.

²⁹ Beatrice Forbes Manz, "Women in Timurid Dynastic Politics," *Women in Iran from the Rise of Islam to 1800*, ed. Guity Nashat and Lois Beck (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 125.

family related to Qazan Khan had claim to both sides of the empire, though her blood was primarily revered in the Western khanate due to Qazan Khan's family ruling there after the empire was split. Yazdi's negligence in recognizing her more than a couple of times weakens his larger argument that Timur, and by extension Shahrukh and Ibrihim Sultan, rule a descendant empire of the Mongols.

Saray Mulk Khanum's position as her husband's advisor was typical of elite women in Chinggisid history. The Mongol Empire required the next great khan to be voted in by the royal family, resulting in months or even years between each great khan. Elite women, typically the wives of the khans, would not only attend these meetings and have a say in the vote, but also fill the gaps by acting as regent during succession struggles.³⁰ These women, referred to as *khatuns*, would rule over the empire for decades before a new successor was chosen; these empresses were politically independent and pursued their own goals rather than act as puppets.³¹ The first example of a khatun as empress was during the second major succession struggle of the Mongol empire, when its second Great Khan Ogedai died. During the interim where his brothers and sons fought over who would rule next, his wife Toregene was named the interim ruler of the empire. Toregene was described by "prominently anti-Ogedei" historians Rashid al-Din and Juvayni as being a competent and "masterful" politician.³² Even several years later, when her son Guyuk was named Great Khan, she is described as being the real master behind the throne.³³ Elite women, especially khatuns, were seen as equals enough to be permitted to rule for decades at a time. The empresses and wives of the Mongol khans were well respected by court historians for

³⁰ Bruno de Nicola, Michael Hope, and Timothy May, "Elite Women in the Mongol Empire," *The Mongol World*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2022), 425.

³¹ Bruno de Nicola, "Women and Politics from the Steppes to World Empire," *Women in Mongol Iran: The Khatuns, 1206-1335*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 39.

³² Nicola, "Elite Women," 426.

³³ Nicola, "Elite Women," 426.

centuries. As the Mongol dynasties strayed from voting on their leader after the deaths of their founders, fewer women were able to claim the position of empress. However, some succession struggles enabled women in these other dynasties to take power.

Consorts would be involved in political assemblies, secure important alliances across the empire, and accompany military leaders on campaigns.³⁴ Political meetings were usually carried out in front of the khan's wives, daughters, and consorts, giving these women access to important information about the empire and allowing "ambitious women to develop their own political agenda."³⁵ Chinggis Khan's own wife and mother would intervene on political matters, revealing how women acted as important advisors to the men in power.³⁶ Chinggis Khan's sons were advised to consult their wives on all political matters.³⁷ Sorqoqtuni, wife of Chinggis Khan's youngest son Tolui, is one of the most famous women in Chinggisid history. After the death of Guyuk, his wife Oghul-Qaimash was regent during the worst of the two succession struggles for the title of great khan. Sorqoqtuni was the mother of future khan Mongke and plotted the overthrow of Ogedai's line with him.³⁸ After her husband's early death, Sorqoqtuni was able to remain unmarried and refused Ogedai's proposed marriage between her and Guyuk, giving her and her sons the privacy required for their coup to come into fruition.³⁹ Not only did her plot put her son in power as a great khan, during the interim she was incredibly wealthy—investing in merchants and ships with luxury items that kept her house financially stable.⁴⁰ She also kept a close-knit relationship with her Jochid relatives, including her nephew Batu; these relationships

³⁴ Nicola, "Elite Women," 423.

³⁵ Nicola, "Elite Women," 424.

³⁶ Nicola, "Elite Women," 424.

³⁷ Nicola, "Elite Women," 424.

³⁸ Anne F. Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 197.

³⁹ Broadbridge, *Women and the Making*, 198.

⁴⁰ Broadbridge, *Women and the Making*, 198.

gave her a distinct advantage over the Ogedai family, whose primary connections were outside the “golden family.”⁴¹ Connections within the royal house were vital to power, as the vote for great khan was done exclusively by the family. The role of a khan’s wife was more than simply creating the next heir to the throne. In a meritocracy like the Mongol empire and its spinoff dynasties, the chief wives would help determine which son was most qualified to rule next.

The Chagataids, from which Saray Mulk Khanum descended, had a famous female empress for several years whom Saray Mulk Khanum descended from. Orghina Khatun, granddaughter of Chinggis Khan, was the wife of Qara Hulugeu, grandson of Chaghatai Khan.⁴² Her husband was removed from power and exiled briefly when Toregene’s son Guyuk put his friend in power of the Chagatai dynasty. Once Mongke Khan was named great khan, Qara Hulegu was given a “royal decree” to put his enemy to death and return to rule the Chagataids; when Qara Hulegu died on his way back, Orghina put her husband’s adversary to death in his stead.⁴³ She ruled for nine peaceful years, until Kublai Khan was named great khan in the 1360s.⁴⁴ While Kublai Khan backed Alghu, another grandson of Chaghatai Khan, as ruler, his support was conditional: Alghu had to marry Orghina in order for Kublai Khan to name him head of the Chagataids.⁴⁵ Despite Kublai supporting regime change and the dynasty to shift to a new line of Chaghatai’s grandsons, he and the people of the empire still respected and supported Orghina enough to keep her safe from the usual killing that came with a new successor to the throne. Orghina’s fame as a stable and competent ruler, along with the *khatuns* who came before her, demonstrate the great deal of power women held during the Mongol empire. While it is

⁴¹ Broadbridge, *Women and the Making*, 200.

⁴² Bruno de Nicola, “The Queen of the Chaghatayids: Orghina Khātūn and the Rule of Central Asia,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 26, no. 1/2 (2016), 113.

⁴³ Nicola, “The Queen,” 115.

⁴⁴ Nicola, “The Queen,” 117.

⁴⁵ Nicola, “The Queen,” 119.

unclear whether any Timurid women, specifically Saray Mulk, acted as regent while their husbands were away, they still held considerable power as political advisors and diplomats.

Toukel Khanum was Timur's Lesser Lady, though she is only mentioned once by name in the entire *Zafarnama*. Toukel Khanum was another Chinggisid princess from the Moghulistan side of the Chagataid empire. Toukel was the daughter of Moghulistan leader Khizr Khwaja. Her marriage to Timur legitimized his rule to the East Chagatai empire, allowing him to reunite both halves of the Chagatai dynasty. To show his respect for her and her lineage, Timur sent Saray Mulk Khanum and his closest amirs on a fifteen-day march to greet her.⁴⁶ The convoy threw huge feasts on every stop back to Samarkand to celebrate the marriage.⁴⁷ Her only reference in the *Zafarnama* is this march. Despite being second to Saray Mulk Khanum, Toukel is not referenced anywhere else in the biography. Just as with Saray Mulk, Toukel's marriage to Timur was primarily to secure his place as *gurgan*. Their marriage gave Timur the legitimacy to reign over the entire Chagataid dynasty and claim it reunified for the first time since Tughluq Temur's death. Their marriage secured his position as a member of the Chagatai dynastic line—this time on the side of Moghulistan, as he was already married to a royal of Mawarannahr.

Interestingly, the wife mentioned most in the *Zafarnama* is Tumen Agha, one of Timur's younger wives. While her role is still minute and her name often is grouped with the other wives, she gets an entire page dedicated to the buildings Timur commissioned in her honor.⁴⁸ Despite her role as a junior wife, she is often mentioned along with Saray Mulk Khanum. Tumen was notably not of Chinggisid descent, unlike Toukel Agha and Saray Mulk, which is the reason for her lower status. Yazdi refers to her as “empress,” an inaccurate description of her position in the

⁴⁶ Yazdi, 192.

⁴⁷ Manz, “Women in Timurid,” 123.

⁴⁸ Yazdi, *History of Timur-Bec*, 193.

harem.⁴⁹ Saray would have been the only wife referred to as empress as she was alive at the time Yazdi is detailing and was the chief wife. Touman Agha was, however, the governess of Ibrahim Sultan, while Saray Mulk Khanum raised Shahrugh.⁵⁰ As she was Ibrahim's mother in all ways except biological, Yazdi likely included her more than the others and on the same level as Saray Mulk out of respect for his patron. The garden Yazdi talks about also shows Timur's piety, as it was originally a representation of "the twelve zodiacs" and a pagan site.⁵¹ Her garden represents the piety of Timur and by extension the boy she raised, who would eventually be the one reading the *Zafarnama*.

Saray Mulk Khanum plays a relatively larger role in the *Zafarnama* than Toukel Khanum and most of Timur's other wives because of her close relationship to him and her power as his chief wife; however, she also may be mentioned more often due to her own piety. Saray Mulk commissioned several monumental mosques in Samarkand. Patronage of buildings like mosques and madrasas was an important sign of piety, especially among dynasties that came from non-royal lineages.⁵² It was seen as an extension of the principle of *zakat*, or almsgiving.⁵³ Patronage was meant to give the less fortunate a place to worship and study, therefore becoming an act of charity. It also showed Saray's commitment to Islam, as she was willing to spend a great deal of wealth commissioning several intricate and massive buildings. Saray's piety is an extension of Timur's own as his chief wife, supporting Yazdi's narrative of Timur being a very religious man and ruler. Timur also commissioned one of the largest mosques in Samarkand, the *Masjid-i Bibi*

⁴⁹ Yazdi, *History of Timur-Bec*, 221.

⁵⁰ Yazdi, *History of Timur-Bec*, 483.

⁵¹ Yazdi, *History of Timur-Bec*, 193.

⁵² Another empire with a great deal of commissioned mosques were the Mamluks. Cairo is known as the "City of Mosques" due to the great number of complexes patronized by noble families. These complexes acted as a source of income and power for a family's bloodline, as the political climate of the elite was always changing due to the constant usurping of power.

⁵³ Nushin Arbabzadah and Nile Green. "Women and Religious Patronage in the Timurid Empire," *Afghanistan's Islam*, 56–70 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2019).

or Bibi Khanym Mosque, in honor of her.⁵⁴ It was one of his largest projects other than the family mausoleum, showing both his patronage of Islam and his respect for his wife.

The reason for women's role as an equal in Turkish nomadic tribes rather than the second-class citizen often seen in other parts of the world is heavily debated by scholars. Modern feminists argue that Islam itself was the reason for women's oppression, though the truth is not so simple. Another theory is that pastoralism and nomadism required men and women to play more equal roles for the tribe to survive. No one could act as "dead weight" so to speak, so both genders gathered food, hunted, and were involved in tribal politics. According to this theory, the move to sedentary society and conversion to Islam both resulted in women losing status. Women in the later Timurid empire did not necessarily *lose* power. Because the Mongols were "pagan" and not Muslim, the devout Shahrukh attempted to distance himself from all Mongol culture, including how his father used Mongol genealogy to keep power. Women, including Chinggisid women, still acted as close advisors to their husbands.

The Muslim woman that Western feminists picture is often a slave or concubine with no power. This portrait of women is heavily influenced by orientalist and imperialist ideas of Islam, which attempt to make the culture as "alien" as possible, as well as a fundamental misunderstanding of harems. The piece of evidence most point to is concubinage. There is no evidence of concubines before the Umayyad caliphate, and it was not until the end of the Umayyads that the sons of concubines could become Caliph.⁵⁵ Concubines during this period were primarily non-Arab women taken as slaves after conquest, which is likely the reason their

⁵⁴ Arbabzadah, "Women and Religious Patronage."

⁵⁵ Majied Robinson, "Statistical Approaches to the Rise of Concubinage in Islam," *Concubines and Courtesans: Women and Slavery in Islamic History*, ed. Matthew Gordon and Kathryn A. Hains (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017).

children could not gain power despite having royal fathers, as non-Arabs were barred from any power.⁵⁶ This changed with the last Umayyad Caliph, who was the son of a concubine.⁵⁷ From his rule forward, concubines were able to produce heirs and gain significant power through maternity. Wives had an even greater role, as Muhammad himself held great respect for his own wives who set the standard for elite Muslim women. Khadija, Muhammad's first wife and the first woman to convert to Islam, was a powerful merchant woman who hired him as a young man. Even after their marriage, Khadija retained full control over the business and its finances. The Quran specifically gives women the power to "inherit property and wealth."⁵⁸ Muhammad's other wives, including the famous Umayyad Aisha, held considerable power over the line of succession of the first four caliphs.⁵⁹ These women also contributed the most to the Hadiths, which are a major source of Islamic law. Both wives and concubines have held positions of considerable influence since the start of Islam and the caliphate, similar to the positions nomadic elite women held.

Under nomadic empires, concubines lost some of the power they might have held under the caliphates due to the collectivism of the royal family. Whereas concubines under sedentary Islamic empires could rise in rank if they bore a son, concubines were not granted that mobility under Mongol dynasties. If a Mongol concubine entered the royal family, their rank and the ranks of their sons were based entirely upon what position they entered the tribe as: concubine, slave, or wife. Women determined the status of their bloodline, rather than the father determining the child's status. If a khan had a son with a concubine, they would have less power than the

⁵⁶ Robinson, "Statistical Approaches."

⁵⁷ Robinson, "Statistical Approaches."

⁵⁸ Robinson, "Statistical Approaches."

⁵⁹ Aisha was one of the Umayyads who stood against Ali. She fought him in the Battle of Camels. Though she was defeated, Caliph Ali put her on house arrest instead of killing her and allowed her to live the rest of her life in peace.

child of a wife or consort. In settled Islamic empires, if a son born to a concubine was accepted by the father, he could be named heir to the empire. Under the Timurids, a woman's position was less of a determiner of whether or not the son would be successor. Timur's chief two wives never gave him any sons, but because the sons were considered to be born to the collective royal family, they were still valid successors despite being born to concubines.⁶⁰ Under nomadic empires, maternity was no longer the same path to power that it was for other Islamic empires. However, women still would retain their respect even if they did not bear children, as was the case with Toukel Khanum and Saray Mulk Khanum. Their royal blood gave them their status, but they did not lose it by not giving their husband an heir.

To ensure his future successors would have the same claim to his "in-law" title, Timur married several of his sons and grandsons to Chinggisid women, especially since his own Chinggisid wife was unable to bear children.⁶¹ His sons Jahangir, Shahrukh, and Amrinshah were all married to Chinggisid women, ensuring their sons were of Chinggisid descent.⁶² On his deathbed in 1405, Timur named his grandson Pir Muhammad Mirza as his heir after his original choice died.⁶³ Both named successors were the children of Jahangir and Khanzada, a well-regarded descendent of Chinggis Khan. Pir Muhammad was not a "forceful" leader, and before he could even reach the capital to take his place as Timur's successor, his cousin overthrew Samarkand and stole the throne.⁶⁴ Khalil Sultan, son of Timur's oldest child Amrinshah, had fewer supporters than other contenders to the throne, but his position at the time of his grandfather's death and his own ambitious nature allowed him to take over the capital city.

⁶⁰ Manz, "Women in Timurid," 125.

⁶¹ Manz, "Women in Timurid," 122.

⁶² Manz, *Power, Politics and Religion*, 17.

⁶³ Manz, *Timurid Iran*, 16

⁶⁴ Beatrice Forbes Manz, *Power, Politics and Religion in Timurid Iran*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 17.

Khalil Sultan was also a son of Khanzada, who was remarried to Amrinshah after Jahangir's death.⁶⁵ When Khalil Sultan took power, he married off Timur's widows, specifically Tumen Agha, to men significantly below their societal position.⁶⁶ This decision was a major point of controversy, especially as an usurper. Shahrukh was the one to "save" Tumen Agha from the marriage and gave her an estate to retire in as an apology of sorts, which gained him supporters.⁶⁷ Even after Timur's death, his widows were highly regarded by the entire empire and Timur's successors. Even though Tuman was not Shahrukh's governess, he still respected her and rescued her from a demeaning marriage.

Several of Timur's grandsons, including Ulugh Beg, were also married to Chinggisid women.⁶⁸ Ulugh Beg "featured the title [of son in-law] prominently" and was married to two princesses of royal descent, showing his own respect for Mongol tradition.⁶⁹ Notably, his father Shahrukh did not favor the "in-law" title. Despite having a Chinggisid wife, Malikat Agha, he changed his title to Sultan and got rid of the puppet Chagatai khanate.⁷⁰ Shahrukh's rule is considered the break between a more Mongol-influenced empire and a primarily Islamic empire. Malikat Agha was the widow of Shahrukh's older brother, but despite staying within Timur's family, she was considerably less powerful than Shahrukh's non-royal and chief wife, Gawarshad.⁷¹ Gawarshad's influence over Shahrukh's rule shows that the empire's conversion to Islam did not result in women losing power. Gawharshad was the daughter of a powerful amir who was close to Timur.⁷² Her close relationship with her husband enabled her brothers to

⁶⁵ Manz, "Women in Timurid," 123.

⁶⁶ Manz, "Women in Timurid," 125.

⁶⁷ Manz, "Women in Timurid," 125.

⁶⁸ Manz, "Women in Timurid," 122.

⁶⁹ Manz, "Women in Timurid," 122.

⁷⁰ Woods, "Timur's Genealogy," 108.

⁷¹ Manz, *Power, Politics and Religion*, 29.

⁷² Manz, *Power, Politics and Religion*, 22.

become members of Shahrukh's inner circle of emirs.⁷³ She had a heavy influence over the politics of her husband's empire, including deciding who would succeed him.⁷⁴ After her husband's death, Gwarhshad was the one to take temporary control over the empire, determining the "first actions taken to prevent disorder" while sending the news to her sons and grandsons.⁷⁵ Her influence was so great it became commonly accepted that Shahrukh devoted himself to religious studies while she ruled the empire, though that was not necessarily the case.⁷⁶

Gawharshad also showed her power through patronage of mosques. She commissioned the Friday Mosque, one of the most famous mosques in Afghanistan and all Central Asia.⁷⁷ The design is meant to emulate the mosques Timur and Saray Mulk commissioned in Samarkand, most visibly in the blue ceramics and brightly colored dome. The similarities were likely to "bring herself into symbolic proximity with such a powerful female predecessor."⁷⁸ The Friday Mosque also proved her own piety, especially given her deeply religious husband. Both her and Saray Mulk Khanum's patronage shows the financial power of elite women, as these buildings were funded by their private finances. Elite women were able to spend their money as they pleased as well as exercise political power. Gwarhshad was also buried in the Friday Mosque, while her husband was not.⁷⁹ Women were in their own right politically, financially, and religiously separate beings from their husbands. Gawharshad and Saray Mulk's patronage also showed the gradual decline of Mongol beliefs, as the mosques and madrasas allowed for Islamic law and scholarship to flourish in place of Mongol law.

⁷³ Manz, *Power, Politics and Religion*, 38/39.

⁷⁴ Manz, *Power, Politics and Religion*, 47.

⁷⁵ Manz, "Women in Timurid," 127.

⁷⁶ Manz, *Power, Politics and Religion*, 13.

⁷⁷ Arbabzadah, "Women and Religious Patronage."

⁷⁸ Arbabzadah, "Women and Religious Patronage."

⁷⁹ Arbabzadah, "Women and Religious Patronage."

According to much of modern feminist interpretation of the power of women in Mongol dynasties, Gawharshad would not have been able to exercise the amount of power she had. Her influence over her husband and her sons does not fit into the role of women that feminist scholars argue came about with the conversion of nomadic empires to Islam. Not only did she have a role in politics both in and outside the household—adversaries of her husband would also plead with her for mercy, and she was able to convince her sons to go against him. Gawharshad is not the passive, forgotten women that feminist scholars associate with Islamic empires. Though she is not referenced in the *Zafarnama*, had she been, she likely would have played a more active role than her father-in-law's wives or Malikat Agha because of her lack of relation to the Mongols.

In contrast to Yazdi's exclusion of the women in Timur's life, Rashid al-Din's similarly structured *Jami al-Tawarikh*, or the *Compendium of Histories*, includes Chinggis Khan's wives and daughters prominently throughout. Rashid al-Din wrote his genealogy and history of Chinggis Khan and the Mongols in the early fourteenth century, commissioned by Ghazan Khan and Uljeytu, both from the Ilkhanid Dynasty. The *Compendium* is a much more thorough genealogy than the *Zafarnama*. Unlike Saray Mulk Khanum, Chinggis Khan's chief wife Borta Fijin is mentioned throughout the first four hundred pages. Though her role is primarily related to her children, she is still highly regarded and respected by both her husband and Rashid al-Din. Borta Fijin is characterized as a highly agentic woman and a caring mother. She gave birth to three of Chinggis Khan's children and raised one adopted one, Jochi, as her own.⁸⁰ In the text, Borta frequently demands children from Chinggis, who gives in to her wishes and either adopts

⁸⁰ Rashid al-Din Tabib, *Compendium of Chronicles: A History of the Mongols, part I*, trans. W.M. Thackston (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 146.

or gives her a biological child.⁸¹ Borta throughout is a constant companion to her husband and frequently advises both him and her children.⁸² Unlike Saray Mulk Khanum, Borta is not pushed to the side in favor of the men. Rashid al-Din greatly reveres her using his diction, describing her as “great” and the “good mother” of the empire.⁸³

Rashid al-Din also makes note of every one of Chinggis Khan’s great wives and daughters, unlike Yazdi who only truly names three of Timur’s. The *Compendium* is a superior genealogy because of this, as it lists every member of the family tree and the children they had. Rashid al-Din also describes important characteristics of each woman, including that Borta was “grandest of all” and that Chinggis Khan’s third wife, despite being “not beautiful,” was given “great importance and respect” due to her royal blood.⁸⁴ Rashid puts more emphasis on the women of Chinggis Khan’s line and dynasty than Yazdi, who only cares to mention Timur’s wives a few times to describe them being sent away to the capital. In contrast, it is evident that Chinggis Khan’s wives accompanied him on various campaigns, especially Borta, who is present during nearly every part of the history of Chinggis Khan. Their tents were luxurious, especially Borta Fijin’s, and are described as having a great many guards and attendants.⁸⁵ On the contrary, Yazdi limits the amount of nomadism evident in the *Zafarnama*, so most of Timur’s conquests are framed as campaigns that he would return home to the capital after. From Ruy de Clavijo’s accounts, it is more clear that Timur spent much more time away from Samarkand than Yazdi implies, and his wives frequently joined him as Chinggis Khan’s would. Similarly, Yazdi also

⁸¹ al-Din, *Compendium*, 347.

⁸² al-Din, *Compendium*, 272.

⁸³ al-Din, *Compendium*, 47.

⁸⁴ al-Din, *Compendium*, 147-8.

⁸⁵ al-Din, *Compendium*, 43.

limits the amount of nomadic and Mongol culture in the biography by instead emphasizing Timur's piety and connection to God.

Yazdi's reverence of Islam is clear throughout the *Zafarnama*. The Chagataids were not muslims, though Timur himself was born one. He was, however, much more enraptured with the culture of the Mongols. His court historians, from what can be gleaned from other histories, were more inclined to reference his following of Mongol culture and law. Yazdi, on the other hand, is more interested in pushing Timur's piety as a muslim; writing that, "in a dream [Timur] heard a voice, which said to him good overtakes men; and distinctly, Fear nothing, for the most high God will on it ungraciously give thee the victory."⁸⁶ He compares the dream to those of the prophets Joseph and Moses, though it would be sacrilege to call Timur himself a prophet.⁸⁷ Timur himself was not a particularly religious man, instead basing his legitimacy in his title as *gurgan* and merit as a military leader. Yazdi, under the rule of the pious Shahrukh and Ibrahim Sultan, reflects the Islamic ideals of the time he wrote the biography. As the Mongols were pagan, they were technically not to be respected under Sharia Law, since they were not "people of the book." Yazdi likely embellishes Timur's religious beliefs to avoid having to confront that his patron's line and rule are based on the idea that his family comes from pagans.

While Timur undertook many pious actions, including patroning several mosques and *madrasas* throughout his capital city of Samarkand, his primary legitimacy came from his connection to Chinggis Khan. The deemphasizing of Mongol culture and the princesses that came with it shows the popular shift in ideology towards a completely Islamic empire rather than a blend of Islam and Turco-Mongol culture. Yazdi's omission of Timur's wives is an attempt to

⁸⁶ Yazdi, *History of Timur-Bec*, 48.

⁸⁷ Yazdi, *History of Timur-Bec*, 48.

stray away from Mongol influence as much as possible so that Timur and his descendents' power is legitimized by Islam rather than relation to Chinggis Khan. Like past and future empires with their conversions to Islam, all references to religion prior are swept under the rug to avoid acknowledging that they came from non-Muslims. Despite Yazdi's deemphasizing of Chinggisid influence, the Timurids are still intertwined with the Mongol dynasty and Timur's own legitimacy came from that connection.

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