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Slaves in Name Only

FREE WOMEN AS ROYAL CONCUBINES IN LATE TIMURID IRAN AND CENTRAL ASIA

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THE POSSIBILITIES OF what it meant to be a concubine in a late medieval setting were several. Conventional wisdom holds that concubinage was a gendered function of slavery—that is, a legal arrangement in which slave owners enjoyed licit sexual relations with their female property. Although this was certainly the view of Muslim jurists and a historical reality for many enslaved women, this understanding of concubinage fails to take into account the different ways in which it was practiced in history. One notable example is found in the households of Timurid princes, who, as descendants of the famous conqueror Temur, or Tamerlane (1336–1405 CE), ruled collectively over the regions of Khurasan in eastern Iran and Transoxiana in Central Asia during the fifteenth century. Timurid sources from the later period list numerous women as royal concubines who were not slaves. Instead, they belonged to notable Muslim families whose pedigrees contemporaries deemed prestigious enough to record for posterity.

This unusual feature of Timurid concubinage raises a series of questions. First, what motivated the later Timurids to take freeborn Muslim women as concubines? The highly competitive political environment of late fifteenth-century Iran and Central Asia required would-be potentates seek out a wide network of supporters, which was achieved in part through securing marital alliances with important amirs and local notables. Given the Islamic proscription of taking more than four wives, Timurid princes felt more at ease in engaging in a legal fiction that permitted them to take freeborn Muslim women as concubines rather than exceeding the number of legal marriages allowed to them by the law.

Second, if concubinage was a means of securing power and authority, was it possible for concubines themselves to participate in the broader political economy of Timurid Iran and Central Asia? If so, how did contemporaries look on their involvement? Here, the career of Khadija Begi Agha, a concubine who eventually became the legal wife of a Timurid prince, serves as an instructive example of a politically active consort who cultivated a diverse network of allies and supporters that she mobilized in times of dynastic conflict. The strong reaction she engendered from her contemporaries suggests that, although the Timurids are well known for their inclusion of women as active participants in dynastic politics, women who traced their origins as concubines in royal households nevertheless faced censure for their involvement.

FREEBORN MUSLIM WOMEN AS CONCUBINES

Genealogical records for Timurid princes list a number of freeborn Muslim women as concubines. For example, in the anonymous genealogy *Mu'izz al-Ansab fi Shajarat al-Ansab* (*The Glorifier of Genealogies Concerning the Ancestral Tree*), the compiler includes the parentage of a number of concubines for Sultan-Husayn Bayqara (r. 1469–1506), the penultimate ruler of Timurid Herat.¹ Among these were daughters of important military commanders such as Latifa-Sultan Aghacha, the daughter of Amir Sultan-Husayn of Chaharshamba, and Zubayda-Sultan, the daughter of Amir Khvaja Hasan-Shaykh Temur Jalayir. Others belonged to notable families that had close ties to the royal household. For instance, Papa Aghacha, the daughter of one Khvaja Ahmad Ataka, was the foster sister of Sultan-Husayn's wife Apaq Begim, herself the daughter of the important military commander Amir Taj al-Din Hasan ibn Amir Nizam al-Din Charkas. Sultan-Husayn was not alone in taking freeborn Muslim women as his concubines. His predecessor, Sultan-Abu Sa'id Mirza, who had ruled both Samarqand and Herat until his death in 1469, is known to have had at least 35 wives and concubines, many of whom belonged to notable Muslim households, based on their fathers' names and titles.²

Before interpreting this information, it is fair to ask whether there is a possibility that these lineages could have been fabricated. After all, embellishing a royal consort's pedigree was not entirely unheard of during the late Timurid period. Take, for example, the case of Qara Koz Begim, the wife of Umar-Shaykh Mirza, the ruler of Timurid Fergana. In his memoirs, Umar-Shaykh's son, Zahir al-Din Muhammad Babur (1483–1530), the founder of the Mughal dynasty in India, wrote that on account of the love shown by his father to Qara Koz Begim, those who wished to please him attributed to her a royal Timurid lineage.³ However, it is unlikely that the information in *Mu'izz al-Ansab* was completely fictitious. Babur, who was Sultan-Husayn's third cousin once removed, was a scrupulous recorder of family lineages,⁴ and his memoirs, together with the work of the late Timurid historian Ghiyas al-Din Khvandamir (d.c. 1535), verify the information provided in *Mu'izz al-Ansab*.⁵

It is worth pointing out that the inclusion of freeborn Muslim women did not preclude the presence of female slaves who served as concubines in royal households. In fact, a number of sources mention concubines who had been gifted as slaves. For example, at the time of Sultan-Husayn's marriage to Shahr-Banu Begim, the daughter of Sultan-Abu Said, she presented him with one of her slaves (*mamluka*), Mengli Bey Aghacha, who later became his concubine and mother to five of his children.⁶ Similarly, while campaigning in India, Babur received a gift of two Circassian slave girls (*qiz*) from the Safavid ruler of Iran, Shah Tahmasp I (r. 1524–1576), during an exchange of embassies.⁷ More often than not, however, barring certain exceptions like Mengli Bey Aghacha, concubines who were slaves simply escaped the notice of Timurid authors because of their low status. Indeed, when recording the genealogies of various Timurid rulers, Babur mentioned frequently that he only recorded the names of important concubines and not the many others who were of no consequence.⁸

The inclusion of free women among the ranks of royal concubines, despite the ready availability of female slaves, suggests that Timurid practices of concubinage served a purpose other than simply ensuring dynastic continuity. The Timurid household was, at its core, a political institution. Household relations, whether based on kinship or service, served a clear function to legitimate and bolster a prince's claim to power in a highly competitive environment. This was particularly true of Timurid marriages. With the adherence to the principle of corporate sovereignty, which permitted all of Tamerlane's male heirs to lay a claim to his patrimony, princes sought to forge advantageous alliances with the families of important amirs by contracting marriages with women of Timurid and amirid birth.⁹

Because Islamic law permitted a maximum of four legal marriages at any given time, it appears that Timurid princes used concubinage to secure alliances and built a network of loyal supporters in lieu of marriage. Instead of flouting the Islamic proscription of taking more than four wives, the Timurids appear to have felt more at ease with perpetuating a legal fiction that permitted freeborn Muslim women to be taken as concubines.¹⁰ Although Timurid sources generally omit the circumstances under which they were acquired, a clear example of a political alliance being forged through the taking of a concubine is found in events of 1519, when Babur took Afghani Aghacha, the daughter of the Yusufzai chief Malik Shah Mansur, to secure her tribe's support.¹¹

Late fifteenth-century authors appreciated the importance of well-placed marital alliances for princes and extolled the virtues of marriage to women of high birth as opposed to union with female slaves. Perhaps the clearest exposition of this opinion is to be found in a work of political and ethical advice written by the leading theologian and jurist Jalal al-Din Davani (d. 1502). Although the work was not written for a Timurid audience, but instead for the Aq Qoyunlu ruler, Uzun Hasan (d. 1478), and his son Sultan-Khalil, it is nevertheless instructive because the political structure of the two neighboring polities were remarkably similar.¹²

Davani begins his discussion on the management of the household with a description of the ideal wife. He sets forth a laundry list of qualities she should possess: “the best women are those who are adorned with intelligence, piety, chastity, cleverness, modesty, kind-heartedness, manners, an inclination to please their husband, and a dignified bearing.” Then, after emphasizing the importance of her ability to bear children, Davani argues that, “a freewoman is better than a slave for included [in the marriage] is the acquisition of followers and support from her close relations, conciliation with one’s enemies, mutual assistance in matters of livelihood, and guards against mean pedigree.”¹³ Here, Davani clearly lays out the benefits of a well-placed marriage, particularly for rulers. Through marriage, he argues, one may gain supporters, broker peace with one’s opponents, forge mutually beneficial alliances with notable families, and ensure that one’s heirs bear a lineage that is beyond reproach.

The disregard for Muslim legal codes regulating marriage and concubinage did not go uncommented on by contemporaries. In his memoirs, Babur disapproved of the practice of taking free Muslim women as concubines, deeming the relationships to be unlawful. Reflecting on Sultan-Husayn’s legacy, Babur mused that it was strange that such a great ruler should have only three legitimate sons with the remaining 11 being the result of unlawful sexual relations (*valad al-zina*).¹⁴ In Babur’s estimation, only Sultan-Husayn’s children born to legally wed wives were legitimate. The three were Badi al-Zaman Mirza, the son of Sultan-Husayn’s first wife, a Timurid princess named Bika-Sultan Begim (d. 1488);¹⁵ Haydar-Muhammad Mirza, the son of Payanda-Sultan Begim, who was the daughter of Sultan-Abu Said;¹⁶ and Muzaffar-Husayn Mirza, Sultan-Husayn’s second son with Khadija Begi.

Meanwhile, the sons born to his freeborn Muslim concubines—that is, Latifa-Sultan Aghacha and Papa Aghacha—were deemed illegitimate.¹⁷ Babur’s judgment is not surprising given that sexual relations between unmarried free men and women were considered unlawful in the eyes of Muslim jurists. Also excluded, however, were Sultan-Husayn’s sons by the Uzbek slave Mengli Bey Aghacha. This omission is curious given that Islamic law deemed the children born to concubines as legitimate. Babur’s memoirs perhaps suggest that Timurid use of free Muslim women as concubines had cast the entire institution in disrepute in the eyes of some contemporaries.

Given that Timurid concubines included women of different social status, with daughters of important amirs on the one hand and female slaves on the other, their standing in royal households must have reflected this difference to some degree. After all, members of Timurid court society were keen observers of social protocol and hierarchy.¹⁸ However, the task of reconstructing the hierarchies of Timurid concubinage remains a difficult one because contemporary authors rarely included information about concubines and low-born women, even when they were mothers of prominent princes.¹⁹ One measure of social rank is the order in which concubines appear in Timurid genealogies such as the *Mu’izz al-Ansab*. Although a genealogy cannot convey the dynamic social hierarchies of the royal household, it can nevertheless serve as a barometer of status, painting in broad strokes the obscured complexities of Timurid concubinage.

The entry for Sultan-Husayn is particularly instructive because it divides clearly his wives and concubines into various strata.²⁰ Listed under the heading “wives and concubines” (*khavatin va qumayan*) are the names of his six wives, two of whom he divorced, as well as of two concubines. The two concubines were both daughters of important amirs: Zaynab-Sultan Aghacha, the daughter of Amir Taj al-Din Hasan b. Amir Nizam al-Din Charkas; and Latifa-Sultan Aghacha, the daughter of Amir Sultan-Husayn of Chaharshamba. Although the *Mu'izz al-Ansab* clearly follows two patterns in listing the eight women—that is, it places wives before concubines and orders them according to their natal family’s political rank—the genealogy does not differentiate explicitly between wives and concubines. If a historian were to rely on the *Mu'izz al-Ansab* alone, it would be impossible to state with absolute certainty which of the eight women were among Sultan-Husayn’s wives (*khavatin*) and which were among his concubines (*qumayan*). Thus, although acknowledging the subtle difference in status among the eight women, the text appears to suggest that concubines who were daughters of important amirs were comparable in rank with legal wives.

Unlike the daughters of important amirs, women belonging to notable Muslim families and female slaves were listed separately under the subheading *sarariy*, the Arabic term for concubines. These included the Uzbek slave Mengli Bey Agacha; Papa Aghacha, the daughter of Khwaja Muhammad Ataka; and Biki Sultan, whose father’s name is not provided. One notes that the *Mu'izz al-Ansab* uses the Mongol term for concubines, *qumayan* (sing., *quma*), for daughters of amirs, whereas women of lower rank were listed under the Arabic *sarariy* (sing., *surriya*). This use of different languages in categorizing concubines was not accidental. After all, the Timurids often used Turko-Mongolian titles to denote high-ranking positions within their royal households.²¹

This polyglotism was a way for the *Mu'izz al-Ansab*’s compilers to indicate a difference in status. Although the concubines of amirid extraction were distinguished from those having a less prestigious background, no pattern can be discerned for how the text orders the *sarariy*. The genealogy lists the Uzbek slave Mengli Bey Agacha before Papa Aghacha, who was certainly a woman of significantly more substantial means. After all, her family was integrated closely with the royal household; she was a member of Sultan-Husayn’s wife Apaq Begim’s foster family. Nor does it order things according to the number of children borne by each woman; Papa Aghacha mothered more sons and more daughters than Mengli Bey Agacha.²² It is possible the *Mu'izz al-Ansab* lists the names of the women based on the order in which they became concubines, but this hypothesis cannot be confirmed because the sources do not provide the relevant dates.

The clearest indication that the *Mu'izz al-Ansab* preserved the different statuses of these women is seen in the case of Zubayda-Sultan. The lone name mentioned under the subheading *dukhtaran-i khana*—Persian for slave girl or, alternatively, house-born female slave; the book’s placement of Zubayda-Sultan seems to be a mistake. As the daughter

of a high-ranking amir, she should have been included in the list of *qumayan* along with other freeborn Muslim women of amirid background. However, the case of Zubayda-Sultan reflects the uncertainties of concubinage for even high-born women and serves as a cautionary tale of what could happen when allegiances and alliances shifted in a fluid political environment. It is unclear when exactly Sultan-Husayn took Zubayda-Sultan as a concubine, but it must have been in the days when the Timurid ruler wished to cement his relationship with her father, Khvaja Hasan-Shaykh Temur Jalayir. The amir was Sultan-Husayn's pick for the governor of Astarabad after the conquest of Herat in 1469. However, within the span of three years, Sultan-Husayn charged Hasan-Shaykh Temur with treason and had him executed in 1472.

According to the historian Khvandamir, although Hasan-Shaykh Temur was executed for his attempts to gather men and arms to instigate strife, he had, on numerous previous occasions, displayed disloyalty and ingratitude, not the least of which was when he threw in his lot with Sultan-Husayn's rival Mirza Yadgar-Muhammad (d. 1470).²³ Hasan-Shaykh Temur, who had been a paramount amir, was also no longer a politically expedient ally for Sultan-Husayn. Even if his loyalty was assured, Hasan-Shaykh Temur had taken a leading role in opposing the Timurid ruler's newly fiscal reform program intended to replenish his depleted coffers.²⁴ With her father executed, Zubayda-Sultan no longer served any political purpose and found herself disgraced, judging from her relegation to the very end of the *Mu'izz al-Ansab's* list of Sultan-Husayn's consorts. Becoming a concubine was thus a high-stakes gamble. But, not all shared Zubayda-Sultan's fate or that of the many others of whom little is written. Some engaged actively in dynastic politics, and none more so than Khadija Begi Agha. The rest of this chapter is devoted to her career.

ROYAL CONCUBINES IN TIMURID POLITICS AND THEIR CRITICS: THE CASE OF KHADIJA BEGI AGHA

No royal concubine had as successful a career as Khadija Begi Agha. The daughter of a Muslim nobleman, Khadija Begi Agha was the concubine of two different Timurid rulers before becoming Sultan-Husayn's wife and a powerful figure in the political landscape of late fifteenth-century Iran. As his consort, Khadija Begi Agha cultivated a wide network of political allies who supported her in her bid to ensure that her son, Muzaffar-Husayn, would succeed Sultan-Husayn. A formidable individual, she engendered a variety of reactions from the members of the royal household and the Timurid literary elite. An examination of her life demonstrates the degree to which social mobility was possible in the royal household for a concubine, and the means through which a woman could shape dynastic politics.

According to Babur, Khadija Begi Agha was initially a concubine of Sultan-Husayn's predecessor, Sultan-Abu Said, with whom she had a daughter named Aq Begim.²⁵ After Sultan-Abu Said's death in 1469, Khadija Begi Agha arrived at court, where Sultan-Husayn

is said to have fallen in love with her and taken her as his concubine.²⁶ Timurid sources make clear that although Khadija Begi Agha would later become Sultan-Husayn's legal wife, she was initially his concubine. The compiler of the *Mu'izz al-Ansab* was sure to include a note under her name declaring that Khadija Begi Agha "was at first a concubine (*quma*) and later entered into a legal marriage (*nikah*)."²⁷ Similarly, Babur notes that she advanced from the rank of a concubine to that of *begim*—that is, wife.²⁸

There is little evidence to suggest that Khadija Begi Agha's success was on account of her family or that she was taken as a concubine to forge an important alliance. At best, she came from a middling amirid family.²⁹ The *Mu'izz al-Ansab* identifies her as the daughter of one Amir Muhammad Sariq, who was the son of Amir Muhammad Khvaja—both of whom have yet to be identified clearly.³⁰ Although the *Mu'izz al-Ansab* notes the use of the high-ranking title *amir* for her father and grandfather, the fact that no source makes note of them suggests they were not particularly important figures at court. Instead, they were probably local notables of some sort. In fact, even Babur, who recorded assiduously the genealogies of others, makes no mention of her family in his notice on Khadija Begi Agha.³¹

It is therefore unlikely that Sultan-Husayn's initial impetus to take Khadija Begi Agha as a concubine was driven by a desire to inherit an alliance forged between his predecessor and her family. After all, the *Mu'izz al-Ansab* omits her name from among Sultan-Abu Said's wives and concubines. Although a woman by the name of Khadija Begi is listed, her father's name is given as Mawlana Nasr al-Din.³² Thus, her absence from the section on Sultan-Abu Said in the Timurid genealogy suggests her family was not important enough to merit mentioning the relationship. Such omissions were not unusual. Babur, for example, does not include the names of the concubines who mothered his cousins, Rajab-Sultan and Muhibb-Sultan, both of whom were Timurid princesses.³³

Babur was not the only author to provide a partial list of a Timurid prince's concubines. The *Mu'izz al-Ansab* does not list any names for the wives or concubines of Sultan-Abu Said's sons—Sultan-Ahmad (d. 1494), Sultan-Mahmud (d. 1495), and Umar-Shaykh (d. 1494)—despite providing the names of their amirs and administrators.³⁴ And although it is true that the *Mu'izz al-Ansab* does not list anyone by the name of Aq Begim among the daughters of Sultan-Abu Said,³⁵ it is unlikely that Babur's information about Khadija Begi Agha and her daughter would have been incorrect. After all, Sultan-Abu Said was Babur's paternal grandfather and Aq Begim was therefore his aunt. Furthermore, Babur's daughter Gulbadan Begim attests numerous times to Aq Begim's parentage in her own memoirs.³⁶

Khadija Begi Agha came to prominence only after her marriage to Sultan-Husayn. Although contemporary sources do not mention the date of their wedding, it likely took place sometime after the birth of their first son, Shah-Gharib Mirza, in 1471, and before the birth of their second, Muzaffar-Husayn, a few years later.³⁷ That it was skipped over by contemporaries suggests that they viewed it as hardly worth notice. Khadija Begi Agha's elevation to the status of a legally wed wife was neither because she gave birth to a son nor simply because of Sultan-Husayn's affections. Other concubines, who belonged to noble

families and had sons by Sultan-Husayn or were dearly beloved by him, never became wives.³⁸ Whatever his reasons for marrying Khadija Begi Agha, they were unique to her.

After her marriage, Khadija Begi Agha focused her energies on ensuring the succession of Muzaffar-Husayn, her only son to survive Sultan-Husayn.³⁹ Although their eldest son, Shah-Gharib (d. 1497), was given the governorship of Herat during the reign of Sultan-Husayn, there is no evidence on hand to suggest Khadija Begi Agha had a role in his appointment.⁴⁰ Despite the prestigious position, Shah-Gharib was never a viable contender for his father's throne. No well-placed marriage was contracted for him and, although it is true that Babur and Khvandamir remembered him fondly, thus describing him as good-natured and a patron of men of learning, he was noted for having a physical disability and being generally frail.⁴¹ So Khadija Begi Agha focused her attention on Muzaffar-Husayn's political future, but in doing so she set in motion events that precipitated a major political crisis in late-fifteenth-century Iran.⁴²

In 1497, not long after Shah-Gharib's death, Khadija Begi Agha secured successfully the governorship of Astarabad for her son Muzaffar-Husayn.⁴³ In doing so, she not only obtained for him an important concession, but also undermined his main rival, Sultan-Husayn's eldest son, Badi al-Zaman, because the governorship had been promised previously to his son Muhammad-Mu'min Mirza at his circumcision feast.⁴⁴ Feeling threatened, Badi al-Zaman went into active rebellion against his father,⁴⁵ which only served to bolster Muzaffar-Husayn's position further, the latter already Sultan-Husayn's favorite.⁴⁶

In attempt to put an end to the growing rift, Sultan-Husayn's close adviser Ali Shir Navai (1441–1501) offered to mediate between father and son. He secured from Sultan-Husayn the promise to offer clemency to Badi al-Zaman if he were to cease his rebellion. At first the negotiations appeared successful, but they fell apart when Badi al-Zaman intercepted a secret letter that incriminated Sultan-Husayn in a plot against the prince. According to Khvandamir, Sultan-Husayn's duplicity was on account of the advice given to him by members of his inner circle, particularly his vizier, Khvaja Qivam al-Din Nizam al-Mulk Khvafi.⁴⁷ No explanation is given for why Khvaja Nizam al-Mulk, a longtime political ally and personal friend of Ali Shir Navai,⁴⁸ sabotaged the negotiations. However, it seems likely that he acted on behalf of Khadija Begi Agha, with whom he developed a close relationship, as evidenced by what transpired next.

In the absence of a peaceful resolution, two sets of fathers and sons faced off on the battlefield. Sultan-Husayn marched against Badi al-Zaman and Muzaffar-Husayn set off to fight Muhammad-Mumin at Astarabad. On May 3, 1497, Muzaffar-Husayn defeated Muhammad-Mumin and sent him as a captive to Herat in silver chains.⁴⁹ Astonishingly, the inhabitants of the city offered him a hero's welcome. He appears to have been so beloved that when he was imprisoned in the Ikhtiyar al-Din Fort, a mob formed quickly. Fearful that if Muhammad-Mumin lived on, it might jeopardize her son's life, Khadija Begi Agha arranged his elimination. She turned to Khvaja Nizam al-Mulk and his sons to support her cause, which they did.⁵⁰ That evening, heeding the advice of Khvaja Nizam al-Mulk, an intoxicated Sultan-Husayn issued an order to Bibi Muhibb-Jangi, the warden

of the Ikhtiyar al-Din Fort,⁵¹ to carry out the execution. News of the prince's death caused widespread mourning among the inhabitants of Herat and panic among some of Sultan-Husayn Bayqara's other sons who, out of fear, rose up in rebellion.⁵²

The relative ease with which Khadija Begi Agha dealt with Muhammad-Mumin demonstrates the efficiency with which she could mobilize members of her political network. Although she was not held responsible for the death of Muhammad-Mumin, Ali Shir Navai saw to the punishment of Khvaja Nizam al-Mulk and his sons, and steps against Khadija Begi Agha's network. Less than a year after Muhammad-Mumin's death, Ali Shir Navai orchestrated the downfall and execution of Khvaja Nizam al-Mulk and his family in June 1498.⁵³ Although there was a host of reasons behind Khvaja Nizam al-Mulk's execution, the inhabitants of Herat believed it to be connected to Muhammad-Mumin's murder.⁵⁴ The deaths of Khvaja Nizam al-Mulk and his family did not compromise entirely Khadija Begi Agha's ability to shape the course of Timurid politics. After all, she had cultivated relations with various factions at court that included bureaucrats and military men. The extent of her network became clear at the time of Sultan-Husayn's death and the succession of Badi al-Zaman and Muzaffar-Husayn.

During the final years of Sultan-Husayn's life, Khadija Begi Agha became particularly vigilant of the resources available to her son in his bid for the throne. When Sultan-Husayn fell ill and Badi al-Zaman called off his rebellion to offer allegiance to his sick father, Khadija Begi Agha entreated her husband to postpone the reunion until he was better. She convinced him that the absence of Muzaffar-Husayn and the ruler's weakened condition might lead his army to shift their loyalties from him to his eldest son. Sultan-Husayn heeded his wife's counsel and delayed meeting Badi al-Zaman until he was in better health and Muzaffar-Husayn was able to join them.⁵⁵ At some point it became clear to Khadija Begi Agha that Badi al-Zaman was unlikely to be passed over and so, in 1504, before Sultan-Husayn was to reunite with his son, she and Muzaffar-Husayn met with him publicly outside Herat and "washed away with the water of amity and cordiality the dust of rancor that had clouded their relations."⁵⁶ This reconciliation did not mean Khadija Begi Agha gave up on her ambitions for her son. Instead, in what was an unusual turn of events, Muzaffar-Husayn and Badi al-Zaman would be declared co-regents after their father's death.

Khvandamir, the historian, records the intense debate that followed the death of Sultan-Husayn over his succession. Some argued that Badi al-Zaman should rule independently, whereas others put forth that Muzaffar-Husayn should be made co-regent and have his name included in coinage and in the sermons for Friday prayers. Here, Khadija Begi Agha's network of allies played a pivotal role. In addition to having great authority and sway, she was supported by Sultan-Husayn's chief amir Shuja al-Din Muhammad Burundiq Barlas and his sons, particularly Mirza Ali Beg. It was on account of the fact that most of the army followed her and the Barlas amirs that the partisans of Badi al-Zaman capitulated and Muzaffar-Husayn was declared co-regent.⁵⁷

In ensuring the accession of her son, Khadija Begi Agha earned the condemnation of other royals, including Babur and his relative Muhammad Hayder Dughlat. Babur

described the co-regency as “a strange arrangement; never has a joint kingship been heard of.” It was against the received wisdom encapsulated in Shaykh Sadi’s words in the *Gulistan*: “Ten poor men can sleep under one blanket, but two kings cannot fit into one clime.”⁵⁸ Although royal etiquette meant they continued to show due deference to her in public and they enjoyed her hospitality in Herat, they castigated her privately in their writings. Muhammad Hayder Dughlat was unsparing in his criticism, describing Khadija Begi Agha as “the instigator of all mischief.”⁵⁹

Her actions engendered intense reactions. When Babur’s brother Jahangir Mirza fell sick after drinking too much in Herat, Muhammad Hayder Dughlat was quick to point the finger at her in his memoirs, claiming, “it was commonly rumored that Khadija Begi Agha was up to her old tricks and had poisoned his wine.”⁶⁰ Not surprisingly, as royals who had their own political aspirations, men like Babur and Muhammad Hayder Dughlat found no fault with the ambitions of her son Muzaffar-Husayn. They had, of course, a personal stake in the political maneuverings undertaken by royal concubines, which no doubt colored their perspective. Nowhere was this more apparent than in Babur’s harsh criticism of Zuhra Begi Agha, who attempted to ensure her son remained the ruler of Samarqand on the eve of the Uzbek takeover of Central Asia.⁶¹

Following the death of Sultan-Mahmud Mirza in 1495, his son Sultan-Ali Mirza managed to gain control of Samarqand, the old Timurid capital, but his rule was precarious, facing as he did serious challenges from two sides. The first was his cousin Babur who, although previously cooperative, now coveted Samarqand for himself and was supported by local notables such as Khvaja Qutb al-Din Yahya.

The second was the formidable founder of the Uzbek Khanate, Muhammad Shibani Khan (d. 1510). In previous years, he had taken on a prominent role in Timurid politics. Believing Babur’s ambitions to be the greater threat, and perhaps seeing the Uzbek conquest of the city as inevitable, his mother and Sultan-Mahmud Mirza’s favorite concubine, Zuhra Begi Agha, decided it was more expedient to forge an alliance with Muhammad Shibani Khan. Both Timurid and Uzbek sources claim that Zuhra Begi Agha offered herself in marriage to Muhammad Shibani Khan with the hope that her son would join the Uzbek Khan’s household and maintain control of Samarqand. The plan succeeded only briefly. Within a few days after meeting with the Uzbek conqueror, the Timurid prince was executed. Zuhra Begi Agha herself is said to have been pushed aside quickly.⁶² Babur, whose own ambitions were thwarted by her actions, disparaged his cousin, saying that, “by listening to the words of women, he removed himself from the circle of those of good repute.”⁶³

CONCLUSION

The study of royal concubinage in Timurid Iran and Central Asia demonstrates that institutions and practices regulating relations between the sexes manifested in different ways across history. These variations reflected the particular circumstances in which they operated. Thus, consideration of royal concubinage sheds further light not only on the

role of women in ruling households, but also on the broader political culture of which the practice was an integral part. For the Timurids, royal concubinage was a solution to the problem of uncertain loyalties and intense political competition. Thus, it was possible to find women of amirid birth, daughters of notable Muslim families, and female slaves all listed together as concubines in Timurid genealogies. The practice was not approved of universally, but, as is often the case with politics, pragmatism trumped legalism. Enmeshed in politics, concubinage allowed for rare moments of mobility and exercise of power, but was also a fraught venture, where women could be cast aside when they, or their relations, were no longer of use.

Timurid concubinage also invites renewed reflection on the relationship between marriage and slavery. In her provocative study of Islamic legal thought, Kecia Ali has argued that slave ownership and its attendant discussions on property were central to how Muslim jurists understood and conceptualized the institution of marriage. According to this argument, “both were forms of control or domination exercised by one person over another.” This similarity is said to have often led to frequent comparisons between the two in Muslim legal thought.⁶⁴ For the Timurids, the opposite dynamic appears to have been the case; the political expectations of marriage and its benefits came to define the terms by which royal concubinage was practiced. Although concubinage was never disentangled from slavery entirely, being a slave was no longer the defining feature of what it meant to be a concubine.

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NOTES

1. First commissioned by the Timurid ruler Shahrukh in 1426 to record Tamerlane’s genealogy, the *Mu’izz al-Ansab fi Shajarat al-Ansab* (*Glorifier of Genealogies Concerning the Ancestral Tree*) was updated to include his descendants, with the final entry being Sultan-Husayn’s son Badi’ al-Zaman (d.c. 1514). A facsimile of one of the manuscripts for the *Mu’izz al-Ansab* (MS, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ancien fonds persan 67) has been published alongside a Russian translation, for which see Vokhidov, *Istoriia Kazakhstana v persidskikh istochnikakh*. All references to the text follow the folio numbers indicated by the editor. On the *Mu’izz al-ansab*, see Woods, *Timurid Dynasty*, 1–15. For Sultan-Husayn’s concubines see *Mu’izz al-Ansab*, fols. 159b–160a.

2. *Mu’izz al-Ansab*, fols. 154b–155a; and Woods, *Timurid Dynasty*, 35–36.

3. Babur, *Baburnama*, 1:24–25 (=fol. 12b).

4. For a modern scholar’s estimation of Babur as a source for Timurid genealogy and the nature of his relationship with Sultan-Husayn see, respectively, Subtelny, *Timurids in Transition*, 44, 46, and “Babur’s Rival Relations,” 109.

5. For instance, Latifa-Sultan Aghacha's amirid background is mentioned in Khvandamir, *Habib al-Siyar*, 4:320. For the English translation see Khvandamir, *Habibu's-siyar*, 2:511. That Papa Aghacha was Apaḡ Begim's foster sister is mentioned by Babur, for which, see *Baburnama*, 2:352–353 (=fol. 169b). Sultan-Husayn would also marry Apaḡ Begim's sister Zaynab-Sultan. For Apaḡ Begim's lineage and the circumstances surrounding her marriage see Subtelny, *Timurids in Transition*, 54, 174. For Hasan-Shaykh Temur's appointment see Khvandamir, *Habib al-Siyar*, 4:142, and *Habibu's-siyar*, 2:424. Also see Subtelny, *Timurids in Transition*, 64.

6. Khvandamir, *Habib al-Siyar*, 4:321, and *Habibu's-siyar*, 2:511.

7. Babur, *Baburnama*, 3:654–655 (=fol. 305a). Annette Beveridge has suggested tentatively that their names may have been Gulnar Aghacha and Nazgul Aghacha. See Begim, *The History of Humayun*, 122, note 3.

8. Babur, *Baburnama*, 1:24–25 (=fol. 12b), 1:56–57 (fols. 28a–28b), 2:352–353 (=fol. 169b).

9. For a discussion on the role of corporate sovereignty in Timurid politics, see Subtelny, "Babur's Rival Relations," 102–118, and *Timurids in Transition*, 36–38. For the significance of amirid wives, see Manz, "Women in Timurid Dynastic Politics," 125, and *Power, Politics and Religion in Timurid Iran*, 174. One of the most influential and powerful female figures in fifteenth-century Timurid politics was Gawharshad (d. 1457), the daughter of the important amir Ghiyas al-Din Tarkhan and wife to Tamerlane's eventual successor and son Shahrūkh (r. 1409–1447). See Manz, "Gowhar-Šād Aga."

10. It was not unusual for Muslim jurists made accommodations for Turko-Mongolian customs that ran counter to Islamic legal precedent—see Subtelny, *Timurids in Transition*, 27.

11. Babur, *Baburnama*, 2:468–469 (= fols. 220a–220b); and Gulbadan Begim, *History of Humayun*, 10 (Persian), 91 (English). Although both Thackston and Beveridge translate Babur's acquisition of Afghani Begim as a "marriage," it is clear from Babur and Gulbadan Begim's wording that she became his concubine and not his wife. Also see Parodi, "Of Shaykhs, Bibis and Begims," 121–138, 135.

12. Woods, *Aqquyunlu*, 11–23.

13. Davani, *Akblaḡ-i Jalali*, 188.

14. Babur, *Baburnama*, 2:352–353 (=fol. 169b).

15. Bika-Sultan Begim was the daughter of the Timurid prince Sanjar Mirza (d. 1459). Sultan-Husayn's marriage to Bika-Sultan Begim was an unhappy one. According to both Babur and Khvandamir, she was an ill-tempered woman, prone to fits of anger and jealousy, eventually resulting in their divorce. See Khvandamir, *Habib al-Siyar*, 4:115–116, and *Habibu's-siyar*, 2:412–413; Babur, *Baburnama*, 2:350–351 (=fol. 168b); and Subtelny, *Timurids in Transition*, 52–53.

16. Sultan-Husayn was married previously to Payanda-Sultan Begim's sister Shahr-Banu Begim. The wedding celebration, which took place not long after his first conquest of Herat in 1469, must have been a great public spectacle, for Khvandamir records a large celebration with the city's notables in attendance and a generous distribution of gifts. See Khvandamir, *Habib al-Siyar*, 4:136, and *Habibu's-siyar*, 2:421. Sultan-Husayn's decision to marry the daughter of his predecessor, Sultan-Abu Sa'id, was consistent with the established pattern of Timurid princes securing marital connections with the family of the rulers they displaced. See Manz, "Women in Timurid Dynastic Politics," 123–124. In this case, the wedding appears to have been a piece of political theater meant to emphasize the continuity of rule between the well-respected Sultan-Abu Sa'id and newly enthroned Sultan-Husayn. See Subtelny, *Timurids in Transition*, 61. The political significance of the marriage would explain why he was so quick to marry her sister after he divorced

Shahr-Banu Begim for her support of Sultan-Husayn's opponent, her brother Sultan-Mahmud (d. 1495), at the Battle of Chakman in 1471. See Babur, *Baburnama*, 2:350–351 (=fol. 169a). Although this edition is missing Thackston's translation of the section on Shahr-Banu Begim, it is included in Babur, *The Babur-nama*, 211.

17. Khvandamir, *Habib al-Siyar*, 4:320–321, and *Habibu's-siyar*, 2:511.

18. For example, Gulbadan Begim noted assiduously the order in which female guests were seated at banquets, including the wedding feast of Babur's son Hindal. See Begim, *History of Humayun*, 31–33 (Persian), 118–123 (English). Also, see Soucek, "Timurid Women," 200.

19. Manz, "Women in Timurid Dynastic Politics," 131.

20. *Mu'izz al-Ansab*, fols. 159b–160a.

21. Subtelny, *Timurids in Transition*, 34.

22. Khvandamir, *Habib al-Siyar*, 4:320–21, and *Habibu's-siyar*, 2:511.

23. Khvandamir, *Habib al-Siyar*, 4:160–161, and *Habibu's-siyar*, 2:433.

24. Subtelny, "Centralizing Reform and Its Opponents in the Late Timurid Period," 134.

25. Babur, *Baburnama*, 2:350–351 (= fols. 169a–169b).

26. Babur, *Baburnama*, 2:350–351 (=fol. 169a). Although Thackston translates *aldi* as married, the text simply implies he "took" her. This reading is confirmed by the late sixteenth-century translation of the text into Persian by Abd al-Rahman Khan-i Khanan, included by Thackston in his edition, where it is rendered as *girifta* (taken). See Babur, *Baburnama*, 2:350. For a similar translation, see Babur, *The Babur-nama: Memoirs of Babur*, trans. Annette Susannah Beveridge (London: Luzac, 1912), 1:268. Sultan-Husayn would eventually marry Khadija Begi Agha after the birth of their first son, Shah-Gharib.

27. *Mu'izz al-Ansab*, fol. 159b.

28. Babur, *Baburnama*, 2:350–351 (=fol. 169a).

29. She was not, as has been suggested elsewhere, a slave. See Balabanlilar, *Imperial Identity in the Mughal Empire*, 24.

30. It is unlikely that she was the daughter of Muhammad Sariq, the agent of the Timurid prince Iskandar b. 'Umar Shaykh (1384–1415), given the fact that he was killed in 1414 and Khadija Begi Agha was still of childbearing age at least as late as the early 1470s. On Muhammad Sariq, see Manz, "Local Histories of Southern Iran," 277–278.

31. Babur, *Baburnama*, 2:350–351 (=fols. 169a–169b).

32. *Mu'izz al-Ansab*, fol. 155a.

33. Babur, *Baburnama*, 1:55–57 (=fols. 27b–28b).

34. *Mu'izz al-Ansab*, fols. 157a–158a.

35. The list of Sultan-Abu Sa'id's daughters is given in *Mu'izz al-Ansab*, fols. 156a–156b.

36. Begim, *History of Humayun*, 14, 23, 31 (Persian), 97, 107, 118 (English translation).

37. Khvandamir does not mention Shah-Gharib's date of birth, but it coincided with Sultan-Husayn's arrival at Akhta Akhur, which took place sometime between March 23, 1471 (his first Īd al-Fiṭr celebrations after reclaiming Herat), and his return to the city for the winter later that year. His comment that Shah-Gharib was born of "that lofty cradle, Khadija Begi Agha, who, in accordance with the glorious Shari'a had attained felicity by way of marriage (*nikah*) to the Khaqan," is somewhat misleading given Babur's previously discussed comment that only three of Sultan-Husayn's sons were legitimate. See Khvandamir, *Habib al-Siyar*, 4:154, 158–159, and *Habibu's-siyar*, 2:430, 432. That Khadija Begi Agha was elevated after Shah-Gharib's birth is also Annette Beveridge's understanding, for which see *The Babur-nama*, 1:268, note 4. Muzaffar-Husayn's date

of birth can only be approximated. According to Khvandamir, when Muzaffar-Husayn reached the age of maturity, he was married to his cousin Khanzada Khanim, the daughter of Sultan-Husayn's sister Badi' al-Jamal Begim. Shortly before the wedding, which took place at the beginning of 1487, Muzaffar-Husayn had been the recipient of a lavish two-month celebration, with considerable feasting, drinking, and partying to mark his circumcision. See Khvandamir, *Habib al-Siyar*, 4:178–179, and *Habibu's-siyar*, 2:442–443. It is unclear how old Muzaffar-Husayn may have been when he got married or reached the age of maturity, but it is possible to speculate based on the little that is known about princely circumcisions in the late Timurid milieu. One of the best-documented ceremonies to mark a royal circumcision was the celebration held by Sultan-Abu Sa'id for his sons' rite of passage. Held over a period of two months at the Bagh-i Zaghan (from May 17–July 19, 1466), it is described by Khvandamir as having been exceptionally spectacular and extravagant. See Khvandamir, *Habib al-Siyar*, 4:83–84, and *Habibu's-siyar*, 2:396–397. The ages of Sultan-Abu Sa'id's sons ranged between 10 years and 15 years at the time. For their years of birth, see Babur, *Baburnama*, 35 (=fol. 18a), 1:50–51 (=fol. 25b), and 1:12–13 (=fol. 6b). This age range seems consistent with what has been approximated by Beatrice Forbes Manz for the age at which the Timurid prince 'Abd al-Latif (d. 1450), the patricidal son of Ulugh Beg (d. 1449), had his circumcision feast—that is, between 8 years and 12 years. See Manz, *Power, Politics, and Religion*, 248, note 16. It is likely that Muzaffar-Husayn's circumcision and wedding took place while he was between the ages of 10 years and 15 years, thereby making his date of birth sometime between 1472 at the earliest (a year after his elder brother Shah-Gharib was born) and 1477. It can be reasonably deduced, then, that Khadija Begi Agha was married legally to Sultan-Husayn sometime during the mid 1470s.

38. For instance, Latifa-Sultan Aghacha and Papa Aghacha. See, for the latter, Babur, *Baburnama*, 2:352–353 (=fol. 169b).

39. According to the *Mu'izz al-Ansab*, she had a total of five children by Sultan-Husayn, three of whom died in infancy. These included two sons, Sultan-Jahangir and Jahangir-Husayn, and a daughter whose name is simply given as Khanim. See *Mu'izz al-Ansab*, fol. 163b.

40. Babur, *Baburnama*, 2:343 (=fol. 166a).

41. Babur, *Baburnama*, 2:343 (=fol. 166a); Khvandamir, *Habib al-Siyar*, 4:207, and *Habibu's-siyar*, 2:456.

42. Khadija Begi Agha's role in the political crisis that unfolded during the final decade of Sultan-Husayn's rule was first pointed out by Barthold, *Four Studies on the History of Central Asia*, 65.

43. Vasifi, *Badayi' al-Vaqayi'*, 2:333.

44. Babur, *Baburnama*, 1:33 (=fol. 41a).

45. Khvandamir, *Habib al-Siyar*, 4:207, and *Habibu's-siyar*, 2:456–457.

46. Babur, *Baburnama*, 2:344–345 (=fol. 166a).

47. For the entire episode, see Khvandamir, *Habib al-Siyar*, 4:208, and *Habibu's-siyar*, 2:457.

48. To appreciate fully the changing dynamics of 'Ali Shir Nava'i and Khvaja Nizam al-Mulk's relationship see Subtelny, *Timurids in Transition*, 82–101, but especially 93, 96, 100–101.

49. Khvandamir, *Habib al-Siyar*, 4:213–214, and *Habibu's-siyar*, 2:459–460.

50. Khvandamir, *Habib al-Siyar*, 4:214, and *Habibu's-siyar*, 2:460.

51. Although no other source mentions her, Khvandamir records a certain Bibi Muhibb as a patron of public buildings in Herat during the reign of Sultan-Husayn. However, there is no evidence to suggest that these two were the same. See Subtelny, *Timurids in Transition*, 157; and Khvandamir, *Ma'asir al-Muluk*, 178.

52. Vasifi, *Badayi' al-Vaqayi'*, 2:334. Those who rebelled included Latifa-Sultan Aghacha's sons, Abu al-Muhsin Mirza, then governor of Marv, and Muhammad-Muhsin Mirza. See Khvandamir, *Habib al-Siyar*, 4:239, and *Habibu's-siyar*, 2:472. Others, however, remained loyal, such as Payanda-Sultan Begim's son, Hayder-Muhammad Mirza, and Papa Aghacha's son, Ibn-i Husayn Mirza. See Khvandamir, *Habib al-Siyar*, 4:245, and *Habibu's-siyar*, 2:474.

53. Subtelny, *Timurids in Transition*, 100–101.

54. Vasifi, *Badayi' al-Vaqayi'*, 2:337. It is true that Vasifi's memoirs, which were completed at the Uzbek court at Tashkent in 1538 or 1539, need to be read judiciously for their account of Timurid intrigues, for although he purports to have had intimate knowledge of high politics, there remain doubts about his veracity. See Subtelny, "Scenes from the Literary Life of Timurid Herat," 140; and Pistoso, "Taste for Ambiguity," 167. Nevertheless, as Subtelny alludes to in her article, although the historicity of his reports may be questioned, they reflect more accurately the perceptions of a contemporary litterateur.

55. Khvandamir, *Habib al-Siyar*, 4:301, and *Habibu's-siyar*, 2:502.

56. Khvandamir, *Habib al-Siyar*, 4:309, and *Habibu's-siyar*, 2:506.

57. Khvandamir, *Habib al-Siyar*, 4:364, *Habibu's-siyar*, 2:532; and Babur, *Baburnama*, 2:381–383 (=fols. 182b–183a).

58. Babur, *Baburnama*, 2:382 (=fol. 183a).

59. Dughlat, *Tarikh-i-Rashidi*, 1:168–169, 2:133.

60. Dughlat, *Tarikh-i-Rashidi*, 1:171, 2:135.

61. Dale, *Garden of Eight Paradises*, 63–64.

62. Babur, *Baburnama*, 1:161–163 (=fols. 79b–80b); Khvandamir, *Habib al-Siyar*,⁴ 4:277–281, and *Habibu's-siyar*, 491–492; and Salih, *Shibani-nama*, 56–57. I am grateful to Eliza Tasbihi for her reading of Muhammad Salih's Chaghatay Turkish. However, Mulla Bina'i makes no mention of Zuhra Begi Agha's role in his section on the conquest of Samarqand. See 'Ali Bina'i, "Shibani-nama," 66–77.

63. Babur, *Baburnama*, 1:163 (=fol. 80b).

64. Ali, *Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam*, 8.

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Concubines and Courtesans

WOMEN AND SLAVERY IN ISLAMIC HISTORY

Edited by Matthew S. Gordon and Kathryn A. Hain

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