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# The Development of Persian Libraries under Timurid Patronage

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## Introduction

Khorasan, a region steeped in rich history and cultural significance, has been a focal point for scholars, poets, and historians for centuries. This region, which traces its history back to ancient Persian records and epic poems, was extolled in the geography treatise

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*Bahman Nameh* [The Book of Bahman]<sup>3</sup> as the birthplace of great ancient kings like Keykavus, who founded the city of Samarkand, and his successor Keykhosrow. Legends exalt Khorasan as a cradle of chivalrous knights and skilled archers, where the righteous flourished under the banner of justice. Cities like Bukhara, Samarkand, Nakhshab, and Ferghana, located south of the Oxus River [now the Amu Darya], were described as the jewels of Khorasan.

Khorasan's geographic location at the crossroads of empires ensured its enduring prominence and cosmopolitanism across the centuries. This location, coupled with the caravans that traveled its fertile valleys and corridors, enabled numerous rulers and sultans to control the region. An ever-shifting mosaic of powers and peoples left their indelible imprint on Khorasan's cultural fabric.

Central to Khorasan's intellectual legacy were its great libraries, which served as vital hubs connecting Persia to the wider world of learning. From the academy of Gondishapur, a center for Greek, Persian, and Indian science, to the unrivaled book treasures amassed by the Samanid, Ghaznavid and Seljuk courts, Khorasan's libraries gathered knowledge from across continents.

These libraries were more than just storehouses of knowledge. They were dynamic spaces where works from Greece, Persia, India, and China were translated, copied, discussed, and synthesized by scholars from diverse cultures. The translation movement catalyzed by these libraries brought the wisdom of antiquity into Arabic and Persian, bridging civilizations. Khorasan's libraries stand as testaments to the region's glorious legacy as a nexus of global thought and a pillar of Persianate civilization.

For five centuries, Khorasan flourished as a celebrated hub of Islamic Persian culture. Libraries, centers of learning, and scholarly institutions proliferated across its territory. The region stood unrivaled as the cradle of Iranian Islamic civilization, while its

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<sup>3</sup> The *Bahman Nameh* is a Persian epic poem of around 9500 lines, likely composed in the late eleventh or early twelfth century CE. It tells the story of the hero Kay Bahman from ancient Iranian mythology. As one of the few surviving Persian epics from medieval Khorasan, the poem offers a unique glimpse into the Persian literary tradition and court culture of that era (translator's note).

cities acted as the political capitals of successive Persian empires. Khorasan remained an integral domain under Iran's central rule up until the Qajar dynasty in the nineteenth century. Khorasan owed its preeminence and longevity to its strategic location at the crossroads of Asia. Its valleys and mountain passes provided the gateway for many foreign rulers and conquerors. The region's boundaries shifted fluidly through history, as new dynasties exerted control and left their imprint. While its size and borders fluctuated, Khorasan's cultural core endured, embracing the diverse artistic influences of each new age while retaining its Persian heart. The region remained an unconquered bastion of Iranian language, faith, and artistic creativity against the onslaught of invading armies. From this unique heritage blossomed some of Persia's most exalted artistic and philosophical achievements.<sup>4</sup>

The thirteenth-century Mongol invasion proved the severest trial for the region. The khans unleashed devastation on an unprecedented scale, razing thriving cities and massacring their inhabitants. The vivid account by the medieval Muslim historian Ibn Athir recounts its horrors.

The Mongols captured the most prosperous and best parts of the earth, which were superior to everywhere else in terms of development and population, and whose people were the kindest and best-behaved of all people, in a period close to one year, and they left no one alive in those cities.<sup>5</sup>

Although the Mongol empire splintered after the death of Abu Sa'id Khan in 1335 CE, the damage was done. Warlords carved Iran into petty fiefdoms, setting the stage for the Central Asian conqueror, Temūr-i Lang [Timur the Lame]. Known as Tamerlane in the West, he founded a war machine that ravaged its way from Delhi to the Mediterranean. But the tumult of Timur's conquests would spark a revival of Persian culture and learning amidst the turmoil.

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<sup>4</sup> Hamid Valizadeh, "Nazari ejmali be Ovazee Khorasan ba'd az haml-e Moghol" [A brief overview of the situation in Khorasan after the Mongol invasion], *Tarikh-e Pajouhesh* 19 (2004): 1-24.

<sup>5</sup> Valizadeh, "Nazari ejmali", 2004, 4.

Timur viewed himself as Genghis Khan's heir, yet while ruthless as a warrior, he proved a discerning statesman and patron of the arts. Timur envisioned his capital Samarkand as an unrivaled cosmopolitan center. Though his military campaigns terrorized vast regions, they also imported priceless books, scholars and artisans to embellish his realm.

The Timurid court spent lavishly to import works from afar and engaged craftsmen to elevate the architectural grandeur of Samarkand. This nourishing environment drove an efflorescence of science and culture, as thinkers converged to exchange ideas. The Timurid Renaissance restored the luster of Persianate society across Central Asia after centuries of instability. From the ashes of Mongol devastation, the phoenix of Islamic art and erudition rose again in Khorasan under Timur's successors.<sup>6</sup> The revival was centered around the magnificent libraries they established, which served as hubs for the transmission of knowledge and cultivation of arts and sciences.

Historical evidence reveals significant differences between the reign of Timur and the invading forces, particularly the Mongols. Timur established a vast empire that extended from India to the Mediterranean Sea, encompassing regions such as Moscow, the Golden Horde, and the Persian Gulf. The hallmark of his rule was the accumulation of immense wealth through the conquest of neighboring lands, with Samarkand at the heart of his empire. Timur's governance brought an end to internal conflicts, ensuring security throughout the empire and fostering safe and prosperous trade routes. Cities flourished once again, adorned with magnificent structures built under the patronage of Timur and his successors. Notably, the city of Herat, which had suffered extensive damage during the Mongol era, was revived and flourished anew in 1405 CE / 807 AH under the directive of Shah Rukh Timur.<sup>7</sup> Unlike the Mongol rulers, Timur actively

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<sup>6</sup> Saeed Tahmasebi, "Naghsh-e siyasi-e ejtema'ie sadat dar doreye Timuri" [The sociopolitical role of the sayyids in the Timurid period], *Nameye Anjoman* 15 (2004): 101-16.

<sup>7</sup> Amir Teimur Refiee, "Seyri dar ovaze eghtesadiye Khorasan-e bozorg dar asre Timuri" [A review of the economic situation in Greater Khorasan during the Timurid era], *Tarikh Quarterly Journal* 2, no. 6 (1386/2007): 61-84.

promoted Persian language and culture as the hallmark of administration and the language of literature and arts in his empire.

Following the dark period of Mongol domination, the relative tranquility and grandeur that Greater Khorasan experienced as the center of Timurid rule provided the foundation for comprehensive cultural and artistic advancements in the region. Consequently, this era is considered one of the prosperous cultural periods in the history of Khorasan. The Timurid period witnessed the emergence of various aspects of Islamic art and culture, and the efforts of the Timurid rulers in promoting intellectual pursuits in this region are undeniable. Through the gathering of artists and scholars, they were able to establish a prominent cultural and artistic hub in Khorasan.<sup>8</sup>

Timur and his successors and descendants made significant endeavors to attract scholars, artists, and architects to their centers of governance. Despite his asceticism, Timur's fourth son Shahrukh<sup>9</sup> was a cultured man who transformed Herat into a vibrant hub for scholars, poets, writers, and historians. He invited numerous artists to copy and illustrate books for his renowned library. Shahrukh's son Ulugh Beg shared his deep passion for science and art, exemplified by his famous observatory, the Zij-e Ulugh Beg.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, Baysonqor, another of Shahrukh's sons, actively fostered artistic talent by gathering and educating artists from diverse backgrounds in Herat. The Timurid rulers in Greater Khorasan recognized the exceptional value of libraries, surpassing any previous era in Iranian history.<sup>11</sup> The growth and prosperity of these libraries were attributed to

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<sup>8</sup> Nasser Emami, "Farhang va miras-e farhangi: Negahi be honarhaye eslami doreye Timuri" [Culture and cultural heritage: A look at Islamic art of the Timurid period], *Meshkat* 53 (1996): 145-76.

<sup>9</sup> Shahrukh Mirza (r. 1405-1447 CE) succeeded his father as the ruler of the eastern region of the Timurid Empire based in Herat. Known for his administrative acumen and patronage of the arts, Shahrukh oversaw a period of relative peace and prosperity. He transformed Herat into a vibrant cultural center, bringing together renowned scholars, poets, artists and architects. Shahrukh commissioned many illustrated manuscripts and established a major library. His sons Ulugh Beg and Baysonqor continued this enlightened legacy as influential patrons of arts and sciences in the Timurid Renaissance (translator's note).

<sup>10</sup> Emami, "Farhang va miras-e farhangi", 1996, 145-76.

<sup>11</sup> Gholamreza Amirkhani, "Katabkhanehaye vogoufiye Khorasan doreye Timuri" [Endowed libraries of Khorasan in the Timurid period], *Miras-e Javidan* 9, no. 49 (2002): 19-24.

the diligent use of their resources by researchers and authors, who relied on the wealth of knowledge they contained to compose and compile their works. Many of these literary endeavors were commissioned by the rulers or by library staff. Notable writers and scholars who dedicated their works to the Timurid sultans' libraries include Khwandamir (1475–1535 CE / 880–941 AH), Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi (d. 1454 CE / 858 AH), and Ghiyas al-Din Jamshid Kashani (1380-1429 CE / 782–832 AH).<sup>12</sup>

The preeminent libraries of the Timurid Renaissance served as unparalleled hubs of scholarly exchange, knowledge accumulation, and cultural transmission, whose legacy profoundly shaped intellectual developments in the Islamic world and beyond.<sup>13</sup> Translating and synthesizing works on science, philosophy, and medicine from antiquity, the libraries of Herat, Shiraz, Rey, and Samarkand fueled the rediscovery of classical knowledge, while their scholarly patrons penned celebrated Persian poetry, mathematics, and astronomy. By preserving, augmenting, and disseminating humankind's intellectual heritage, the Timurid libraries helped lay the foundation for the modern university system, while catalyzing the revival of arts and humanities that defined the Islamic Renaissance. The Timurid legacy served as a cultural conduit to early modern Europe, from the migration of its scholars fleeing westwards to the later acquisition of its manuscripts by Ottoman sultans and European elites.

## A Brief Overview of Libraries in Khorasan Prior to the Timurid Era

From the ninth century CE (third century AH) until the Mongol invasion of Iran by Genghis Khan in the thirteenth century CE (sixth century AH), the cities of Bukhara, Merv, Balkh, Neyshabur and Ghazni were major intellectual centers boasting grand madrasas and libraries for scholars, researchers and students. These libraries essentially functioned as

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<sup>12</sup> Gholamreza Amirkhani, "Talfiq va tadvin-e ketab dar ketabkhanehayeh doreye Timuri" [Authoring and compiling books in Timurid libraries], *Faslnameye Ketab* 10, no. 2 (2000): 61-102.

<sup>13</sup> M. E. Subtelny, "Socioeconomic Bases of Cultural Patronage under the Later Timurids," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 20, no 4 (1988): 479-505.

centers of learning at a time before the establishment of universities. Lovers of literature and culture flocked from the farthest reaches of Iran and neighboring lands to complete their education and enrich their knowledge. They freely benefited from the teachings of renowned scholars who instructed students in the numerous madrasas focused on scientific and religious sciences.<sup>14</sup>

The first library of Khorasan mentioned in historical sources from the Islamic era was the library of Ghazni, which existed in the ninth century CE (second century AH). This prestigious library contained a rare Bible manuscript. The Ghazni library was catalogued, with its precious books protected in locked boxes.<sup>15</sup> This influential center of knowledge was sadly lost to fire in 1151 CE / 546 AH.

The Samanid<sup>16</sup> had numerous libraries in Transoxiana. Avicenna described obtaining permission from the Samanid ruler Nuh ibn Mansur to access his grand library in Bukhara, noting that it was organized by subject.<sup>17</sup>

A second exceptional library was at the Nezamiyeh of Nishapur, an eminent center of learning in the fifth century AH (corresponding approximately to 1056-1106 CE), that nurtured famous students like Imam Muhammad Ghazali (1058-1111 CE), Omar Khayyam (1048-1131 CE), and Anvari Abivard (1126-1189 CE).<sup>18</sup> It was completely destroyed when the Mongols invaded the city.

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<sup>14</sup> Ramin Homayoun Farrokh, "Tarikhcheye ketab va ketabkhaneh dar Iran" [A brief history of books and libraries in Iran], *Honar va Mardom* 55 (1967): 20-7.

<sup>15</sup> Ahmad Habibi, "Ketabkhaneye Ghazneh dar gharne dovom-e hejri" [Ghazni library in the 2nd century AH], *Rahnamaye Ketab* 5, nos. 11-12 (1962): 995-6.

<sup>16</sup> The Samanids were a Persian dynasty that ruled over Central Asia from the ninth to the tenth centuries CE. Known for their patronage of arts, literature, and sciences, they played a crucial role in the cultural and intellectual development of the region. Their influence and cultural legacy had a lasting impact on subsequent dynasties, including the Timurids, who emerged several centuries later and drew inspiration from the rich cultural heritage of the Samanids (translator's note).

<sup>17</sup> Farid Mojtabai, "Ibn Sina," in K. Mousavi (ed.), *Daieratolmaaref-e bozorg-e eslami* [The great Islamic encyclopedia], vol. 4, 1-49 (Tehran: The Great Islamic Encyclopedia Center, 1991).

<sup>18</sup> Ali Javaher Kalam, *Ketabkhanehaye Iran* [Libraries of Iran] (Tehran: Bina, 1932), 1311.

The library of Masjid Uqail or Aqil in Neyshabur burned down when the Ghuzz (also known as the Oghuz Turks) invaded the city in 548 AH (1153 CE). Hafez Ebru (1362-1431 CE) describes this incident:

Among the destruction caused by the Ghuzz was a mosque called Masjid Uqail, which contained a treasury of authoritative books. Around five thousand volumes on various sciences were endowed there for students. They set fire to it, as well as eight madrasas belonging to the caliphs, seventeen madrasas belonging specifically to the Shafi'i school, and five other libraries each containing large amounts of books. Seven libraries were looted, and the contents were sold off as scrap paper.<sup>19</sup>

In the city of Merv, which enjoyed great scholarly and social prominence in the first half of the twelfth century CE, another newly established Nizamiyyah madrasa was considered one of the cultural centers of Khorasan. The famous Islamic historian and geographer Yaqut al-Hamawi<sup>20</sup> wrote about this city, its madrasa, and its library.

Merv had numerous other libraries until the early thirteenth century, when they were burnt down in the Tatar invasion. The Aziziyyah library, located in the city's Grand Mosque, was an important public library during the reign of Seljuk Sultan Sanjar, containing 12,000 volumes for public access.<sup>21</sup>

In his memoir *Lubab ul-Albab*,<sup>22</sup> Mohammad Aufi refers to three libraries. The first was located at the head of the Bazaar in Bukhara, where he studied the poetry of Bahram Gor, the Sassanid king whose bravery is depicted in many literary works but whose poetic works were lost in Antiquity. The second library was in Samarkand, known for its cool

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<sup>19</sup> Amirkhani, "Ketabkhanehaye vogoufiye Khorasan", 2002: 20.

<sup>20</sup> Yaqut al-Hamawi (1179-1229 CE) was a Muslim scholar of Byzantine Greek ancestry, highly active during the late Abbasid period (twelfth-thirteenth centuries). He is most renowned for his work *Mu'jam ul-Buldān* [Dictionary of Countries], a comprehensive geographical dictionary that includes invaluable information pertaining to biography, history, and literature, along with geography.

<sup>21</sup> Amirkhani, 2002.

<sup>22</sup> "Lubab al-Albab" is an Arabic phrase that translates to "The Essence of the Essence" or "The Kernel of Kernels." This Samanid-era work is considered the oldest extant biographical work in Persian literature and the most important collection of biographies of Persian poets, featuring 27 biographies of contemporary poets. The *Lubab al-Albab* is also notable for its diverse material, including being the earliest known work in Muslim literature in which a compass is described in sea navigation (translator's note).



and refreshing environment, housing the poetry of Sultan Atsiz Khwarazmi (1099-1157 CE / 492-551 AH). The third library, also located in Samarkand, was referred to by Aufi as the Sarandibi's library. Another library was the Madrasa of Masud Bek in Bukhara, according to Khwaja Rashiduddin Fazlullah Hamadani<sup>23</sup> the most magnificent and busiest school in the region. It was burnt during the Mongol invasion led by Abaqa Khan in 1271 CE (671 AH), along with all its precious books.

The Mongol invasion led to the destruction of many libraries in the Khorasan region. The Mongols, known for their military might and brutality, targeted intellectual and cultural centers during their expansionist campaigns. This included libraries that housed invaluable collections of books and manuscripts, causing irreparable loss to human knowledge and cultural heritage. The destruction disrupted the transmission of ancient wisdom and hindered the progress of various fields of study, marking a decline in the influence and cultural identity of the Islamic civilization.

## The Rise of Timur and the Cultural Flourishing of Greater Khorasan

The emergence of Timur in the late eighth century AH (late fourteenth century CE) and the rise of the Timurid state had far-reaching consequences for Greater Khorasan. Timur, a native of Samarkand of Turkic descent, was a devout Muslim. He was very interested in Persian culture, though tragically his invasion proved disastrous for Iran and neighboring regions, earning him infamy for extreme brutality.<sup>24</sup> His military campaigns from Moscow to India and from China's borders to the Mediterranean were marked by unbridled bloodshed and violence. However, much of this onslaught was driven less by political or military objectives than by economic motives, as he channeled the spoils into Transoxiana. Timur forcibly relocated artisans, scholars, artists and scientists to his

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<sup>23</sup> Rashid al-Din Fazlullah, *Jame' al-Tavarikh* [Compendium of chronicles] vol. 3 (Baku: Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan, 1967).

<sup>24</sup> Ardeshir Khodadian, "Khorasan va Mavara al-Nahr dar Ayeneh-ye Tarikh-e Iran va Eslam" [Khorasan and Transoxiana in the Mirror of Iranian and Islamic History], *Journal of Faculty of Literature and Humanities* 47-46, no. 159-158 (2012): 189-203.

Central Asian capital. This involuntary migration of talent nurtured the cultural and intellectual growth of his Transoxianan domain.<sup>25</sup> Timurid rule thus heralded a remarkable era of prosperity for Persian culture, arts, scholarship and science.

As a result of Timur's policies, scholars and artists flocked to this burgeoning academic and cultural hub from all corners. Within a short period, Samarkand blossomed into one of the foremost centers of learning in the Eastern world.<sup>26</sup> Luminaries of the time included jurist Sharaf al-Din al-Jurjani, Sufi scholar Sa'd al-Din al-Taftazani, astronomer Ulugh Beg, poet Lutfullah Nithari, and polymath Ghiyath al-Din Jamshid al-Kashi, among countless others who migrated there pursuing enlightened patronage. In essence, Timur's conquests, despite their initial destruction, catalyzed an unparalleled efflorescence of Persianate high culture and scientific achievement centered in Transoxiana, shaping the course of human civilization.

The main factors of the scientific, cultural and artistic development of Iran during the Timurid period can be summarized as follows:

1. The Timurid dynasty cultivated an unparalleled cultural renaissance that profoundly shaped the evolution of the Persianate book arts and libraries by means of political stability, economic prosperity, intellectual discourse and artistic patronage.
2. Century-long Timurid rule enabled policies that engendered cultural development. Consolidating the fractured post-Mongol landscape, Timur envisioned Samarkand as the dazzling capital of a reinvigorated empire. His conquests amassed enormous wealth, lavished on importing artisans and architects. This environment fostered cultural, scientific and artistic progress.

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<sup>25</sup> Mohammad Nazeri, "Siasate elmi va farhangi-ye Timur," *Roshde Amouzeshe-e Tarikh* 10, no. 3 (2009): 37-43.

<sup>26</sup> Hadi Mir Jafari, "Naghshe Timurian va hemayate anan dar shokoufayee farhang va tamadon-e Irani" [The role of Timurids and their patronage in the flourishing of Iranian culture and civilization], *Journal of Humanities of University of Sistan and Baluchestan* 158-159 (2001): 189-204.

3. While the Timurid aristocracy were pious Muslims, they nonetheless tolerated religious diversity. Debates between scholars of different Islamic sects were encouraged, stimulating manuscript production on Sufi mystical thought. Timur prized intellectual curiosity, founding madrasas to disseminate knowledge, with a special interest in astronomy and medicine.
4. The Timurid court became a hub where artistic talents converged across cultures. Legendary Central Asian and Persian intellectuals and craftsmen thronged the city. Libraries operated as vibrant scriptoria, where calligraphers, illuminators and bookbinders honed their craft. The eminent vizier Mir Ali Shir Navai oversaw the burgeoning imperial library. Manuscripts from this era displayed consummate artistry.
5. This Timurid legacy resuscitated Persianate culture after centuries of instability, inspiring an enduring reverence for books. Their lavish libraries stand as monuments to an unrivaled epoch of artistic sophistication, setting new pinnacles of excellence for later generations to emulate. Modern libraries retain traces of their Timurid forebears' visionary patronage, which irrevocably shaped the evolution of Islamic manuscript and book arts.

## The State of Libraries in Khorasan During the Timurid Era

To describe the condition of libraries in the Timurid age, we must briefly look to the period before. The eleventh-century scholarly movement led by scientists like Abu Rayhan Biruni,<sup>27</sup> Avicenna, and Imam Muhammad Ghazali,<sup>28</sup> who authored scientific works in Persian, was strengthened in the early twelfth century CE. With the astonishing advancement in the promotion of science, culture, libraries, and higher education centers, it was expected that the arts and culture would continue to flourish in the

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<sup>27</sup> Abu Rayhan Biruni (973-1048 CE) was a prominent eleventh-century Persian scholar and polymath (translator's note).

<sup>28</sup> Imam Muhammad Ghazali (1058-1111 CE) was an influential Persian theologian and Sufi mystic (translator's note).

thirteenth and fourteenth centuries CE, and richer libraries would be founded across Islamic lands. However, unforeseen circumstances led to a different outcome.

The disastrous events of 1155-1215 CE (550-612 AH) in Greater Khorasan and Transoxiana destroyed a host of intellectual and spiritual treasures. The destruction that Khorasan and Transoxiana suffered at the hands of the Ghuzz Turks was no less severe than the calamities inflicted by the Mongols.

In the savage Ghuzz invasion, Iran and Khorasan were devastated and libraries were burned or looted. As Hafiz Ebru writes, over five thousand books on various sciences were lost when the Aqila Mosque library in Neyshabur was consumed by fire. Fifteen other libraries met a similar fate, and seven more were plundered.<sup>29</sup>

In the Mongol invasion, the schools of Merv, Bukhara and Nishapur were closed, libraries were set on fire, and scholars were killed, captured, or fled in fear. Yaqut al-Hamawi left an account of his experiences:

I left Merv in 616 AH [1219 CE]. At that time there were ten endowed book treasuries in that city that I have not seen the like of anywhere in the world in terms of abundance and quality of manuscripts. Among them were two libraries in the city's main mosque, one named Khazanat al-Aziziya, endowed by Az al-Din Abu Bakr Atiq Zanjani (also known as Atiq ibn Abi Bakr)... This library contained twelve thousand volumes, or close to that number. The other library was named Khazanat al-Kamaliya, and I am not sure to whom it was attributed. Among other libraries of Merv was the library of Sharaf al-Mulk Mustawfi Abu Sa'd Muhammad ibn Mansur, and Khazanat al-Kutub of Nizam al-Mulk Hasan ibn Ishaq. Two libraries belonged to the Sam'ani family, another to the Hamidiya school, the treasury of Majd al-Mulk, the treasuries of the Khatuni family, and Khazanat al-Dhamiriya. Access to these libraries was extremely easy, and it rarely happened that there were not two hundred or more volumes from them in my house without any deposit. Had this city not fallen into the hands of the Tatars and declined into ruin, I would not have left it until my death.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Abdullah ibn Lutfullah Hafez Ebru, *Joghrafiaye Hafez Ebro, Rub' Khorasan, Herat* [The Geography of Hafez Ebru, Quarter of Khorasan, Herat], compiled by Najib Mayel Heravi (Tehran: Iran Cultural Foundation, 1970).

<sup>30</sup> Asghar Eghbal Ashtiani, *Tarikhe Moghol* [History of the Mongols] (Tehran: Amirkabir, 1977).

During the reign of Sultan Atsiz Khwarazmi, the last ruler of the Khwarazmian dynasty before the Mongol invasion, some famous and important libraries in Merv belonging to such scholars and library collectors as Imam Hasan Gattan and Rashid Watwat, which according to his own account contained a thousand volumes, were looted. In the Mongol calamity, not only were many scholars and virtuosos slaughtered, but mosques, schools, and libraries containing countless books and treasures of sciences and works were consumed by fire and plunder. A number of scientists and dignitaries who had escaped the Mongol executioners took refuge in the southern provinces of Iran, which had remained relatively safe from destruction. Some went to India and Asia Minor, where they strove to propagate Persian literature and sciences.<sup>31</sup>

Mowlana Munshi, a contemporary poet, composed an elegy for Baysonqor Mirza:

I came upon the library, only to find  
The scholars strewn in sorrow, turbans unbound.  
Their robes as black as the ink from their pens,  
Now cast aside, scattered on the ground.

The shelves once heavy with hand-scribed tomes  
Lie bare like the branches in winter's cold.  
The illuminations in colors so bold,  
Now lost to the chaos, the manuscripts disbound.

The astronomical astrolabes all smashed,  
The celestial spheres they so carefully mapped.  
Centuries of knowledge, upended and dashed,  
As the horde pilfers treasures once tightly wrapped.<sup>32</sup>

Building on the ashes of the Mongol invasion, Samarkand emerged as a beacon of knowledge and creativity. The 104-year rule of Timur and his successors stands as an era of prominence and splendor for libraries. Encouraging scholars, artists, and craftsmen, the sons and successors of Timur fostered a vibrant intellectual environment, giving rise

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<sup>31</sup> Nasser Naghavi, "Sayri dar ketabkhanehaye eslami" [A survey of Islamic libraries], *Mashkouh* 21 (1988): 158-78.

<sup>32</sup> Mohammad Hedayati, "Naghde tarikhnegari-ye ommumi-ye ketabkhanehaye Iran" [Critique of the general historiography of Iranian libraries], *Ketabdarie va Etelaesani* 37 (2001): 157-204.

to new schools in mysticism, literature, architecture, calligraphy, painting, tilemaking, bookbinding, and other fine crafts that necessitated the establishment of libraries.

During this period, a notable development was the increasing usage of the term "Ketabkhaneh" to refer to libraries in Iran. Prior to that, libraries were referred to using terms such as Dar al-Kutub, Khazanat al-Kutub, Bayt al-Kutub, and occasionally Ketabkhaneh. These earlier terms followed Arabic structures.

Various types of libraries were established:

1. Libraries in mosques, religious places, and religious schools
2. Personal libraries
3. Specialist libraries.

## Libraries in Mosques, Religious Places, and Religious Schools

In the early centuries of Islam, mosques also had an educational function, and study circles and discussions continued there even after schools were established.<sup>33</sup> Libraries were also established in mosques for public use, especially for students and teachers.<sup>34</sup> Religious schools also needed libraries for students and scholars. Some of the most important libraries in mosques, religious places, and religious schools during the Timurid era in Greater Khorasan were as follows:

1. *The Library of Madrasa, Mosque and Khanqah of Gowharshad Agha Begum:* Gowharshad, wife of Shah Rukh Bahadur Khan and mother of Baysonqor and Ulugh Beg Mirza, was a virtuous and knowledgeable woman who constructed a magnificent mosque, madrasa and khanqah near the holy shrine of Imam Reza in 1424 CE. The madrasa of Gowharshad Agha Begum had a very large

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<sup>33</sup> Mohammad Maki Saba'i, *Naghsh-e Ketabkhaneh-haye Masajed dar Farhang va Tamaddon-e Eslami* [The Role of Mosque Libraries in Islamic Culture and Civilization], translated by Ali Shakui (Tehran: Organization of Cultural Revolution Documents, 1994); Nader Karimian Sardashti, *Tarikh-e Ketabkhaneh-haye Masajed-e Iran* [The History of Mosque Libraries in Iran] (Tehran: Library of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, 1999).

<sup>34</sup> Nasser Ansari, *Ketab va ketabdariye majmoueye maqalate ketab va ejtema* [Books and librarianship: A collection of articles on books and society] (Tehran: Tous, 1975).

and important library, looted during the Uzbek invasion of Khorasan in the early sixteenth century. After Shah Abbas Safavi (1571-1629 CE) ordered Sheikh Baha al-Din Ameli (1547-1621 CE) to gather the looted books and reopen the Astan Quds Razavi Library, the library of Gowharshad Agha Madrasa was almost closed.<sup>35</sup>

2. *The Library of Astan Quds Razavi*: Although the exact date of establishment of this library and its founder are unknown, based on evidence in past centuries there was a place for reciting the Quran near the shrine. The existence of various religious schools in Mashhad led to the need for a library until Shah Rukh Mirza made Mashhad the capital of his government in the fourteenth century CE, developing mosques and shrines in the city, when the library was proposed by students and scholars. There is no mention in any source of a library or books in the shrine of Razavi until the Safavid era. But during the reign of Sultan Hussain Bayqara (1438-1506 CE) and the ministry of Amir Alishir Navai (1469-1506 CE), the Shiites enjoyed relative freedom and were able to become custodians of the Astan Quds Razavi, one of the holiest sites of Shia Islam as it is home to the shrine of Imam Reza in the flourishing city of Mashhad.<sup>36</sup> This could have paved the way for cultural activities in the shrine of Imam Reza, including a library.
3. *The Library of Atiq Grand Mosque in Shiraz*: This library containing many books on religious sciences was established by Mirza Pir Mohammad ibn Omar (781-812 AH / 1379-1409 CE), the ruler of Shiraz, who had a great interest in books and libraries.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Mohammad Nikparvar, *Ketabkhaneh-haye Ostan-e Khorasan: az aghaz-e Eslam ta 'asr-e hazer* [Libraries of Khorasan Province: From the Beginning of Islam to the Present Era] (Mashhad: General Directorate of Culture and Arts of Khorasan, 1972).

<sup>36</sup> Saeed Mohammadnia et al., *Sargozaasht-e ketabkhaneha dar Iran* [Destinies of libraries in Iran] (Tehran: Ketabdar, 2011).

<sup>37</sup> Abbas Keymanesh "Ketabkhaneh-haye Iran dar Dore-ye Teimuriyan" [Iranian Libraries During the Timurid Period], *Journal of the Faculty of Literature and Humanities, University of Tehran* 1-4, no. 33 (1995):155-171.

4. *The Library of Dodar Madrasa*: The madrasa was constructed during the reign of Shah Rukh Timuri in 1439 CE by Amir Yousof Khajeh Bahador, one of Shah Rukh's commanders. It was known as the Yousof Khajeh Madrasa. Over time it became known as "Dodar" because it had two entrances on the east and west sides.<sup>38</sup> Next to this madrasa was a well-known library providing books for the students of this madrasa.
5. *The Library of Ghiyathiyya Madrasa in Herat*: Khwaja Ghiyath al-Din Pir Ahmad was the minister of Shah Rukh Bahador Khan, and the father of Khwaja Majd al-Din Muhammad Khwafi. He founded a superior madrasa in Khwargerd, Khorasan, whose library was one of the most prestigious in Shah Rukh's time.<sup>39</sup>
6. *The Library and Madrasa of Shahrokhiyeh*: In 813 AH / 1411 CE Shah Rukh Bahador Khan constructed the Shahrokhiyeh Madrasa in Herat and appointed some of the most renowned scholars and mystics of the era to teach there. These scholars included Mahmud ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali Tusi, Yusof ibn Abi Sa'id Obhay, and Nasir al-Din Lutfallah. Additionally, the esteemed mystic Khwaja Ala al-Din Chishti was appointed as the head of the school and oversaw its great library.<sup>40</sup>
7. *The Library of Parizad Madrasa in Mashhad*: Parizad Madrasa is one of the most magnificent surviving madrasas in Mashhad. It was named after Parizad, a woman from Shah Rukh's court on whose orders it was built (Fatemi Moqaddam, 2008). This madrasa also had a library that contained many donated books.
8. *Other Libraries*: Many other libraries were established in the madrasas of this period: The library of Sultan Madrasa, Ghiyathiyya library, library of Dar al-Hadith Madrasa in Herat, library of Khwaja Malik Zargar Madrasa, library of

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<sup>38</sup> Zahra Fatemi Moghadam, "Madares-e Dini-ye Mashhad dar Dore-ye Teimuriyan" [Mashhad Religious Schools During the Timurid Period], *Zaa'er Monthly* 9, no. 168 (2008): 12-14.

<sup>39</sup> Nikparvar, *Ketabkhaneh-haye Ostan-e Khorasan*, 1972.

<sup>40</sup> Khwandamir, *Tarikh-e Habib al-Siyar fi Akhbar Afrad al-Bashar* [The History of Habib al-Siyar Regarding the Accounts of Human Beings] (Tehran: Khayyam, 2001).



Khwaja Makhdum Jaami Madrasa, library of Khwaja Kamal al-Din Giringi Madrasa, library of Khwaja Ismail Hisari, library of Amir Mahmud Madrasa, library of Tiflagan Madrasa, library of Sabz Darman Madrasa, library of Nezamiyya Madrasa, library of Pir Khanqah Madrasa in Herat, library of Malik Hussein Kurt Khanqah Madrasa, library of Bilband Madrasa, library of Sabz Darman Madrasa, library of Sharifah Mahd-e Uliya Madrasa of Gowharshad Agha Begum, library of Gharbi Madrasa, library of Ekhlasiya Madrasa, library of Badiieya Madrasa, library of Sehhiyah Madrasa.<sup>41</sup>

## Personal Libraries

The history of personal libraries or collections in Iran dates back to the Islamic era. In past centuries, since books were produced as manuscripts, their price was high and not everyone could afford to buy books. Those who could buy books either had considerable wealth or a keen interest in sciences and knowledge.

Many Muslim kings and amirs respected the spiritual status of scholars, scientists and artists, and provided them with material and spiritual support. This tradition continued from the early Islamic centuries until the early twentieth century.

Many Muslim rulers themselves were not scholars themselves, but nonetheless competed to collect books and establish libraries. Personal libraries can be divided into three groups:

1. Libraries of kings, princes and amirs
2. Libraries of ministers and statesmen
3. Libraries of scholars, literati and scientists.

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<sup>41</sup> Nikparvar, 1972.

### *Libraries of Kings, Princes and Amirs of the Timurid Era*

This section explores three notable personal libraries associated with prominent Timurid figures, shedding light on their founders, collections, and contributions to the literary and artistic heritage of Iran and beyond.

1. *The Library of Baysonqor Mirza*: Ghias al-Din Baysonqor, son of Shah Rukh and grandson of Amir Timur Gurkan, was a young man with a talent for the arts and a love of literature. He shunned royal duties and spent his time collecting books and socializing with scholars, poets and men of letters. He established a magnificent library, one of the most valuable ever built in Iran. The surviving manuscripts from Baysonqor's library are the finest examples of the development and perfection of the art of bookmaking, binding, illumination and painting in Iran. The director of the Baysonqor library was Kamal al-Din Jafar Tabrizi, famed as Jafar Baysonqori, one of the celebrated calligraphers of the ninth century AH / fifteenth century CE. The books from this extensive library are now scattered across libraries worldwide, and wherever they are found they are treated with the utmost care and reverence.<sup>42</sup>
2. *The Library of Sultan Husayn Bayqara*: Sultan Husayn Bayqara reigned over Herat and other cities in Khorasan at the peak of their scholarly glory. He was a virtuous and poetic man, devoted to bringing scholars and artists to his court. He established a large school and library in Herat.<sup>43</sup> Sultan Husayn had a large group of artists at his court to illustrate the books in his royal library. He appointed Kamaluddin Jafar Tabrizi head of the Baysonqori library. The Sultan's minister Amir Alisher Navai was also a serious supporter of scholars, literati and artists.<sup>44</sup> His reign saw many books written in the fields of literature, mysticism and medicine.

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<sup>42</sup> Keymanesh "Ketabkhaneh-haye Iran dar Dore-ye Teimuriyan," 1995.

<sup>43</sup> Nikparvar, 1972.

<sup>44</sup> Mohammad Hassan Rajabi, *Ketabkhaneh dar Iran* [Library in Iran] (Tehran: Office of Cultural Research, 2002).

3. *The Library of Khalil Sultan*: As was common among the Timurid royalty, this Timurid prince had a great interest in collecting books and establishing libraries. He founded a library in Tashkent adorned with various books on literature, history, astronomy, medicine, pharmacology, geography, and many other sciences. The establishment of this library in Tashkent and Khalil Sultan's encouragement of scholars revived the city. Scholars came to take advantage of the vast and valuable Tashkent library, making the city a center of science. This led in turn to the establishment of other libraries, making the city a prominent scientific center.<sup>45</sup>

### *Libraries of Ministers and Statesmen*

1. *The Library of Amir Alisher Navai*: The library of Amir Alisher Navai was very prestigious. He had a keen interest in promoting sciences and arts and established stipends for scholars and students, some of whom reached high scholarly ranks and authored hundreds of books, the details of which are found in *Al-Nafayes*.<sup>46</sup> To manage this library, he appointed the accomplished Mowlana Haj Mohammad Dhufnoon who was skilled in various disciplines (Naqavi, 1988) and took appropriate measures such as dedicating endowments whose income was spent on the library.<sup>47</sup>
2. *The Library of Khwaja Afdhal*: Khwaja Afdhal al-Din Mahmud ibn Zia al-Din Muhammad Kermani was one of the great ministers of the fifteenth century, under the patronage of Amir Alisher Navai. In Herat he built a grand mosque, madrasa and khanqah, endowing each with a large library. In addition, he

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<sup>45</sup> Keymanesh, 1995.

<sup>46</sup> *Majalis-al-Nafayes* [Gatherings of the Precious], authored by Ali-Shir Navai around 1490 CE, offers a vivid portrayal of the lives of contemporary poets in the Joghatai dialect of the Turkish language. Esteemed as an early reference of its time, this influential work remains a significant resource. Fakhr of Herat translated it into Persian under the title of *Lataif-Nama* (completed between 1520-1522 CE) and supplemented it with additional content. This text, enriched by the personal perspectives of its author and translator, stands as a pivotal primary source for comprehending the literary landscape, notably the revered poets of Herat, within its historical context (translator's note).

<sup>47</sup> Mohammadnia et al., *Sargozaasht-e ketabkhaneha*, 2011.

established an extensive library in Herat with thousands of books, which was a gathering place for poets, writers and historians.<sup>48</sup>

### *Libraries of Kings, Princes and Amirs of the Timurid Era*

The only well-known library belonging to the scholars and literati of the Timurid era was the library of Mowlana Abdurrahman Jami.

Abdurrahman ibn Nizam al-Din Ahmad ibn Shams al-Din Muhammad Jami was the most famous poet and writer of the fifteenth century CE: his works are widely published, read, and discussed today. He had a valuable library in Herat, managed by his nephew Mohammad Nur, himself one of the famous calligraphers of the time. Jami's library was one of the great libraries of Iran. Jami gave stipends to those who carried out research in his library.<sup>49</sup>

The scarcity of personal libraries of scholars and literati of this era can perhaps be attributed to the abundance of royal libraries: scholars could easily access libraries in the courts of kings and princes and did not feel the need to establish private libraries for themselves.

### Specialist Libraries

A specialist library refers to a library whose collection relates to a specific field of knowledge and science or provides services to a specific group of people. The oldest specialist library in Iran was at Alamut fortress, built by Hassan Sabbah. This library was dedicated to the followers of Hassan Sabbah, known as Ismailis or Batinites.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Keymanesh, 1995.

<sup>49</sup> Farrokh, "Tarikhcheye ketab va ketabkhaneh", 1967.

<sup>50</sup> The library of Alamut was established by Hassan Sabbah after he seized the fortress in 1090 CE and converted it into the headquarters of the Nizari Ismaili state. As the founder of the Nizari Ismailis, Hassan Sabbah used the library to house many rare and prohibited Ismaili theological texts that were restricted for use by him and his inner circle of followers. The contents reflected his efforts to consolidate Ismaili doctrine and equip his propagandists with theological resources and training. By establishing this specialized religious library, Hassan Sabbah aimed to solidify the Ismaili character and identity of Alamut's residents. The number of manuscripts at the height of the library's operation is unknown, but it represented one of the major book repositories of Ismaili works in the medieval Islamic world. The secrecy

In the Timurid era, the only truly specialist library was that of Ulugh Beg Mirza. Ulugh Beg Mirza, the eldest son of Shah Rukh Mirza and brother of Baysonqor Mirza, took control of Turkistan and Transoxiana in 1409 CE, and made Samarkand his capital. Due to his passion for the arts and sciences, especially mathematics, astronomy and astrology, he built a great observatory in 1419 CE in Pusht-e Kohak, northeast of Samarkand, and invited renowned scientists and astronomers for research and observation. The observatory had an important library whose books Ulugh Beg brought in from the farthest reaches of Iran and neighboring lands at great expense. Ulugh Beg's observatory faced destruction in 1449: with the decline and extinction of the Timurid dynasty, the science of astronomy in Iran gradually deteriorated.<sup>51</sup>

No libraries are known to have been open to the general public in Greater Khorasan during the Timurid era.

## Conclusion

This examination of the cultural landscape of Timurid Khorasan has highlighted the extraordinary efflorescence of manuscript production and imperial library patronage sponsored by this dynasty at its zenith. Timurid libraries and book collections expanded enormously in terms of quantity and attained new heights of quality and refinement.

Multiple intersecting factors coalesced to catalyze this unrivaled flourishing of book arts and accumulation of manuscripts. While Timurid patronage was fueled partly by genuine cultural passions, political motivations also came into play. Rulers lavishly sponsored scholarly and artistic endeavors to augment their prestige, while indulging in courtly one-upmanship through conspicuous support of libraries and scriptoria.

The Timurid elite transformed their libraries into thriving workshops actively generating manuscripts, hosting the era's finest painters, calligraphers, illuminators,

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and exclusivity of the library reflected its role as a strategic asset for the Nizari Ismailis under Hassan Sabbah's leadership and control (translator's note).

<sup>51</sup> Rajabi, *Ketabkhaneh dar Iran*, 2002.

bookbinders and other artisans. Exquisite books were produced in the libraries of Herat established by Gowhar Shad, Shah Rukh, and Hussain Bayqara, who recruited the leading masters of the day, such as Behzad, Mirak Naqqash, and Sultan Ali Mashhadi.

Likewise, Baysonqor's library cultivated an unrivaled collection through the efforts of its director, the celebrated calligrapher Ja'far Tabrizi. Under enlightened patronage, these artistic hubs generated outstanding specimens of book arts that defined new pinnacles of technical mastery. Chief among the era's cultural achievements were the imperial manuscripts prepared for rulers, which stand out for their artistic splendor.

While the Timurid court boasted innumerable personages with literary, artistic, and scholarly prowess, luminaries like Ali Shir Navai hold pride of place for shaping the court's intellectual life. The wide-ranging erudition and prolific output of Navai and his peers provided much of the substance that was beautifully encapsulated in coveted manuscripts.

On the whole, the cultural blossoming under the Timurids represented a golden age not just for Khorasan, but for the broader Persianate world as an active cultural center. The quantity, variety, and beauty of books produced during this century-long period remained unsurpassed until the rise of the Safavids and Mughals. Timurid legacies endured through the dispersal of their manuscripts across later dynasties. However, no successor could replicate the courtly environment of patronage, creativity, and competition that spawned such a vibrant manuscript culture.

For approximately a century, the Timurid realms fostered a singularly thriving milieu for the accumulation and production of manuscripts, generating treasures that stand out for their splendor even within the overall cultural brilliance of medieval Islamic civilization. The Timurid era produced some of the most voluminous and most beautifully embellished library holdings, leaving a timeless mark on Persianate cultural heritage.