

The solution of many conundrums related to Khvandamir's general history Habib al-Siyar fi Akhbar Afrad al-Bashar: A case study

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Abstract

Khvandamir's general history Habib al-Siyar fi Akhbar Afrad al-Bashar, finished for the first time in Iran in 1524 and later on revised by the author in India, has been regarded as the most important historiographical work of the late Timurid as well as the early Safavid and Mughal periods (16th century) by modern scholarship. As such, it has been mainly valued for historical information it contains on political, economic and social issues of these periods. This article proposes to consider the Habib al-Siyar as an historiographical narrative in its own right. In doing so, it tackles a number of questions directly related to the author's religio-political attitudes which have remained unanswered to date. I hope, in presenting two of the oldest extant manuscripts of this work, dating back to the 1520s and 1530s, to advance a study which highlights and critically analyses the historiographical implications of Khvandamir's work, which the author wrote for a Shi'i Safavid audience in Iran and a couple of years later as a later edition, for a mostly Sunni Mughal audience in India.

Keywords: Habib al-Siyar, Khvandamir, historiographical work, conundrums

Introduction:

Habib al-Siyar fi Akhbar Afrad al-Bashar, a historical work written by Ghiyas al-Din Khvandamir (d. 942/1535-1536), the former Timurid court secretary employed by the Safavids in Herat in the 1520s, is generally considered to be the most important historical source for the first two decades of Safavid rule in Iran and Central Asia. Scholars working on the history of the late Timurid and early Safavid era have paid close and remarkable attention to Habib al-Siyar, seeking to answer political, economic and religious questions.

Regrettably, when dealing with Safavid chronicles, the material dimension of history, that is, the manuscript tradition of historical narratives, is most often overlooked when an edition of a work is available ¹. This neglect is rather problematic, considering that until the middle of the 19th century, most texts in the Islamic world were handwritten manuscripts and not printed books manuscripts that were copied and recopied many times and even at times altered and realtered. In this paper, I will present an example that illuminates how a thorough study of the manuscript tradition of a historical work can change the way we see it, and consequently reshape our perceptions about the religio-political contexts of the text's production and reception. I will use the example of the chapters on early Islamic history contained in two of the oldest Habib al-Siyar manuscripts to show how history was written and rewritten in the 16th century. I argue that it is crucial to question pre-conceived notions about Habib al-Siyar as a definitive unchanging text in premodern times.

1st Case: Where and when was Habib al-Siyar fi Akhbar Afrad al-Bashur Completed?

The Persian general history Habib al-Siyar was the first historical work written under the early Safavids in Iran and, as will be elaborated in the following paragraphs, the Mughals in India². In his preface to the historical chronicle that spans from the creation of the world to the last year of Shah Isma II's rule (930/1524), Khvandamir points out that he devotes his book to his second patron, the vizier of the Safavid governor of Herat, Karim al-Din Khawajah Habib Allah Savaji Qazvini, in 930/1524.

Historical accounts from this period inform us that Habib al-Siyar was written at a time of transition in which dramatic changes occurred in history after the Sunni Timurids were replaced by the Shi'i Safavids in Iran. These radical political changes are also visibly mirrored in Khvandamir's biography, he was born under the rule of the Timurids around 880/1475 in Herat, which was first captured by the Uzbeks (913/1507), and later by the Safavids (916/1510), under whose patronage he started writing his general history. At the end of his life, he emigrated to the last surviving Timurid realm in Northern India: Babur's newly founded empire at Agra³. These historical shifts became major turning points in Khvandamir's life, which undoubtedly have influenced the writing of Habib al-Siyar. Until a few years ago, works like Habib al-Siyar had been merely regarded as veritable goldmines of 'facts' and mainly valued for the information they contained on different topics, namely political, economic, and social aspects of the Timurid and Safavid periods. Overcoming this rather positivistic method of research, today Persian chronicles are no longer regarded as records of the past showing 'what actually happened', but are perceived as multifaceted historical documents which contain a great variety of ideological and narrative elements, giving insights into the past mediated through the text.⁴

Working on Habib al-Siyar, however, remains a challenging task in the field of Islamic history as, similar to many other Persian chronicles, there is no critical edition available. The edition used by scholars worldwide was printed for the first time in 1954 in Tehran, with a preface written by Jalal al-Din Huma-i and indices by Muhammad Dabir Siyaqi.⁵ This Tehran edition is simply the typographic version of a Bombay lithograph dating back to the middle of the 19th century.⁶ Since the Bombay lithograph edition does not indicate exactly which manuscripts it drew on, one cannot trust the content of the text leaving one with more questions about the narrative when read closely.

2nd Case: Habib al-Siyar fi Akhbar Afrad al-Bashur is pro-Shi'i work or pro-Sunni?

Given that Khvandamir wrote his general history under the openly aggressive anti-Sunni Safavid rule in Herat in the 1520s, it is quite astonishing that he presents an explicitly pro-Sunni version of history in at least some parts of the historical record included in the Tehran edition. An illuminating example is part four of the first volume, which deals with the time after the Prophet Muhammad's death and his immediate successors in the 7th century, the first century of the Islamic calendar (hijrah). The Tehran edition has the following chapter heading: On the events of the time of the caliphate of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, may God be pleased with them.⁷ This clearly shows that the account on the succession of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH is given in the Sunni tradition, which indicates that there had not been any designated successor to the Prophet at the time of his death in 632.

This account does not easily fit with known official Safavid policies on religious matters as Shah Ismail and his followers did not regard Abu Bakr, Umar, and 'Uthman as Rightly Guided Caliphs and legitimate successors to prophet Muhammad". On the contrary, official Safavid records specifically emphasized depicting 'Ali as the only legitimate successor to the Prophet.

For instance, when Herat was conquered by the Safavids in 1510, the khatib (preacher) of the Friday prayer was brutally murdered in the mosque when he refused to curse the first three caliphs.⁸

The next day the entire population, elite and commoner alike, gathered in the congregational mosque, and Hafiz Zaynuddin Ziyaratgahi climbed the pulpit to read the royal proclamation.

However, despite the urging of the warriors who were at the foot of the pulpit, he did not intone the curse on the opponents of Ali ibn Abi Talib. Therefore, he was seized and killed right there in the mosque by Quli-Jan's sword, and the entire population, gripped with fear and trepidation, poured out of the mosque.⁹

Apart from the beginning of part four on the 'Rightly Guided Caliphs', there are also chapters on the merits (fazayil) of Abu Bakr, 'Umar, and 'Uthman, with frequent ben- editions after each of their names (may God be pleased with him-raziya llah 'anhu), as well as a mentioning of their honorific titles (siddiq for Abu Bakr, faroq for Umar, and zu al-nurayn for 'Uthman). This art of praise, common in Sunni tradition, is noteworthy since Khvandamir finished his chronicle under Safavid rule. Having said that, it should be mentioned that Ali is praised in more detail than his predecessors and receives more attention in the whole work. Taking into account the anti-Sunni sentiments in Safavid Herat in the 1520s, however, it is surprising that the author held the first three caliphs Abu Bakr, 'Umar, and 'Uthman, as well as Ali, in high esteem.

As Adam Jacobs mentions in his dissertation, 'Sunni and Shi'i perceptions, boundaries and affiliations in late Timurid and early Safavid Persia, the treatment of early Islamic history found in Habib al-Siyar caused confusion in modern scholarship as to the actual social and political situation in Herat at the time.¹⁰

Yet despite these attempts to appease his Twelver Shi'a readers, Khawând Amir also includes a great deal of unambiguously-Sunni material in the Habib al-Siyar that ought to have alienated them. Aside from the favorable treatment I have already mentioned that he gives to the Shi'i reviled figures of Aisha, the first three Caliphs, Talha and Zubair etc(R.A). and the Sunni alternatives to accounts that are central to the Sunni-Shi'a divide, he also incorporates a miscellany of other, lesser details that ought also to have specifically offended the Safawid ruler and his Qizilbash followers.¹¹

Reading Habib al-Siyar's chapter on the successors of Muhammad PBUH, Jacobs seems to conclude that despite the Safavid audience's displeasure with the content of the text, Khwandamir was not persecuted by Safavid officials. Trying to explain his viewpoint, Jacobs further suggests that 'the Safavids' infamous anti-Sunni policies were not in force in Herat at this time to the extent that they were in the west of Persia.¹²

Although Jacobs' considerations are based on the text of the Tehran edition of Habib al-Siyar, they are nevertheless incorrect.

The answer to the questions raised by Habib al-Siyar lies with its very beginnings in the 1520s, necessitating a return to the earliest manuscripts of the chronicle. When going through catalogues of relevant manuscript collections to examine the manuscript tradition of Habib al-Siyar, it becomes clear that there is a vast corpus of manuscripts available to the researcher today.

For the purpose of the paper at hand, I take into account the earliest ones only, that is, manuscripts written during Khvandamir's lifetime in the 1520s and 1530s. For reasons of space, and to remain within the scope of this paper, I focus on two manuscripts: one being kept at the Institute of Oriental

Manuscripts in St Petersburg (No. D77-1), and another one located in the Astan-i Quds-i Razavi Library of the Shrine of the Eighth Imām Rizā in Mashhad (No. 9468).

The former manuscript (hereafter: the Petersburg manuscript) contains volume one and two of the work, while the latter manuscript (hereafter the Mashhad manuscript) includes volume one only. The Petersburg manuscript consists of 564 folios and is of a very good quality, as can be seen in the elaborately designed headings (sarlawh) of the four parts of the volume in gold and other colors. This manuscript is clearly part of the Herati tradition of bookbinding and book illustration. The first of its two volumes was copied by a Darvish Muhammad. All on the first day of Muharram, 930 (9 November, 1523), and the second one was finished by the same scribe on 3rd Shawwal, 930 (3 August, 1524).

Thus, both volumes were copied when Khvandamir was still in Herat. The Mashhad manuscript consists of 563 folios and is not dated, but bears a muqabalah (collation note) of Khvandamir's dating back to Rajab 940 (January-February 1534) at the end of the third part of volume one. The manuscript differs in its shape from the Petersburg one and does not belong to the Herati tradition of book art. The date of 940/1534 belongs to the time when Khvandamir had already emigrated to Babur's realm in north of India and, after the emperor's death, had become the historian of his son, Humayun. The connection between Khvandamir and Babur is an interesting one, as it might throw light on the nature of Habib al-Siyar as a pro-Sunni text. As is stated by the author himself in a note later added to the first volume in the Tehran edition ¹³, Khvandamir rewrote at least parts of his chronicle in India when being present at Babur's court.

N. D. Miklukho-Maklai's opinion:

As suggested by the Russian scholar N. D. Miklukho-Maklai some decades ago (1967, 1975. P. 110-116), it has been assumed that this later version of Khvandamir's mainly consists of alterations made to the last part of his chronicle on the Timurid and Safavid dynasties. For the reshaping of this part, Khvandamir apparently had the chance to get access to Babur's notes for his famous autobiography, Babur-namah. However, when examining the Petersburg and Mashhad manuscripts, it becomes clear that also many parts of Habib al-Siyar on early Islamic history were changed by Khvandamir himself. While the chapter heading on the Rightly Guided Caliphs that was found in the Tehran edition can be seen in the Mashhad manuscript ¹⁴, the Petersburg manuscript contains a slightly different heading. In this manuscript ¹⁵, there is no mention of the Rightly Guided Caliphs but only one: All. His predecessors, the first three Rightly Guided Caliphs in the Sunni tradition of Islam, Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman, are referred to as 'rulers', or 'people in power', which

does not give them any particular legitimacy as Islamic rulers. The full heading in the Peters- burg manuscript reads as follows: 'On the events of the time of the rulers Abū Bakr, Umar, and Uthman, and the caliphate of the commander of the faithful, All, peace be upon him' (Dar zikr-i vaqayi-i ayyām-i ivālat-i [in other manuscripts: tasalliq-i] Abū Bakr va Umar va 'Uthman va bayan-i halat-i ayyam khilafat-i amir al-mu'minin Ali alayhi al-tahīyah va al-salam).

This heading, in addition to the narrative of the Petersburg manuscript chapters, indicates no account of early Islamic history based on the Sunni tradition of Islam at all. Instead, the text of Habib al-Siyar obviously derives from the Shi'i tradition where Ali b. Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet PBUH, is regarded as the only rightful successor to the Prophet Muhammad PBUH and is, according to Twelver Shi'ism, the first of the twelve Imams, whose line ended with Muhammad al-Mahdi in the 9th century. In addition to that, there are neither honorific titles (like siddiq, faruq, and zu al-nurayn) nor benedictions when the names of Abu Bakr, Umar, and 'Uthman, mentioned in the text. Only 'All receives the benediction 'alayhi al-salam (peace be upon him) and the title amir al-mu'minin (commander of the faithful), which, in the Sunni tradition, is used for all four successors of Muhammad. Reading these chapters on early Islamic history gives a very different, Shi'i outlook of the events which took place in the 7th century. It is not surprising, then, that chapters as the one on the merits (fazail) of Uthman¹⁶ depicting him as rightful successor of the second caliph 'Umar and pious Muslim ruler, are simply not found in the Petersburg manuscript¹⁷, but are included in the Mashhad manuscript only.¹⁸

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the Petersburg manuscript copied in Safavid Herat in the year 930/1523-1524 does not contain a great deal of unambiguously-Sunni material', which Jacobs found in the Tehran edition. Instead, in this manuscript, we find an account of early caliphate history that clearly comes from the Shi'i tradition of Islam and fits perfectly into the official frame of religious policy at the time of Shah Isma II. As I have argued, there are two strands of manuscripts: one belongs to Khvandamir's time in Herat and bears a Shi'i outlook of history, and the other one goes back to his time in India, bearing a Sunni version of events related to the prophet and his successors. When contemplating religio-political aspects that Habib al-Siyar dealt with, therefore, one should keep in mind that there are different versions of the text. The Tehran edition does not represent a text that was written by Khvandamir under Safavid rule, but a version of history that was written by him when serving the Sunni Timurid prince Babur in India. Due to the intensive changes made to the Herati version, the Indian version might be called the first Mughal history book in its own right. Jacobs suggestion that Safavid politics in the eastern part of their realm were less strict than other places and gave

Khvandamir a certain space for expressing his own religious convictions, is therefore null and void. Habib al-Siyar remains a most interesting text, with two versions, Herati and Mughal, which exist in hundreds of manuscripts. It becomes clear that although a chronicle under the title Habib al-Siyar was held in high esteem in the premodern Islamic world for more than 300 years before print became available in the 19th century, its text had never been one and the same. Therefore, to understand a historiographical work like Khvandamir's Habib al-Siyar, it is extremely important to take a careful and thorough examination of its manuscript tradition. This has to go much further than merely trying to reconstruct the original version of a text or, even more problematic, basing one's research on a text available in an obscure edition. Rather, we have to ask more questions about the ways in which these texts were written and rewritten in premodern times to better understand the statements made in them. In doing so, it becomes clear that Khvandamir himself wrote two quite different versions of his chronicle, the first one for a (pro-Shi'i) Safavid audience in Iran and the later one for a (pro-Sunni) Timurid audience in India. A detailed study of the manuscript tradition of Habib al-Siyar might be the first step forwards learning more about the audience and readership in the 16th century and later on.



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References

- ¹ Even publications on the Habib al-Siyar, such as Bashir (2014; 2015), and Quinn (2015), in which both authors deal with historiographical and religio-political aspects of the work, have shown no awareness of its complicated manuscript tradition.
- ² Amir Sayyid Sadr al-Din Sultan Ibrahim Amīnī Haravi's (d. 941/1535) Futuhat-i shāhī, begun in 925/1519 for Shah Ismā'īl himself, was finished in 937/1531 only. For further details on its composition date, see Trausch 2015. P. 50
- ³ Accounts of Khvandamir's life are given by Hidayat Hosain 1940. P. i-xxxvi; Szuppe 1992. P. 55-57; Jacobs 1999, P.104-109; Calmard 2000. P. 358-361; Conermann 2002. P. 92-96, and Jusupova 2006. P. 10-26.
- ⁴ See the still very stimulating books of Meisami (1999) on Persian chronicles until the 12th century, and of Quinn (2000) on Safavid historiography.
- ⁵ (it has been reprinted since then several times) (Khvandamir 1333 [1954]; a partly translation of this is Khvandamir 1994).
- ⁶ (Khvandamir 1273 [1857]).

⁷ (Dar zikr-i vaqöyi-i ayyam-i khilafat-i khulafa-i rashidin rizvan Allah 'alayhim ajma In) (Vol. 1. P. 444)

⁸ (see Calmard 1993. P. 121-125; Mitchell 2009. P. 26-27, and Szuppe 1992. P. 77-78):

⁹ Habib al-Siyar, Tehran ed. (Kavandamir 1333 [1954]. Vol. 4. P. 515), transl. by Wheeler M. Thackston (Khvandamir 1994. Vol. 2. P. 592).

¹⁰ (1999. P. 163-164)

¹¹ (Jacobs 1999. P. 163-164)

¹² (Ibid. P. 165)

¹³ (P. 686)

¹⁴ (fol. 425b)

¹⁵ (fol. 204a)

¹⁶ (Tehran edition. Vol. 1. P. 516),

¹⁷ (fol. 232a)

¹⁸ (fol. 494b-497a)