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Glimpses at the cultural life of 19th century Khiva

To Edward Tryjarski

*bayat kimke birse bu edgü kılık
bu edgü kılık birle edgü yorık
(Kutadgu Bilig, ed. R.R. Arat, I.
Istanbul 1947, line 1978)*

Armin V á m b é r y (1832–1913), the self-styled false dervish and later professor of oriental languages at the University of Pest, like most of the travellers and envoys to 19th century Central Asia, had not much love lost for the Khanate of Khiva nor its incumbent khan, “who in appearance was so fearfully dissolute, and who presents in every feature of his countenance the real picture of an enervated, imbecile, and savage tyrant”, to whose “might and bloodthirstiness gloomy superstition imposes some limits” (Vámbéry 1864: 130). However, V á m b é r y felt obliged to admit: “Ah, the environs of Khiva with its small courts, in the form of strongholds shaded by lofty poplars, with its fine meadows and rich fields, seems to me still, after I have visited the most charming countries of Europe, as beautiful as ever.”¹

This was in 1863, during the reign of Sayyid Muḥammad K h ā n (1856–1864), whose predecessors seem to have left their contemporaries with equally mixed feelings. Count N.N. M u r a v ’ j o v (1794–1860), who visited Khiva in 1819 as a

¹ V á m b é r y 1864: 121. For a recent assessment of V á m b é r y ’s views of Central Asian culture, and more generally Islam, see Conrad 243–262.

Russian envoy, expressed both praise and disgust for this exotic backwater of history, which seemed at the time to promise some good business for Russian export interests. For the khan in power, Muḥammad Raḥīm Khān I (1806–1825), the father of Vámbéry's sinister host, he had the following compliments: "A clear intellect, quick perception, ambition, monstrous cruelty, love of power, enterprise, intrepidity, extraordinary determination, covetousness, and suspiciousness. [...] In comparison with his countrymen he may be called a learned man, for besides his mother tongue, he both speaks and reads Arabic and Persian, and has studied astrology and medicine. [...] The greater part of his time is passed in the steppe, hawking or hunting, [...]" According to Murav'jov, he also loved checkers and the company of learned and pious men.²

The English officer and diplomat Alexander Burnes (1805–1841), who in 1832 visited the land of the Turkmens, commented afterwards in his report that the subjects of Allāh Quli Khān (1825–1842), the son and successor of Murav'jov's host, were "at best [...] but an organized banditti, protected by the strength of their country" (Burnes II 384) and finds it "impossible to form any but a vague estimate of the revenue of Khiva: little of it is derived from lawful sources, and the Khan supports his army and himself chiefly at the expense of his neighbors."³ No less unattractive than the khans' personality and rule seemed the trade and crafts,⁴ architecture,⁵ and way of life⁶ of the capital to most of the visitors.

These and other charming European pictures of 19th century Khiva can be supplemented by the impressions of an Oriental visitor to the khanate, the Persian envoy in 1851, Riẓā Quli Khān (1800–1871), who, as a refined courtier of the Qajar shahs and a well-read shiite, felt that both the khan and his dignitaries and tribal leaders lacked not only manners and *savoir-vivre* but even knowledge of the fundamental beliefs and regulations of Islam and its history.⁷ Most objectionable to all visitors, however, seemed the Khivans' employment of slave labor.⁸

² Murav'yov 128, see also 120–126. For more favorable impressions see Helmersen 63–64, Abbott I 87–88, Shakespear 712 (for Allāh Quli Khān, 1825–1842), Burnaby 308–309, 323 with a reference to unfriendly Russian newspaper remarks, Landsdell II 261–263, Moser 253–256 (for Muḥammad Raḥīm Khān II, 1864–1910).

³ Burnes II 387. Burnes had not been to Khiva, but expresses what seems to have been a common opinion at the time.

⁴ Murav'yov 144–145, Landsdell II 284–287.

⁵ Murav'yov 162, Abbott I 75, Danilevskij 69, Abrosimov 88, Vámbéry 1864: 329, Landsdell II 288, Moser 250.

⁶ Murav'yov 166–168, Abbott I 75–77, 86, 147–152.

⁷ Riẓā Qouly Khan 108–109, 115–116, 128–130.

⁸ On the fate of Persian and Russian slaves see Murav'yov 57–59, Helmersen 34–37, Abbott I 104, 150, Shakespear 715–718, Abrosimov 93, Riẓa Qouly Khan 85–87, 110–111; Vámbéry 1868:201–202, Moser 93, Riẓa Qouly Khan 85–87, 110–111; Vámbéry 1868: 201–202, Moser 246–249.

The assertions of contemporary observers leave a contradictory picture. Prejudice, fear, lack of insight and a sentiment of superiority in regard to the "barbarian Asiatics", quite common at the time, might have dictated their general verdict, although individual pleasant impressions are not withheld. Credit is usually given to the Khivans' skills in irrigation and agriculture in general⁹ and occasionally to their hospitality and goodwill.¹⁰ Moreover, the khans are sometimes praised for their shrewd politics and the skill with which they kept together an unruly and basically incompatible population.¹¹ None of these observers has much to say about cultural life in a broad sense, except for a word here and there on local education and scholarship¹² or literature¹³ and music.¹⁴

These casual remarks of envoys and travellers may reflect a lack of interest or opportunity to get acquainted with what there was of a Khivan cultural life. The vision of the Orient of the time had more to do with Persia or India than with the austere charms of this isolated piece of land. A glimpse at some indigenous sources and at today's visible vestiges of cultural creativity might provide a somewhat more equitable impression.

Since parts of the archives of the Khivan khans were first rediscovered in 1936 in the Leningrad Saltikov-Ščedrin Library and then analyzed by P.P. Ivanov, M.Yu. Yuldašev, Yu. Bregel' and others¹⁵, we know that Burnes and other observers were wrong when they thought that little of the khanate's revenue was derived from lawful sources. This research has shown that Khiva had quite a sophisticated administration. The khans disposed of regularly kept *defters* of revenue and expenditure in which the various dignitaries and institutions, administrative units, towns, villages and tribes are listed. Details are available on the maintenance of mosques and *medreses* of the whole country, together with

⁹ Murav'yov 46, 142-143, Helmersen 6-11, 50-53, Shakespear 702, 714, Vámbéry 1864: 343; Vámbéry 1868: 183-185; Landsdell II 266-269, Moser 235. A number of beautifully kept gardens created as summer residences for the various members of the ruling house, dignitaries and Turkmen chiefs were found in the vicinity of the town of Khiva and all over the khanate (Riza Qouly Khan 70, 72, 77, 138, 180, Helmersen 20-21). In the opinion of Rizā Quli Khān (87, 127) only a few gardens in Persia could compare with Allāh Quli Khān's palace and garden in Rafanik.

¹⁰ Abbott I 36, 136, Vámbéry 1864: 130, Landsdell II 310.

¹¹ Vámbéry 1873: 314 for Allāh Quli Khān and Muḥammad Amīn Khān.

¹² Murav'yov 69-70, Abbott I 88, 119-120, 141, 148-152, 167, Vámbéry 1864: 132, 337, Landsdell II 290-292, Mac Gahan 301.

¹³ Shakespear 717, Vámbéry 1864: 347; Landsdell II (261-262) sympathizes with the khan's distress about the loss of his library which was confiscated by the Russians following the conquest of Khiva (1873), cf. *Firdaws*, introduction 37-38.

¹⁴ Vámbéry 1864: 347, Vámbéry 1868: 73-74, 274, Landsdell II 258, 308-309, Moser 259-260.

¹⁵ Bregel' 1966 gives an outline of the fate of this and other parts of the archives, a description of their main holdings and of the relevant publications.

their personnel, on *vaqfs* and their *mutavallīs*. *Defters* and documents reflect the various taxes levied on different types of land holdings, on agricultural products, animals, shops and caravans, they show customs duties, fees for economic and legal transactions and the material support for the Turkmen tribes.¹⁶ In addition, the archives contain diplomatic correspondences, royal decrees, reports, petitions and contracts.¹⁷

Another source of income — and expenditure — can indeed be seen in the frequent campaigns of the khans against their sedentary and nomadic neighbors as described in the huge dynastic history *Firdaws al-Iqbāl* by the Khivan scholar and *mūrāb* (supervisor of the irrigation system) Mūnis (1778–1829) and his nephew and continuer Āgahī (1809–1874), of which we now possess a beautiful edition of 1200 printed pages by Yuri Bregel. Nine manuscripts of this monumental work have come to light.¹⁸ It contains the story of Khwarezm/Khiva from Adam to the second and long-reigning khan of the Qongrat dynasty, Muḥammad Raḥīm I (1806–1825), i.e. Count Murav'jov's host and one of the four eminent khans among the altogether nine Qongrat khans of the 19th century. Āgahī later composed five additional chronicles which comprise the reigns of the seven successive Khivan khans between the years 1825–1872, that is, one year before the Russian occupation in 1873. Between two and seven copies of these five chronicles have been found.¹⁹ Together with *Firdaws al-Iqbāl*, they are valued by modern scholars in the field as witnesses to Khiva's high standard of historiography in the Chaghatay language.²⁰

Both Mūnis and Āgahī were most diligent annalists of their lords' military exploits. They describe their almost annual campaigns against the rebellious Turkmen tribes, the Qaraqalpaqs and Qazaqs, Persians and Bukharians (*Firdaws*, *Materialy passim*). Heaps of spoils and numbers of slain and enslaved enemies are taken account of (*Firdaws* 601, 684, 708, *Materialy* 453). They report on the dispatch and reception of envoys (*Firdaws* 813, 860–861, 1049–50, 1105–06), the khan's hunting parties two or three times a year (*Firdaws* 554–579, 643–644, 1050, *Materialy* 449) and his frequent visits to the graves of holy men (*Firdaws* 565–572, 621). Eminent 'ulamā' and venerable shaykhs are occasionally mentio-

¹⁶ Ivanov 1937, Ivanov 1939, Ivanov 1940; a bibliography of Yuldašev's work is given in Bregel' 1972; Bregel' 1961a, Bregel' 1966, Bregel' 1972.

¹⁷ Bregel' 1972: 69–71. The archival materials, mostly of the Qongrat period (19th c.), are written in Chaghatay and other Turkic languages, Persian and Tadjik, see Bregel' 1972: 71–72.

¹⁸ *Firdaws*, introduction 43–44. For the biographies of Mūnis and Āgahī, see *ibid.* 3–12; cf. Hofman, vol. 4: 199–205 and vol. 2: 48–52.

¹⁹ *Firdaws*, introduction 11–12. Excerpts of Mūnis' and Āgahī's works, mainly descriptions of campaigns, were published in Russian translation in *Materialy* 355–638.

²⁰ Eckmann, PTF II 387–390, Bregel 1982: 357 citing W. Barthold who valued Khivan historiography higher than that of Bukhara and Khoqand (cf. *Stori/Bregel'* II 1108–1201).

ned in passing: They are at the khan's side during campaigns,²¹ they assist in the khan's accession to the throne (*Materialy* 551), they participate in diplomatic talks (*Materialy* 458, 588, 592) and sumptuous meals, and they receive robes of honor and other royal marks of distinction (*Firdaws* 554–558, 720, 759–760, 799–801, *Materialy* 545). 'Ulamā' travel to Istanbul,²² Mekka,²³ Teheran (Riza Qouly Khan 119). St. Petersburg (*Materialy* 594) and Astrakhan (Helmersen 113). But the great epilogue to *Firdaws al-Iqbāl* which Mūnis intended to devote to the prominent 'ulamā', shaykhs, holy men, poets and artists, in short, the *fuḏalā'* of Eltüzer Khān's reign, was regrettably never written (*Firdaws*, introduction 16).

According to Bregel, Mūnis and Āgahī used a simple style in some parts (*Firdaws*, introduction 33), but they were also capable of writing in a highly ornate language, interspersing the text with verses in the style of 'Alī Shīr Navā'ī. And they seem to have had an audience — however small — for their sophisticated historical compositions in the well-established Islamic literary tradition. However, later khans and dignitaries ordered at least three other scholars, Ish-Murād Ākhūnd (1861),²⁴ Thanā'ī (1809/10–1872),²⁵ and Bayānī (ca. 1858/59–1923)²⁶ to epitomize and simplify their work in order to make it readable to a wider circle of aesthetes.

But the khans were obviously not only interested in immortalizing their own glorious reigns, and at the same time in asserting "their genealogical and historical connection with the house of Chingiz."²⁷ The four most prominently culture-minded of them (Muḥammad Raḥīm I, 1806–25, Allāh Qulī, 1825–42, Muḥammad Amīn, 1846–55, Muḥammad Raḥīm II, 1864–1910) had numerous Arabic and Persian classics translated into Chaghatay, among them the histories of aṭ-Ṭabarī (ca. 839–923; cf. Hofman, vol. 6:26), al-Mas'ūdī (d. 945; cf. Hofman, vol. 3:150, vol. 4:124, vol. 6:35), Ibn al-Athīr (1160–1233; cf. Hofman, vol. 3:226, 273, 281–282), Mīrkhwānd (d. 1498)²⁸, Sharaf ad-Dīn 'Alī Yazdī (d. 1434/35; Hofman, vol. 6:135) and of the historian of India, Firishta (ca. 1572–ca. 1623/24; cf. Hofman, vol. 3:49). Poetic works translated by the order of the khans

²¹ *Materialy* 486, 535, 545; the *shaykh al-islām* seems to have participated regularly (see *ibid.* index s.v. "shejkh-ul'islam").

²² Vámbéry 1864: 122, 124, 134, *Osmanlı devleti* document No. 56.

²³ Riza Qouly Khan 119, Burnaby 299, 318.

²⁴ *Tārīkh-i Sayyid Muḥammadkhānī* composed in 1861–62, see Hofmann, vol. 3: 333–334.

²⁵ *Tawārīkh-i Khwārazmshāhīya*, composed in 1864; for an evaluation of this work see Bregel 1978; cf. Hofman, vol. 5: 163–164.

²⁶ *Shajara-i khwārazmshāhī*, composed in 1910, see Bregel' 1961b; cf. Hofman, vol. 2: 240–243.

²⁷ Bregel 1982, here 383; *Firdaws*, introduction 31–32.

²⁸ In his conversation with the Persian envoy, Rizā Qulī Khān, Muḥammad Amīn Khān mentions Mīrkhwānd's *Rawzat aṣ-Ṣafā* as a source of his historical knowledge (104). According to the same envoy (114), the khan had given 2000 *tuman* to the *dīvān begi*, Mollā Muḥammad Nazar, for his translation of this work. Cf. also Hofman, vol. 4: 134–136, vol. 5: 125.

were the *Shāhnāma* by Firdausī (d. ca. 1025/26; cf. Hofman, vol. 2:262; vol. 3:45–46) and works by Niẓāmī (d. 1209), Sa‘dī (d. 1292), Hīlālī (d. 1529). Fuẓūlī (d. 1556; cf. Hofman, vol. 4:144) and others. Among the religious works were the classics by al-Jazūlī (d. ca. 1470; cf. Hofman, vol. 3:7) and al-Mu‘īnī (d. 1501/2; cf. Hofman, vol. 4:193). Mūnis and particularly Āgahī were involved in a number of these translation projects,²⁹ but the names of other translators occur also more than once.³⁰

Poetry was also much *en vogue* at the Khivan court, although modern scholarship is not too much impressed (Eckmann, PTF II 388–391) with the talent of the no less than 44 poets that can be made out for 19th century Khiva.³¹ Muḥammad Raḥīm Khān II (1864–1910) was not only a collector of manuscripts (Landsdell II 261–262), he also wrote verses under the penname of “Fīrūz”. Over the four decades of his reign, he gathered around him more than 30 poets in his special court circle of poetic wits. Verses of 32 of them he had collected in a special volume entitled *Majma‘-i sī shu‘arā’-i shāhī-i pirau-i Fīrūz*.³² Āgahī compiled another anthology of Chaghatay poetry entitled “Bayāz-i Āgahī wa-Fīrūz”, in which he did not hesitate to include some verses of the rival *in poeticis* Amir of Khoqand, Muḥammad ‘Umar Khān (ca. 1785/6–ca. 1822/3; cf. Hofman, vol. 2:52). It speaks for the khan’s modesty that he did not have his own divan (Hofman, vol. 3:56) lithographed in the government press he had himself founded, but rather that of the court historian Mūnis.³³

Muḥammad Raḥīm Khān II (1864–1910), the poet, lost his power to the Russians, who made him pay considerable sums in war indemnities. But like his more fortunate predecessors, he invested in his capital’s urban development. He had the harem of the older of his two palaces (Kunya Ark, 17th c.) enlarged and a *madrasa* built in his name (1871).³⁴ But the boom in Khiva’s architecture, that we so much admire today, began during his namesake grandfather’s reign, in the first quarter of the century, after the devastated city had been rebuilt at the

²⁹ *Firdaws*, introduction 7–8 for Mūnis’ translation of the *Rawzat aṣ-Ṣafā*, 9–11 for Āgahī’s translation of works by Niẓāmī, Sa‘dī, Jāmī, Hīlālī and others. Between Bregel’s and Hofman’s data, the translation of about two dozen works can be traced.

³⁰ E.g. Dāmollā Ḥabīballāh Ākhūnd in the reign of Muḥammad Raḥīm Khān II, see Hofman, vol. 3: 49, 150.

³¹ A perusal of Hofman’s *Turkish Literature* led to this number.

³² Hofman, vol. 3: 54–63, Eckmann, PTF II 390–391.

³³ Vámbéry 1892: 198, published in 1292/1875.

³⁴ Pugatschenkova 101, 108, where she lists ten additional *madrasas* that were built during the reign of this khan. Pugatschenkova so far has the most detailed description of the art and architecture of the old town (iĉan qal‘a) of Khiva. See also Fabritsky-Shmeliov 5–18 with a documentation of 135 photographs, Knobloch 139–143, Belinskaja 380–383, Pander 220–231. Since the dates of construction given in the various publications differ in many cases, Pugatschenkova’s dates are adopted here. As the relevant studies remain rather descriptive, further comparative research is needed.

end of the 18th century by the *inaq* Muḥammad Amīn (d. 1790). Muḥammad Raḥīm I (1806–1825) had the palace Kunya Ark enlarged, a mint established,³⁵ constructed the eastern gate of the city, Palwān Darwaza, with its shopping mall (1806/07 to 1832/33, Pugatschenkowa 98), the splendid Qutluḡ Murād Inaq Madrasa (1804–12, Pugatschenkowa 92, 98, 110) and a stone bridge across the Khan's channel at Khiva (1815, Helmerson 10). Most important of all, the mausoleum of the local saint Pahlawān Maḥmūd (1247–1325) was reconstructed and enlarged (1810–25).³⁶

Muḥammad Raḥīm Khān's successor, Allāh Quli Khān (1825–42) probably initiated the most brilliant period of Khiva's urban development, while scoring one military success after the other. He again embellished and enlarged the palace Kunya Ark (1825–1842, Pugatschenkowa 101), founded the Allāh Quli Khān Madrasa (1834/35)³⁷ and built the rich new palace Ṭash Ḥauli (1830–38)³⁸ and a number of palaces outside of the capital (Riza Qouly Khan 137). The Aq mosque (1838–42, Pugatschenkowa 120), a bazaar (*tim*) and a karavansaray are also to his name (1832–33).³⁹ His son, and one of his successors, Muḥammad Amīn Khān (1846–55) is credited for the revival of Kunya Urganj as a trade center and for the construction of the largest of Khiva's *madrasas*, the Muḥammad Amīn Madrasa (1851–52) with the adjacent famous blue Kalta Minār (1855).⁴⁰ According to the archival documents, other members of the ruling house and dignitaries also endowed mosques, *madrasas*, mausoleums and trade facilities (Ivanov 1940: 143–155).

As to their decoration, all of these architectural monuments display a high level of craftsmanship in the applied arts. Stonecarving, woodwork and ceramic tiles, paintings on walls and ceilings as well as calligraphic inscriptions are of a fine quality and bear witness to a distinctly Khivan style of the 19th century.⁴¹

Research on the Khanate of Khiva and its Central Asian neighbors as pre-modern states has just begun. To dismiss them as barbaric robber states was

³⁵ Pugatschenkowa 99, 101, Hofman, vol. 3: 11 cites a chronogram on the construction of the mint in 1828–29, although it is usually attributed to the reign of Muḥammad Raḥīm Khān I.

³⁶ Pugatschenkowa 120–122. See also Vámbéry 1864: 331–332, Riza Qouly Khan 117, 132–136. According to *Firdaws* (1186), the khan was buried there, because he was particularly devoted to this most eminent of Khivan saints. Abu l-Ghāzī Bahādur Khān (1644–63), his son Muḥammad Anūsha Khān (1663–74) and Allāh Quli Khān are also buried here.

³⁷ Pugatschenkowa 108 (where she lists two additional *madrasas* constructed during the reign of this khan), 118.

³⁸ Pugatschenkowa, 131, 133. For a contemporary description, see Riza Qouly Khan 72–75.

³⁹ Pugatschenkowa 120, 124; cf. Vámbéry 1864: 332–331.

⁴⁰ Pugatschenkowa 98, 118, 120; cf. Vámbéry 1864: 332–333. For contemporary photographs (1873–1896) of Khivan life and architecture, see *Khiva*.

⁴¹ Pugatschenkowa 81, 97–99, 122, Belinskaja 381–383, 393–395 (for pottery, metalwork and jewellery).

perhaps a handy political argument in the colonialist race of the 19th century. When the agenda of Khiva's past is re-examined by researchers, it might be helpful to overcome the simplistic concept of decline by combining the various source materials available for analysis within the framework of political, socio-economic, literary and art history, in a comparative approach that has proven useful in recent research work on Middle Eastern states on the threshold of modernization.

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