

# Balkh and the Plains of Turkestan

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*Photographs by Ruth Harold*

If I had to choose a single place to represent all the glories and calamities of Central Asia, I would pick the oasis of Balkh in northern Afghanistan. Balkh was old long before Alexander captured it, and over the course of 2500 years has seen more than a score of conquerors come and pass on. The Arabs, impressed by Balkh's antiquity and wealth, called it Umm-al-belad, the mother of cities. When the Silk Road was the chief artery of commerce between East and West, Balkh was second to none. But then came Chingis Khan, who wreaked upon it the utter devastation that has made the Mongols' name a byword for barbarism. Balkh never fully recovered, and eventually faded into a village; the seat of government shifted to scruffy but vigorous Mazar-i Sharif, site of a revered shrine. What the visitor comes to see in Balkh is chiefly the melting walls of the old city, enclosing a vast field of rubble and wreckage; it is a place of memories rather than monuments. But for those who savor the melancholy pleasure of ruins, there is no more evocative site between Xian and Trebizond.

Why here, on the drab plains of Turkestan between the Hindu Kush mountains and the river Amu Darya (Oxus)? At one level, geography holds the key. Balkh sits on an alluvial fan built up by the Balkab River, well suited to irrigation. The region called Bactria in ancient times was renowned for its grapes, oranges, water lilies and later sugar cane, and an excellent breed of camels too. To this day, some of the

world's most luscious melons come from nearby Kunduz. Most significantly, several natural trade routes intersect at Balkh. From there, caravans could follow the well-watered foot of the mountains westward towards Herat and Iran, or across the Oxus to Samarkand and China [Fig. 1]. The valley of the Balkab still gives passage to Bamiyan and thence to Kabul; of all the routes across the Hindu Kush, this is the most westerly and the easiest. But geography is at most opportunity, not destiny; and the greatness of Balkh owes even more to those

inventive Iranian peoples who promoted craftsmanship and trade, built cities and wrote poetry all across ancient Central Asia. On the down side, Balkh was usually rich rather than powerful, and became the envy and the prize of more warlike neighbors.

Always a place of importance, the province of Bactria and its capital city flash into view in the fragmentary annals of historians and travelers. Bactria first appears on the list of the conquests of Darius, who incorporated it into the Achaemenid empire. Tradition claims that Zoroaster taught here and died here, in the sixth century BCE, or even earlier; the Zoroastrian faith became the state religion of the Achaemenids, and later of the Sasanians. Alexander took Bactria in 329 BCE, married the princess Roxane, and made the region his base for further conquest and for the amalgamation of the Greek and Iranian civilizations. That vision, far in

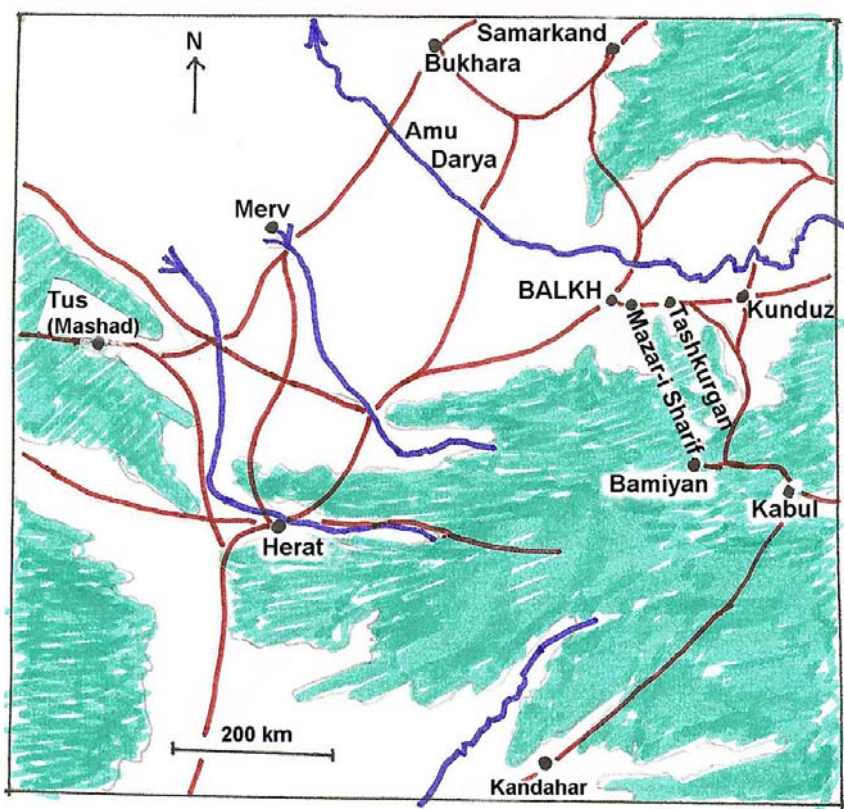


Fig. 1. Balkh and its neighbors. Copyright © 2007 Frank Harold.

advance of the times, survived for another three centuries in the small Graeco-Bactrian kingdoms that thrived and quarreled on both sides of the Hindu Kush. The ruins of one of their cities have been found at Ai Khanum, close by the River Oxus. They wrote no history but contributed greatly to the development of Gandharan architecture and sculpture, and they minted the most gorgeous silver coins of the ancient world.

Bactria reappears with its annexation by the Kushans (129 BCE), whose large and powerful empire stretched from Central Asia deep into India. This was a fortunate era, when the lands through which the caravan routes passed were divided among a few stable states which submergered their differences in the interests of trade; and Balkh flourished at the crossroads, as a depot and trans-shipment point for the world's luxuries. 'From the Roman Empire the caravans brought gold and silver vessels and wine; from Central Asia and China rubies, furs, aromatic gums, drugs, raw silk and embroidered silks; from India spices, cosmetics, ivory and precious gems of infinite variety' (Dupree 1967, 71). With the merchants came monks preaching the new religion of Buddhism, and Balkh became a center of worship and learning, famous for its temples and monasteries.

By the time the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang passed through Balkh on his way to the fountainhead of Buddhism in India (630 CE), the city had become part of the Sasanian empire. Sasanian viceroys ruled from Balkh, and a splendid fire-temple had been erected in the suburbs. The bazaars were still humming with trade, the countryside fertile, and a hundred Buddhist temples and monasteries testified to the continued vitality of Buddhism. Xuanzang was particularly impressed by the wealth of the chief monastery and its associated stupa. But he noted also that the



*Fig. 2. Balkh. The Timurid walls of the Bala Hissar. Photograph copyright © 1970 Ruth Harold.*

building had recently been looted, and that the monks had become lax in the performance of their duties; perhaps he sensed that the glory days of Buddhism were over. There was frequent strife with the Turkic nomads across the Oxus, and the first Arab incursions were just fifteen years ahead.

The times that followed were turbulent ones in Central Asia. Balkh changed hands repeatedly among Arab, Persian and Turkic rulers, and was sacked more than once, yet it continued to prosper. The Arab geographers Yaqubi and Moqaddasi (9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries) depict Balkh as it was under Samanid rule, when Bukhara was the center of power. A large and bustling city of mud brick some three square miles in area, it held perhaps 200,000 persons. Mud-brick walls surrounded the city, pierced by seven gates. Buddhist and Zoroastrian temples had been destroyed; instead, a splendid Friday mosque occupied the center, and many more mosques were scattered among the dwellings. The city was home, not only to Persians and Turks but also to communities of Jews and Indian traders; a Nestorian metropolitan had his see in Balkh. It nourished poets and scholars, lawyers and even geographers and astronomers. But peace was a sometime thing; even when Balkh came under Seljuk rule for

over a century, the nomads were never far away.

Catastrophe struck in 1220, when Chingis Khan chose to make an example of Balkh, perhaps as punishment for an uprising. One hundred thousand Mongol horsemen embarked on an orgy of slaughter and destruction that left nothing standing; a few weeks later they returned to pick off the handful of wretched survivors. Balkh remained in ruins for a century and was so described by Marco Polo (1275) and by Ibn Batuta (1333); and yet revival must have been under way, for Timur (Tamerlane) chose Balkh to proclaim his accession to the throne (1359). Timur and his successors favored Balkh; they restored the walls [Fig. 2] and endowed the city with quite splendid buildings, some of which survive.

Balkh remained worth fighting over, by Uzbeks, Safavids, Mughals and eventually the rising power of Afghanistan under the Durrani Shahs. But the city slowly declined as its surroundings grew swampy and malarial, the irrigation canals fell into disrepair, and cholera struck again and again. Uzbeks of nomad origins became the dominant element. By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the population was down to 500 households, and the administrative center of Afghan



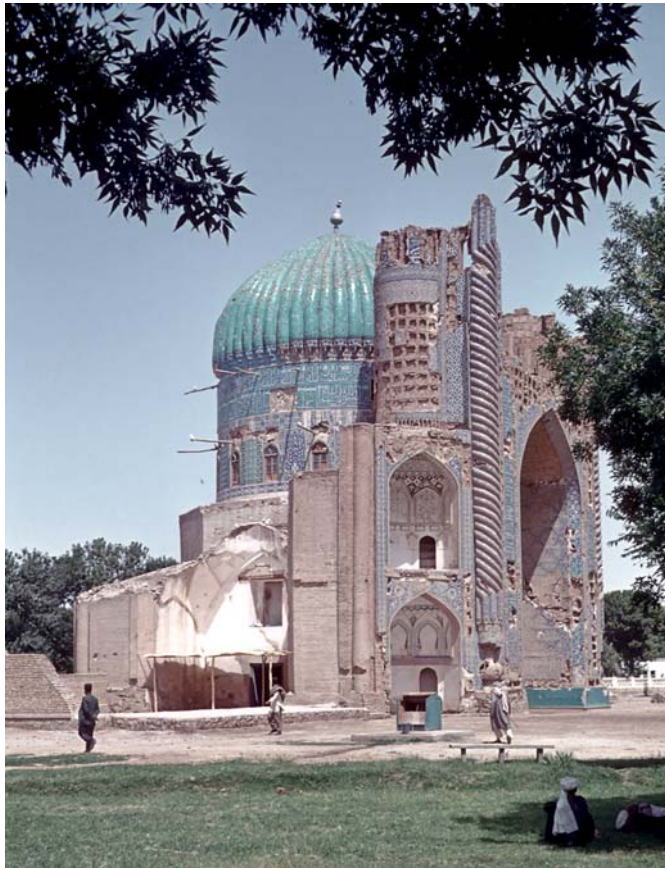


Fig. 3. Mausoleum of the theologian Abu Nasr Parsa (1462-1463 CE). Photograph copyright © 1970 Ruth Harold.

Turkestan had migrated (1866) to nearby Mazar-i Sharif. A new chapter had begun, the one in which we are still living.

Of all this eventful history, little enough remained on the ground at the time of our visit in 1970. One arrives in the center of an agricultural market town, neatly planted with trees and grass, that show off two Timurid edifices. One is the mausoleum of Khwaja Abu Nasr Parsa [Fig. 3], erected in 1462/63 in honor of a distinguished theologian; it is considered one of the finest examples of late Timurid architecture and often features on tourist posters. The shrine consists of a tall octagonal brick chamber surmounted by a fluted dome; entry is through a high portal flanked by a pair of corkscrew columns. The entire exterior is clad in brilliant blue tile mosaic, much of which has been slowly peeling off the walls. The interior

mounds probably mark the sites of that Buddhist temple and stupa, whose statuary Xuanzang described as being 'lustrous with precious gems.' A small brick mosque decorated with carved stucco survives from early Islamic times, but we failed to find it. What we had come to see was the walls

is cool and austere, decorated with stucco honeycomb and painted floral designs. Across the park stands a tall gateway with some decorative tile work; this is all that remains of a madrassah built in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in Timurid style. As far as I can ascertain, but h buildings still stand.

The earlier monuments take some searching. A couple of nondescript

[Fig. 4], battered and weather-beaten but still sixty feet high in places, that enclose the Bala Hissar, the High Fort. The ramparts were built in Timurid times (14/15<sup>th</sup> centuries) upon foundations that likely go back to the Kushans and possibly further. They enclose a roughly circular field half a mile across, that probably corresponds to the central city of medieval Balkh. Now there is only dry scrub and low mounds of debris; here and there potsherds and broken bricks call mutely for attention. There is nothing much to see; but I have never forgotten what it felt like, up there on those worn stumps of wall, gazing out over nothingness.

We stayed in Mazar-i Sharif ('Tomb of the Exalted'), which boasted a decent hotel and even occasional electricity. There is nothing ancient or traditional about Mazar, which only rose to prominence in the 19th century. We found it a bustling 'third-world-modern' town of straight wide streets, motor traffic, government offices and shops. Uzbeks, Tadjiks, Hazara and Pashtuns meet and chaffer in the seat of power, which is also a center for trade in Karakol lambskins and carpets. More recently, Mazar has all too often been in the news. It was largely spared Soviet shelling, but saw much fighting when the Taliban seized most of northern Afghanistan, and again when that



Fig. 4. Balkh. The Timurid walls of the Bala Hissar. Photograph copyright © 1970 Ruth Harold.





*Fig. 5. Mazar-i Sharif. Shrine of Hazrat Ali. Photograph copyright © 1970 Ruth Harold.*

regime was toppled by the Northern Alliance with the help of American airpower. Miraculously, the great shrine of the Sharif Ali, which lent the city its name, has survived the turmoil and has recently been restored.

Hazrat (the noble) Ali is one of the central figures of Shia Islam, and almost as much revered as the Prophet Muhammad himself. Ali ibn Abi Talib was Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, and eventually became the fourth Caliph. But his reign was marred by discord; the Caliph was assassinated in 658 CE, and according to orthodox tradition was buried in Najaf, Iraq. Afghans believe otherwise: the body of the

slain Caliph, tied onto a camel's back, was carried out to Turkestan and buried in a secret location. Five hundred years later, thanks to dreams and visions, the grave came to light and a shrine was built over it. Chingis Khan leveled it, but Ali's sepulcher was rediscovered during the reign of Husain Baikara, the last Timurid Sultan of Herat, who erected a grand mausoleum on the site (1481 CE) [Figs. 5, 6, 7]. This is the building, many times restored and re-decorated, that one sees today. With its two domes, impressive courtyard and portals, excellent blue tile-work and a flock of white pigeons, the shrine of Hazrat Ali is one of the most spectacular buildings in

Afghanistan. Pilgrims flock to the tomb, which has a reputation for miraculous cures; and many thousands come here each spring to celebrate Nauruz, the Persian New Year.

Neither Balkh nor Mazar look anything like a caravan city of the middle ages, but nearby Tashkurgan does (or did in 1970) [Figs. 8, 9, 10, facing page]. The town officially goes by the name of Khulm. A ruined mud-brick castle looms over the town; it is only a couple of centuries old, but the weathered walls give it an



*Fig. 5. Mazar-i Sharif. Shrine of Hazrat Ali, view in courtyard. Photograph copyright © 1970 Ruth Harold.*



*Fig. 5. Mazar-i Sharif. Shrine of Hazrat Ali. Photograph copyright © 1970 Ruth Harold.*

antique air. The covered bazaar was fascinating, a place of traditional crafts, small open-fronted shops and inviting chai-khanas (tea houses). You sat on a takht, a throne, by the side of the street, sipping your tea while puffing on a hookah, and watched the parade of Central Asia pass by. That was in a time of peace, which seemed like innocence. I wonder how Tashkurgan has fared.

## About the Authors

**Frank and Ruth Harold** are scientists by profession and travelers by avocation. Frank was born in Germany, grew up in the

Fig. 8. Tashkurgan. Photograph copyright © 1970 Ruth Harold.

Middle East and studied at the City College, New York, and the University of California at Berkeley. Now retired from forty years of research and teaching, he is Professor Emeritus of biochemistry at Colorado State University and a member of the volunteer faculty at the University of Washington. Ruth is a microbiologist, now retired, and an aspiring painter. The Harold family lived in Iran in 1969/70, while Frank served as Fulbright lecturer at the University of Tehran. This experience kindled a passion for Asian travel which has since taken them to Afghanistan and back to Iran, into the Himalayas, up and down the Indian sub-continent



Strange, *The Lands of the Eastern Caliphate* (Cambridge, 1905; reprint Lahore, 1977); and in

articles on Bactria and Balkh by Frantz Grenet in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Vol. 3 (London, 1988). A very readable account of the land, its past and its present, is in Nancy Hatch Dupree's *The Road to Balkh* (Kabul, 1967); unfortunately, this little gem is now a collector's item. The most celebrated traveler's tale is surely *The Road to Oxiana*, by Robert Byron (London, 1937; reprint Oxford, 1982). Discerning



Fig. 9. Street scene, Tashkurgan. Photograph copyright © 1970 Ruth Harold.

and along the Silk Road between China and Turkey. They make their home in Edmonds, Washington.

## Sources

The history of Balkh, and the reports of ancient travelers, are covered in some detail by Guy Le

readers will also enjoy *The Light Garden of the Angel King: Journeys in Afghanistan*, by Peter Levi (London, 1972). Afghanistan's recent travails have been extensively covered, for instance, in Larry P. Goodson, *Afghanistan's Endless War* (Seattle, 2001).



Fig. 10. Chaikhane (tea house) in the bazaar, Tashkurgan. Photograph copyright © 1970 Ruth Harold.