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# **Female Mystics in Mediaeval Islam: The Quiet Legacy**

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## Abstract

*Historians and analysts of current affairs alike are interested in the role that women have played in Islam, including the extent to which women were the agents and creators of Islamic mysticism. We still know surprisingly little about premodern learned women, particularly from the eastern Iranian world. This article describes one female mystic, Umm 'Alī, who flourished in ninth-century Balkh and has so far eluded modern scholarship. A historiographical study of her provides insight into how the representations of mystical women changed over time. From the earlier sources, we learn that Umm 'Alī applied creative and interesting strategies that provided her access to the highest sources of learning. Umm 'Alī's case also allows for some tentative conclusions on the importance of pedigree, and the practice of strategic marriages that connect local power-holders with the 'ulamā'.*

**Keywords** mysticism, Islam, scholarship, eastern Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia, mediaeval history, gender, women.

*anān-i īn pākān chunān būda-and, tā mashāyikh-i a'zām bi chi ḥadd būda bāshand!*

*If the wives of these pure [ones] were such, [just think] at what levels the great shuyūkh must have been!<sup>1</sup>*

## Introduction

The archetypal female mystic of mediaeval Islam is, no doubt, the famous Rābi‘a al-‘Adawiyya al-Qaysiyya (d. 185/801), known simply as “Rābi‘a.” Annemarie Schimmel pointed out that Rābi‘a had many successors and that they did not all resemble Rābi‘a.<sup>2</sup> But, despite wide current interest in the role of women in Islam, the story of public, mystical Muslim women remains largely focussed on Rābi‘a, and, in the accounts on her, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between fact and myth. Fragmentary records, scattered references, and ambiguous representations also confound attempts to form a coherent view of other female mystics. The goal of this article is to bring together evidence on one nearly contemporary mystic, Umm ‘Alī of Balkh, also known as the “one of high standing” (mahd-i ‘aliyya). It will be seen that Umm ‘Alī presents a very different profile of female mystic. A close reading of the primary sources highlights the fact that the narrative of her agency and impact changed over time. The transformation occurred at the hands of her biographers, who were bound by social conventions that restricted women’s agency. From the earlier sources, we learn that Umm ‘Alī applied creative and interesting strategies that provided her access to the highest sources of learning.

The topic of female mysticism in mediaeval Islam is particularly important because religious scholarship was one area in which Muslim women assumed roles equal to those of men. This article might best be compared with the “women worthies” genre that Margaret Meriwether and Judith Tucker identified. The expression refers to the history of notable women “who have played a role that is visible (although often neglected in history writing) in public activities.”<sup>3</sup> Given that we do not have much information on female scholars in pre-modern times, this approach that “adds women to history” remains valid. It raises new questions about the role of women as social and economic actors. There is not enough data on premodern female scholars for us to answer them comprehensively. Nonetheless, Umm ‘Alī’s case allows us to reach some tentative conclusions about the importance of pedigree and the practice of strategic marriages that connect local power-holders with the ‘ulamā’.

It should be added, as a caveat, that reconstructing the life experience of learned women such as Umm ‘Alī of Balkh from fragmentary texts with difficult historiographical traditions is a daunting task. The job is more difficult because early Islamic scholarship does not, by its very nature, lend itself to generalizations. Our clearly-defined modern view of Islamic scholars (‘ulamā’) and the legal schools (madhāhib) to which they may have belonged, for example, denies the plurality found in early mediaeval religious scholarship.<sup>4</sup> Our Balkhī source on Umm ‘Alī, the Faḍā’il-i Balkh, nowhere contains the word “Sufi.”<sup>5</sup> Some of the biographies in this work are of public religious figures who have since been canonized as the prototypes of Sufism.<sup>6</sup> But, because our main source does not use it, we shall not call Umm ‘Alī a “Sufi” either and will use the generic term “mystic.”

Before we turn to Umm ‘Alī’s story, let us consider some of the relevant historiography and scholarship on the history of women scholars in the Islamic world. Most relevant for this article are quantitative studies;

qualitative analyses of the visibility, image, and agency of female scholars;  
and the discussion of “misogynistic” attitudes held towards them.

## Surveys, Numbers, Profiles

Since the early 1990s, modern scholars have questioned the traditional wisdom that Muslim women were “silent” and “oppressed” in pre-modern Islam. Relevant studies of the past two decades have revealed that women exercised far more power than was previously believed, including in the area of Islamic scholarship.<sup>7</sup> Evidence for pre-modern female scholars in the Islamic world can be found in the biographical dictionaries that formed an important genre in Islamic historiography. Modern scholars have collated hundreds of women’s biographies from these sources. The surveys do not always differentiate between categories of Islamic scholars - e.g., mystics, female traditionists (i.e., collectors of ḥadīth), and legal analysts - but total numbers of recorded female scholars remain relevant to us, because they allow us to place Umm ‘Alī in the context of the history of female Islamic scholarship.<sup>8</sup>

Ruth Roded found that several dozen mediaeval biographical compilations were filled with tens, hundreds, and even thousands of women scholars.<sup>9</sup> A more recent encyclopaedic collection of 8000 muḥaddithat is being carried out by Mohammad Akram Nadwi.<sup>10</sup> Irene Schneider focussed specifically on the twenty women scholars of the seventh to the thirteenth centuries CE discussed by the Syrian historian Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1347). She found that they played an active role in the educational system of their time.<sup>11</sup>

Disaggregating the numbers, Roded, and more recently, Nadwi, have shown that the majority of women are concentrated heavily around the first century of Islam. This is no doubt related to the unique position of the ṣaḥābiyyāt - women Companions who were the contemporaries of the Prophet - as precedents and role models for Muslims in general and for Muslim women in particular.<sup>12</sup> The numbers are lower but still significant in the eighth and ninth centuries CE but taper off dramatically thereafter.<sup>13</sup>

Umm ‘Alī flourished during the ninth century CE, when women scholars were still well represented in the biographical dictionaries.

The accounts on female scholars have survived not only in biographical dictionaries but also in local histories. There are important references in Ibn ‘Asākīr’s (d. 571/1176) *Ta’rīkh Dimashq* with 13,500 biographical entries, including more than 200 women (although these are mainly members of the Umayyad family rather than scholars).<sup>14</sup> Richard Bulliet examined the entries on women in the biographical dictionaries of Baghdad, Nishapur, and Gurgan. Al-Khatīb al-Baghdādī’s *Ta’rīkh Baghdād* (completed 463/1071) includes thirty women out of a total of 7,831 biographies.

‘Abd al-Ghāfir al-Fārisī (d. 529/1132) wrote his *al-Siyāq li-Ta’rīkh Naysābūr* and included twenty-two women among his 1,699 biographies.

Ḥamza al-Sahmī’s (d. 426/1035) *Ta’rīkh Jurjān* gave the biographies of twelve women among his 1,194 biographies.<sup>15</sup> Bulliet spells out the important finding that these (relatively few) women were mentioned on account of their kinship ties to the compiler. Some were noble, others were involved in mysticism, and more were known for scholarship in ḥadīth or, rarely, in other disciplines.<sup>16</sup>



The local histories from further east - Bukhara, Samarqand, and Balkh - which are missing from Roded's survey, have a much smaller selection of women (and men). The *Faḍā'il-i Balkh*, a text that forms the basis for much of this article's discussion, includes only the case of Umm 'Alī and, to a far lesser degree, that of her husband's second wife, Ḥakīma Zāhida. The excerpt with the relevant account is translated from Persian into English in the appendix to this article. The Persian *Tārīkh-i Bukhāra*, which is more a history than a prosopography, does not mention any Bukharan female scholar, much like the Arabic *Ta'rīkh Samarqand*, which follows the western Islamic prosopographical style of listings of isnāds (chains of transmitters), with limited information on the lived experiences of the scholars. The *Ta'rīkh Samarqand* profiles a single muḥadditha named Ṣūfiya bt. al-Shaykh al-Ḥāfiẓ al-Mustamlī Isma'īl b. Ibrāhīm b. 'Abdallāh b. 'Umrān al-Balkhī.<sup>17</sup>

## Visibility, Image, and Agency of Women

The image of women as passive citizens confined to carrying out domestic chores and raising families was revised amongst Orientalists and Islamic historians in the 1970s and 1980s with studies of working women. Maya Shatzmiller studied mediaeval Muslim “working women,” including rural labourers, hairdressers, peddlers, secretaries, prostitutes, and ḥadīth scholars. She concluded that “women were involved in economic life in medieval Islam to an important degree.”<sup>18</sup> Leslie Pierce and Ruby Lal, who reinterpreted the Ottoman and Mughal harems respectively, have shown the complex and contradictory character of domestic life, which was not limited to the home but extended well into the “public” domain.<sup>19</sup>

This complementary view of women as social and economic agents still, however, requires further refinement amongst Orientalists and Islamic historians. Julia Bray, in her study of men, women, and slaves in Abbasid society, laments that:

[D]espite their [women’s] much greater prominence in the biographical sources from around the thirteenth century onwards and in documentary sources from the Mamluk and Ottoman periods, and the greater attention that both families and women of these later periods are now receiving, women - though no longer families - tend to be seen as objects rather than as agents, of social development.<sup>20</sup>

One might add the criticism that, even where women in the mediaeval Islamic world are considered, scholars have tended to focus on the western Islamic lands, providing far less evidence from the eastern Iranian world or Central Asia. Umm ‘Alī of Balkh contributes in a small way to rectifying this imbalance.

The image of the mystical woman, in particular, has dominated the discourse on learned Muslim women. And, within this discourse, the case of Rābi‘a al-‘Adawiyya has been adopted as the archetypal form. Rābi‘a was born into a poor home and sold into slavery. Her sanctity secured her freedom in a life of celibacy and prayer. She gathered around her many disciples, including one of Balkh’s most famous early saints, Shaqīq al-Balkhī (d. 174/790-1) and the traditionist Sūfīyān al-Thawrī (d. 161/778), both of whom feature prominently in the Faḍā’il-i Balkh.<sup>21</sup> She received several offers of marriage but refused them all, choosing celibacy over marriage.

She was famed for her teaching on mystic love (maḥabba) and fellowship with God (uns).<sup>22</sup> As we shall see, Umm ‘Alī of Balkh has a very different background to that of Rābi‘a, which indicates that mystical women must have been diverse.

Another line of enquiry concerns the alleged taboo against Muslim women studying with men to whom they were not related or married. In his study of Mamluk learned women, Jonathan Berkey refers to the fourteenth-century Egyptian scholar Ibn al-Ḥajj, who held that it was not generally accepted that women sit across from men and get up and show the “private parts of their body.”<sup>23</sup> This was seen as a threat to established sexual boundaries represented by the mixing of men and women in informal lessons in mosques or homes. Often, women were taught by other women.

Huda Lutfi, however, emphasizes that there are discrepancies between the prescriptions that Ibn al-Ḥajj wants to uphold and women's agency in reality. This becomes obvious in the fact that Ibn al-Ḥajj criticizes what had become a reality in Cairene society - the free mingling of women and men, as in mosques during public festivals.<sup>24</sup> We shall see that Umm 'Alī also displayed a more open attitude towards her male colleagues and teachers.

The question of women's visibility and the law has been taken up by scholars such as Christopher Melchert, who surveyed mediaeval Islamic law on the question of whether women should be kept out of the mosque. He prefaces his article by saying, "It is commonly observed that women enjoyed greater freedom of movement in earlier Islamic law than later."<sup>25</sup> Matthieu Tillier found this public visibility to be true also of women at the Abbasid legal courts.<sup>26</sup> Our study of Umm 'Alī fits within these historiographical debates that find mediaeval Islamic women to be visible and influential in society, albeit usually mediated through male connections - a husband, father, or some other male relative.

## The Argument of “misogyny”

Some scholars have tried to explain the decline in female scholarship after the ninth century CE as the result of a misogynistic bias of the male biographical compilers. Roded suggests that the ninth-century “Abbāsīd legists” purposely removed or omitted references to women scholars.<sup>27</sup> Richard Bulliet has a counterargument: He takes the numbers of entries at face value and concludes that women actually lost importance in the scholarly circles from the tenth to the fifteenth centuries CE.<sup>28</sup> As we shall see, Umm ‘Alī did not provoke an overt misogyny amongst her male biographers, who would have called into question her moral character or professional skills. She appears in numerous sources over the centuries, but again, she is only one case from Balkh.

The mediaeval female scholar presents a dilemma often misunderstood by those who look at ancient models to find support for contemporary views. Some scholars of the early 1990s held that the “origins” of the repression of modern Muslim women lay in the mediaeval period. Julie Scott Meisami argues strongly against this judgement<sup>29</sup> posited by her colleagues, Fedwa Malti-Douglas, Leila Ahmed, and Denise Spellberg.<sup>30</sup> Scott Meisami writes:

Gender and gender roles are social constructs and subject to change over time, both in actuality and in textual representations. Arguments based on the assumption that gender is a constant in any given society, culture, or religion and that it is uniformly so treated by writers, are therefore untenable.<sup>31</sup>

Equally, Umm ‘Alī should not be taken as the prototype for any paucity of women scholars observed in today’s eastern Iran or Central Asia, even though she presents only one case: we simply do not know the percentage of women scholars. Moreover, Umm ‘Alī’s scholarly path and her actions were mediated by a literary tradition that evolved over time. It is to this literary tradition that we now turn.

## The Sources on Umm ‘Alī of Balkh

There are half a dozen interesting textual references to Umm ‘Alī in several Persian and Arabic sources. We are, in general, dealing with a challenging and limited base of sources, when compared with the evidence base in other disciplines. This contrasts markedly with the wealth of sources that scholars of learned women in ancient Greece possess, for example.<sup>32</sup> It is with this source gap in mind that I deliberately adopt an in-depth view of the historiography on Umm ‘Alī to embrace the plurality and full range of possibility of her agency.

The main source of information on Umm ‘Alī’s life is the third part of the Faḍā’il-i Balkh, which profiles seventy shuyūkh (pl. of shaykh, i.e., members of the ‘ulamā’) who flourished in Balkh between the seventh and twelfth centuries CE. From this underused prosopographical and historical source we can extract by far the most data on Umm ‘Alī’s life. The original Arabic version of the Faḍā’il-i Balkh was written by the Shaykh al-Islām al-Wā’iẓ al-Balkhī (fl. 610/1214), and his account survives only in a Persian rendition made by a certain ‘Abdallāh [b. Muḥammad] b. al-Qāsim al-Ḥusaynī (fl. 676/1278). We know of the author and translator only what the Faḍā’il-i Balkh tells us, and we have no way of determining how closely the Persian rendition follows the original Arabic. We can say with some certainty that the Arabic author was a member of the ‘ulamā’, as was probably the Persian translator.

The work survives in four manuscript copies only, none of which can be precisely dated.<sup>33</sup> The Faḍā’il-i Balkh is largely hagiographical and anecdotal, The second-oldest manuscript came to light a decade ago

which might call into question its validity as a source for history, but scholars such as Jürgen Paul have argued that storytelling is a narrative technique that keeps the audience interested while giving them a taste of universal messages that are common to works of adab (educational and entertaining prose); factuality was not so much the issue.<sup>34</sup> We need to be careful when using the Faḍā’il-i Balkh as a historical source, but, as the earliest surviving narrative from and on Balkh, it remains invaluable for our study.

The Faḍā’il-i Balkh, in turn, cites at least three sources for the account on Umm ‘Alī (see translated excerpt in appendix): the Risāla by Abū al-Qāsim Qushayrī; a work of ṭabaqāt, a biographical genre that classifies scholars according to “levels”;<sup>35</sup> and “history books”. Abū al-Qāsim Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) is the source for the account of a dinner that Umm ‘Alī’s husband Aḥmad organized for a member of the futuwwa - the organizations of chivalry sometimes associated with Sufism but which, unlike the Sufi orders, tended to be more social than spiritual in orientation.<sup>36</sup> Qushayrī is the well-known Khorasani mystic and scholar of the Shāfi‘ī legal school, and his Risāla (c. 438/1045) is an important early compendium of the principles and terminologies of Sufism.<sup>37</sup> The Faḍā’il-i Balkh is a text that values the principles of piety and mysticism, and it is, therefore, not surprising that the author cites the Risāla. He was true to his source: the original account of the dinner in the Risāla survives today and is recognizable from the account in the Faḍā’il-i Balkh.<sup>38</sup>

Sufi sources tend, in general, to provide more information on female spiritual figures than do other Islamic texts.<sup>39</sup> Qushayrī's *Risāla* has contemporary parallels and successors that the author of the *Faḍā'il-i Balkh* could have cited yet did not but which we will consider in this article.

These include Sufi hagiographical and prosopographical compilations and *tadhkira* works, such as Abū Nu'aym al-Ḥāfiẓ al-Isfahānī's *Ḥilyat al-awliyā' wa-ṭabaqāt al-asfīyā'* (composed 422/1031), al-Hujwīrī's (d. 465-9/1072-7) *Kashf al-maḥjūb*, and Farīd al-Dīn Attā'ī's (d. 617/1221 or earlier) *Kitāb Tadhkirat al-awliyā'*.<sup>40</sup>

The second source cited in the excerpt on Umm 'Alī is a certain 'Alī b. Faḍl on the wise sayings attributed to Umm 'Alī (and her husband Aḥmad's second wife, Ḥakīma Zāhida). Perhaps this is 'Alī b. al-Faḍl b. al-Ṭāhir al-Balkhī (d. 323/934-5?) whose *ṭabaqāt* is mentioned elsewhere in the *Faḍā'il-i Balkh* as a key source.<sup>41</sup> Women were by no means excluded from *ṭabaqāt*, as is demonstrated convincingly in Roded's inventory. A very early source in the form of the Iraqī Ibn Sa'd's (d. 230/845) *ṭabaqāt*, for example, included more than 4000 women (amongst them 629 independent entries, the rest being embedded in other sections).<sup>42</sup> In the Khorasani *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya* by al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021), from Nishapur, we find no mention of Umm 'Alī,<sup>43</sup> but she appears in al-Sulamī's minor work, the *Dhikr al-niswa al-muta'abbidāt al-ṣūfiyyāt*.<sup>44</sup>

A third set of sources in the excerpt on Umm 'Alī is referred to as "the history books" (*kutub-i tawārīkh*), which the Shaykh al-Islām al-Wā'iz used to describe Umm 'Alī's ancestry.<sup>45</sup> The generic reference is repeated elsewhere in the work and reflects the author's primary focus on legal, scholarly, and Sufi works, his limited familiarity with historical texts, and a possible later redaction.<sup>46</sup>

## Umm ‘Alī’s Path to Scholarship

### Study and Credentials

From the excerpt on Umm ‘Alī in the Faḍā’il-i Balkh, we learn that she received an Islamic education of the highest level in her time. She studied with a certain Ṣāliḥ b. ‘Abdallāh and transmitted his book of tafsīr (Qur’anic exegesis).<sup>47</sup> Faḍā’il-i Balkh editor ‘Abd al-Ḥayy Ḥabībī and Richard Gramlich have identified this teacher as Ṣāliḥ ‘Abdallāh Ṣāliḥ b. ‘Abdallāh b. Dhakwān al-Bāhilī al-Tirmidhī (probably d. 239/853-4), who also taught the Qur’an to Umm ‘Alī’s husband, Aḥmad b. Khidrawayh,<sup>48</sup> to whom we shall return shortly.

Umm ‘Alī later travelled to Mecca, where she performed the ḥajj pilgrimage and remained for seven years to study, until she mastered all the branches of Islamic knowledge (‘ilm) and was instructed in ḥadīth. None of the other sources describes the educational background that formed the basis for her scholarship. These are, of course, the credentials sought by male ‘ulamā’ as well. Travel was an important part of Islamic education until the sixth century of Islam, that is, before Muslim learning became more formalized through schools and madrasas.<sup>49</sup>

Umm ‘Alī’s studies should not strike us as unusual for women. Berkey explains that obtaining an education is well attested in the sources for mediaeval learned women. Amongst the 1075 women listed in al-Sakhawī’s al-Ḍaw’ al-lāmi’ fī a’yān al-qarn al-tāsi’ on leading figures of the fifteenth century, for example, 411 obtained such an education - either by memorizing the Qur’an, studying with a particular scholar, or receiving ijāzas (licenses to transmit). Her transmitting a book - rather than a set of ḥadīth - is likewise not uncommon.<sup>50</sup>

The standards and expectations of Umm ‘Alī as a scholar were in no way less rigorous than those to which her male counterparts were held: she still needed to travel to Mecca for the pilgrimage, to study with a master for an extended period, and to obtain the credentials to transmit her teacher’s work. The Faḍā’il-i Balkh mentions without judgement her travels, in which she may have been unaccompanied by her husband.<sup>51</sup>

## Marriage and Home

Nowhere have I found Umm ‘Alī’s birth or death dates. The lack of dates is a common feature in mediaeval accounts on Muslim learned women in general. Fortunately, the biography of her husband Aḥmad b. Khidrawayh in the Faḍā’il-i Balkh gives some information that allows us to home in on the second half of the ninth century. The clue is that, when Umm ‘Alī returned to Balkh from Mecca, her husband had already died. We know from the Faḍā’il-i Balkh and other sources that Aḥmad died in 240/854-5, at the age of ninety-five. This sets the terminus post quem for Umm ‘Alī’s death at 240/854-5. If she did survive to old age, she would probably have lived well into the second half of the ninth century CE.

The Faḍā’il-i Balkh does not mention Umm ‘Alī’s given name, but other sources do. Al-Hujwīrī tells us in his *Kashf al-maḥjūb* that Umm ‘Alī’s name was Fāṭima.<sup>52</sup> Umm ‘Alī married well, as one might expect for a woman of her standing (see below), but she did not marry a wealthy noble, choosing instead one of Balkh’s most beloved scholars and mystics, the qāḍī Abū Ḥāmid Aḥmad b. Khidrawayh (d. 240/854-5), who receives ample treatment in the Faḍā’il-i Balkh<sup>53</sup> and other hagiographical sources and is known as an example of the futuwwa (spiritual chivalry).<sup>54</sup> Gramlich does not see him as a proponent of the malāmatiyya –the early Islamic mystical tradition that originated in Khorasan and based itself on the tenet that all outward appearance of piety or religiosity is ostentation– but, as Hamid Algar explains, the concepts of futuwwa and the malāma overlap during this period.<sup>55</sup> As a fatā (a young male exponent of futuwwa), Aḥmad is credited with exhibiting much generosity, which left him in a constant state of debt.<sup>56</sup> He expounded on the mystical concepts of seeking refuge in God alone, outlined a ten-step process to attain the Sufī ṭarīqa, and pondered the battle with the soul (nafs). He is said to have met and studied with major shuyūkh, such as Ibrāhīm b. Adham (d. 161/777-8), Ḥātim al-Asa mm (d. 237/857-8), and Abū Ḥ afṣ b. Ḥ addād (d. c. 265/878-9) in Nishapur. Much is also written about his stay with Abū Yazīd al-Bistā mī (d. 261/874-5?).<sup>57</sup> Aḥmad b. Khidrawayh had many students, including some better-known authorities.<sup>58</sup> According to ‘Abdallāh al-Ansā rī al-Harawī (d. 481/1089), who mentions Umm ‘Alī only in passing, Aḥmad b. Khidrawayh also performed the ḥajj to Mecca, besides visiting the above-mentioned masters.<sup>59</sup>

While one might assume that Shaykh Aḥmad had chosen his betrothed, al-Hujwīrī’s account and those of his successors tell us that it was quite the opposite: Umm ‘Alī wooed Aḥmad. Umm ‘Alī’s decision to marry apparently came after a change of heart on the matter. We are not told what made her change her mind, but perhaps the message here is to stress the importance of marriage even for pious, mystical women. Al-Hujwīrī states that Umm ‘Alī had to ask Aḥmad more than once before he complied, and then only after she had cunningly appealed to his spiritual conscience.

Al-Hujwīrī says:

*Chūn way-rā irādat-i tawba padīdār āmad, bi Aḥmad kas firistād, ki: “Ma-rā az pidar bikhwāh.” Way ijābat nakard. Kas firistād, ki: “Yā Aḥmad,*



*man tū-rā mard-i ān napindāshtam ki rāh-i ḥaqq nazanī. Rāh-bar bāsh na rāh-bur.” Aḥmad kas firistād, wa way-rā as pidar bikhwāst.*<sup>60</sup>

*When she changed her mind, she sent someone [with a message] to Aḥmad: “Ask my father for my hand.” He did not respond. She sent someone [again with a message]: “Oh Aḥmad, I did not think you a man who would not follow the path of truth. Be a guide of the road; do not put obstacles on it.” Aḥmad sent someone [with a message] to ask her father for her hand.*

In Attā r’s *Tadhkirat al-awliyā’*, Shaykh Aḥmad’s biographical entry contains a discussion of his wife Fāṭima as a miracle-working mystic and “an accomplished master of the Sufi path” (*andar ṭarīqat, āyat-ī būd*).<sup>61</sup> From here on, Attā r’s account closely resembles that of al-Hujwīrī. The latter recounts her wooing of Aḥmad thus:

*Tawbat kard wa bar Aḥmad kas firistād, ki: “Ma-rā az pidar bikhwāh.” Aḥmad ijābat nakard. Dīgar bār kas firistād, ki: “Ay Aḥmad, man tu-rā mardāna-tar az īn dānistam. Rāh-bar bāsh, na rāh-bur.” Aḥmad kas firistād wa az pidar bikhwāst.*<sup>62</sup>

*She changed her mind, and sent someone to Aḥmad [with the message:] “Ask my father for my hand.” Aḥmad did not respond. Once more, she sent someone [with the message:] “Oh Aḥmad, I thought you were more manly than this. Be a guide of the road; do not put obstacles on it.” Aḥmad sent [a messenger] and asked her father for her hand.*

Al-Hujwīrī, too, identified Umm ‘Alī as the daughter of a high official, although he calls her “daughter of the amīr of Balkh.”<sup>63</sup> The imprecision about Fāṭima’s lineage - she was the granddaughter of Balkh’s governor, as will be seen shortly - is repeated in later sources of the same genre. It contrasts with the persistence of the image of Umm ‘Alī as astute and “manly.”

After all, convention would have it that the man proposes to his prospective wife, and not vice versa.<sup>64</sup>

### Social Class and Family Relations

The Faḍā'il-i Balkh is a rich source for details on Umm 'Alī's family background and social class, the like of which I have not found elsewhere. By tracing the family links between Umm 'Alī and other shuyūkh of the Faḍā'il-i Balkh, we can glean that Umm 'Alī had considerable financial means and was descended from an important local family. Umm 'Alī's maternal grandfather was one of the early Abbasid governors of Balkh, al-Ḥasan b. Ḥumrān (fl. 142/759-60). The name of this early wālī (governor) of Balkh is attested also in fals coins.<sup>65</sup> We are given her mother's name (Mu'mina) and burial place, which emphasizes the importance of Umm 'Alī's semi matrilineal lineage, that is, one in which the mother is mentioned, with her patrilineal genealogy.<sup>66</sup>

The picture of Umm 'Alī's family comes into sharper focus when we trace the family links mentioned in at least five more biographies in the Faḍā'il-i Balkh, all of which lead back to her grandfather, al-Ḥasan b. Ḥumrān. In fact, a genealogy emerges that is situated in the highest echelons of Balkhī society, both scholarly and secular. Thus, in addition to her maternal grandfather al-Ḥasan b. Ḥumrān, we learn about the latter's brother (Umm 'Alī's great-uncle), Mutawakkil b. Ḥumrān (d. 142/759-60). He was a successor (tābi') to a Companion of the Prophet. Mutawakkil was also Balkh's first qāḍī and is profiled as the ninth shaykh in the Faḍā'il-i Balkh's seventy biographies.<sup>67</sup> We are told that he was a staunch supporter of Umayyad rule, until its bitter end, and distinguished himself as a proponent of *irjā'*.<sup>68</sup> Men like Mutawakkil were the reason that one of Balkh's epithets was "Murji' ābād."<sup>69</sup>

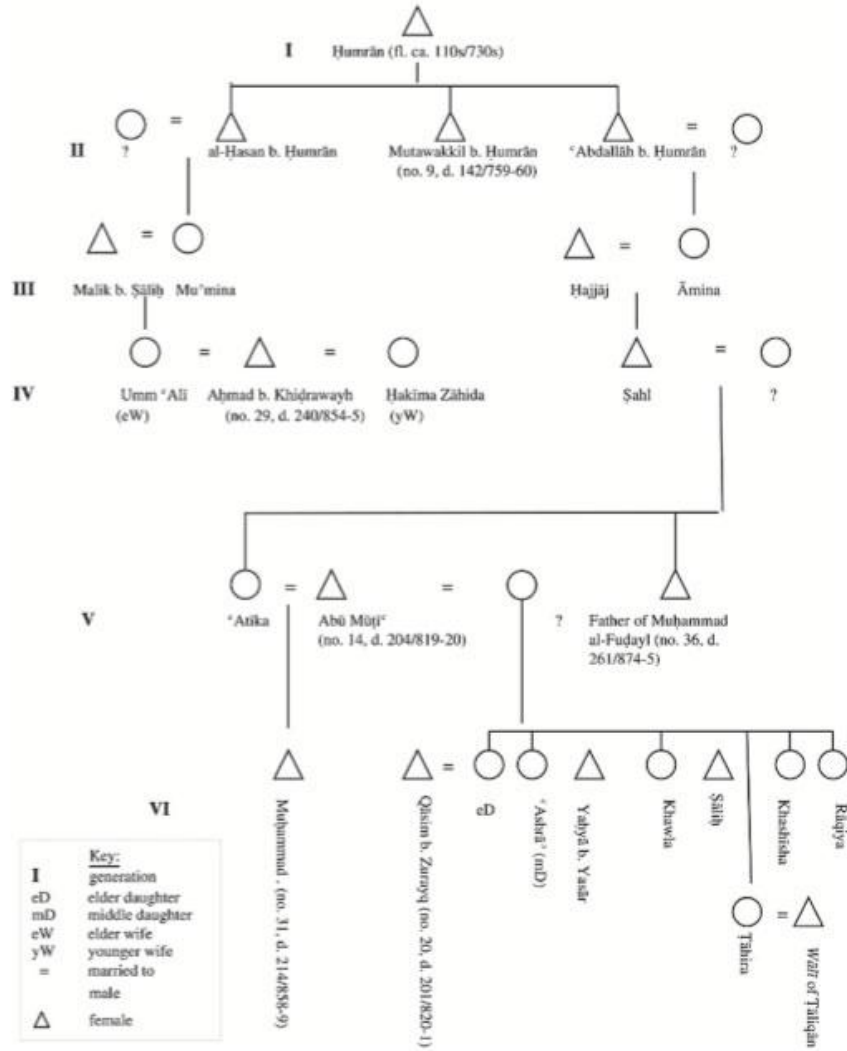
We also read that the governor had a second brother (i.e., a second great-uncle of Umm 'Alī's), called 'Abdallāh. His line accounts for four more of Balkh's seventy saints: Balkh's thirty-sixth shaykh, Muḥammad al-Fuḍayl (d. 261/874-5), is his great-grandson, while Balkh's fourteenth shaykh, the qāḍī Abū Mutī' al-Balkhī (d. 204/819-20), married his greatgranddaughter (and aunt of the said Muḥammad al-Fuḍayl). The son of Abū Mutī' al-Balkhī is Balkh's thirty-first shaykh, called Muḥammad b. Abī Mutī' (d. 244/858-9). Moreover, the Faḍā'il-i Balkh's twentieth shaykh, Qāsim al-Zurayq (d. 201/820-1), married into the family through one of Abū Mutī' 's daughters.<sup>70</sup> We can now construct a family tree, which I call, for convenience, the "House of Ḥumrān."

Mapping the genealogy of the "House of Ḥumrān" makes a convincing case that scholarship and political power often went hand in hand within the same extended family. This house alone produced six of Balkh's seventy scholars profiled in the Faḍā'il-i Balkh, in addition to Umm 'Alī. Thus, family ties and elite connections in the formation of the mediaeval scholarly community seem to have been equally important for men and women. I have argued elsewhere that a significant number - but not all - of Balkh's shuyūkh were independently wealthy and connected to social and political circles of power.<sup>71</sup> The same seems to have been true of women scholars. As we have seen, Umm 'Alī had major family connections through maternal blood relations. Richard Bulliet also found that al-Fārisī's women scholars

were mentioned in his eleventh-century history of Nishapur, on account of their family and marriage ties.<sup>72</sup>

The Faḍā'il-i Balkh emphasizes not only Umm 'Alī's family pedigree but also her wealth. She spent a considerable amount of her own money to finance her pilgrimage to Mecca.<sup>73</sup> The ḥajj was an expensive undertaking for an eastern Khorasani: the distance between faraway Balkh and Mecca was 3150 kilometres, as the crow flies. Expenses included transport, food, and lodging costs for the outbound and inbound journeys, which took months. It appears she also financed her seven-year sojourn in Mecca herself. She obtained seventy-nine thousand dirhams from the sale of her estates and other possessions, and this would easily have covered all her costs.

The House of Ḥumrān (reconstructed from accounts in the *Faḍā'il-i Balkh*):



It seems reasonable to assume that her wealth came from her grandfather's days as the governor of Balkh, for he would probably have been a major landowner.

We do not know whether, during her sojourn in Mecca, Umm ‘Alī disbursed some of her great wealth to charity, a practice ascribed to other ninth-century women during their pilgrimages.<sup>74</sup> Charity is a common trope in later accounts of Sufis and other mystical religious figures and scholars. Jāmī, in his account of Umm ‘Alī, says, “She was of noble descent and had many possessions. She donated everything to the poor” (Way az awlād-i akābir būd wa māl-i bisyār dāsht. Hama-rā bar fuqarā nafaqa kard).<sup>75</sup>

The channels through which female scholarship was acquired thus have a pragmatic element. The hosting and training of scholars and the patronage of shrines dedicated to them was expensive. In the ninth century CE it was the noble families, such as the House of Ḥumrān that had the financial resources, the know-how, and the important link with the early Abbasid past. The House of Ḥumrān is the only important family we can reconstruct from the biographies of the shuyūkh of the Faḍā’il-i Balkh. The Faḍā’il-i Balkh ends its own historical account of Balkh in Part One, which precedes the biographies - Part Two is a brief geographical overview - with that of the Samanids. Their ascent in Bukhara and that of the Banjūrīds in Balkh seem to coincide with the end of the prominence of this family.<sup>76</sup>

## Umm 'Alī's Actions and Attributes

### Social Etiquette in Religious Society

One anecdote related in the Faḍā'il-i Balkh excerpt concerning Umm 'Alī (see appendix) emphasizes Umm 'Alī's awareness of social etiquette when advising her husband on how to organize a dinner for a member of the futuwwa. The author portrays Umm 'Alī as the one with the "insider knowledge" on how to host such fatā men. Her husband, on the other hand, is depicted as lacking such knowledge (thus, we read in FB's excerpt: "Oh Aḥmad! Can't you do that, and don't you know how one ought to invite these people of humanity and [fol. 135b]<sup>77</sup> chivalry (murūwat wafutuwwat)?"). We are thus left with the sense that Umm 'Alī was worldly and "in the know," while Aḥmad appears to have lacked confidence and sociability.

The anecdote on the dinner is recounted in several Sufi hagiographical works, with some variations. Al-Hujwīrī identified the chivalrous guest as the mystic Yaḥyā b. Mu'ādh al-Rāzī (d. 258/872).<sup>78</sup> He explains that Shaykh Aḥmad consulted his wife on the dinner party in this way:

*"Da 'wat-i Yahyā-rā chi bāyad?" Guft: "Chandīn sar gāw wa gūsfand wa hawāyij wa tawābil wa chandīn sham' wa 'atr . Wa bā īn hama nīz bīst sar khar bibāyad kusht." Aḥmad guft: "Kushtan-i kharān chi ma'nī dārad?" Guft: "Chūn karīmī bi khāna-yi karīmī mihmān bāshad, nabāyad ki sagān-i maḥallat-rā az ān khayr bāshad?"<sup>79</sup>*

*"How do I make the invitation to Yahya?" She said: "Some cows and sheep, carrots and seasoning, and some candles and perfume. And on top of all this, twenty asses must be killed." Aḥmad said: "What is the meaning of the killing of asses?" She said: "When a great man comes to the house of another great man, should the dogs of the quarter not benefit from it?"*

The implication in Faḍā'il-i Balkh that Umm 'Alī was questioning Aḥmad's competence is absent from the Kashf al-maḥjūb. It appears that al-Hujwīrī's account is less concerned with the possibly unbalanced relationship between Aḥmad and Umm 'Alī but keen on passing on her experiences of hosting proper dinners and the importance and act of generosity in general.

It could be that the killing of the asses is a secondary element in the story. It certainly sounds like a component added to the main story, which concerns the treatment of the futuwwa. The secondary element is inserted to show that Umm 'Alī was so sensitive to the needs of God's creatures that she considered the needs even of the unclean dogs. The charity may, however, have gone too far: why slaughter useful asses to feed ravening dogs?

### Living out the Sufi Experience

The second anecdote in the Faḍā'il-i Balkh's excerpt on Umm 'Alī recounts her receiving the news that her husband had died and, shortly thereafter, learning that Aḥmad had merely fainted and was actually in good health. Umm 'Alī is depicted as the apotheosis of composure and patience, which are important virtues for Sufis. Her unruffled stance throughout this series of events is contrasted with the agitated reactions of the co-wife, Ḥakīma Zāhida. The author concludes that it is clear from this account that everyone reaches his or her particular "station" (maqām) and "moment" (waqt) in life. The implication appears to be that Umm 'Alī had reached higher levels in both maqām and waqt.

The concepts of maqām and waqt are important in Sufism. The Sufi maqām is the dimension of spiritual experience generally characterized as having a certain duration and resulting, to some extent, from individual striving. The Sufi waqt is a dimension of mystical experience considered a timeless instant in which one is aware most acutely of one's spiritual state.<sup>80</sup>

Umm 'Alī, who is also called the one who is "of a high standing" (mahd-i 'aliyya), had reached these spiritual heights. Umm 'Alī is, for Shaykh al-Islām al-Wā'iz, an exemplary mystic.

Al-Hujwīrī also emphasizes Umm 'Alī's spiritual qualities, stating explicitly that she was "on the ṭarīqa", the Sufi path upon which all mystics embarked: "Fāṭima, his [Aḥmad b. Khidrawayh's] wife, had a noble standing in the Sufi path" (Wa Fāṭima, ki 'iyāl-i way būd, andar ṭarīqat sha'nī 'azīm dāsht).<sup>81</sup>

### Advanced Learning and Exchange with Sufi Masters

According to al-Hujwīrī, Umm ‘Alī furthered her scholarly training by attending lessons with one of the most celebrated Islamic mystics of her time, Abū Yazīd (Bāyazīd) al-Bisṭā mī (d. 261/874 or 264/877-8).<sup>82</sup>

Al-Hujwīrī’s account of what she did when she arrived to study with Abū Yazīd is as follows:

*Chūn pīsh-i Bāyazīd āmad, burqa ‘ az rūy bar-dāsht, wa bā way sukhan-i gustākh mī-guft. Aḥmad az ān muta ‘ajjib shud wa ghayrat bar dilash mustawlī gasht. Guft: “Yā Fāṭima, ān chi gustākhī būdat bā Bāyazīd?” Guft: “Az āncha tū maḥram-i tabī‘at-i manī, wa way maḥram-i ta rīqat-i man. Az tū bi hawā rasam, wa az way bi khudā. Wa dalīl bar īn, ān ki way az su ḥbat-i man bī-nīyāz ast, wa tū bi man muḥtāj.”*<sup>83</sup>

*When she came to Bāyazīd [Abū Yazīd], she removed her veil from her face and spoke with him boldly. Aḥmad was surprised by this, and jealousy seized his heart. He said, “Oh Fāṭima, why this boldness with Bāyazīd?” She said, “As much as you are my natural partner, he is my spiritual partner. Through you I reach love, and through him I reach God. This is because he does not need my company, while you need me.”*

Al-Hujwīrī tells us that the relationship between Umm ‘Alī and Abū Yazīd was not to last. One day, the great mystic commented on her hands and the henna painted on them. The utterance of such observations on a part of her body was a step too far for her, and Umm ‘Alī declared that it had rendered their companionship unlawful (ḥarām).

It seems that Atṭā r picked up this account from al-Hujwīrī, as his description of Umm ‘Alī’s relationship with Abū Yazīd is almost identical:

*Chūn pīsh-i Bāyazīd andar āmadand Fāṭima niqāb az rūy bar-dāsht, wa bā Abū Yazīd sukhan mī-guft. Aḥmad az ān mutaghayyir shud, wa ghayratī bar dilash mustawlī shud. Guft: “Ay Fāṭima, īn chi gustākhī būd ki-bā Bāyazīd kardī?” Fāṭima guft: “Az ān-ki tu maḥram-i ta bī‘at-i manī, wa Bāyazīd maḥram-i ta rīqat-i man, az tū bi-hawā birasām wa az way bi-khudāy rasam. Wa dalīl-i sukhan īn-ast, ki ū az su ḥbat-i man bī-nīyāz ast, wa tu bi-man muḥtājī.”*<sup>84</sup>

*When they arrived at Bāyazīd’s, Fāṭima removed her veil from her face, and spoke with Abū Yazīd. Aḥmad became angry at this, and jealousy seized his heart. He said, “Oh Fāṭima, why this boldness with Bāyazīd?” Fāṭima said, “As much as you are my natural partner, Bāyazīd is my spiritual partner. Through you I reach love, and through him I reach God. This is because he does not need my company, while you need me.”*

How are we to explain Umm ‘Alī’s unveiling in front of her teacher and scholarly companion Abū Yazīd? This is very different from what we learn from Mamluk accounts, that women who studied with men sat behind a screen so they could not be seen. They also studied alongside men, at times in full view and in public spaces.<sup>85</sup> The informal setting, of course, lent itself well to administering the teaching of women whose movements were more restricted than those of men. Even where men and women did seem to interact in full view of each other, the unveiling of a woman’s face strikes one as unusual. Is it possible that Umm ‘Alī unveiled herself in order to assume the role of a male scholar?



Umm ‘Alī’s reverse gendering finds its echo in a statement by al-Hujwīrī, who cites Abū Yazīd as saying this about Umm ‘Alī: “Whoever wishes to see a man disguised in women’s clothes, let him look at Fāṭima!”<sup>86</sup> Alyssa Gabbay, in her study of Raziya, a noblewoman of the Delhi Sultanate, tried to make sense of her cross-dressing and identification as a man. Gabbay understood that Raziya had “exploited a metaphorical space in which elite daughters could exercise greater agency within a society that normally severely restricted their actions.”<sup>87</sup> I find this a plausible explanation also for Umm ‘Alī’s reverse genderization.

But perhaps Abū Nu‘aym al-Isf ahānī saw precisely this part of the account on Umm ‘Alī as problematic and adjusted the narrative somewhat. His (Arabic) account of Shaykh “Aḥmad b. Khidr” begins with Umm ‘Alī, who was “a daughter of notables” (min banāt al-kibār):

*[Umm ‘Alī] excused (ḥallalat) her husband of paying [the later instalments of ?] her bride-price (ṣadaq),<sup>88</sup> on the condition that he marry her (an yuzawwijahā) to Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭ ā mī. He took her to Abū Yazīd. She came before him and sat down in front of him, her face unveiled. Aḥmad expressed amazement and said to her, “I see that you are unveiled before Abū Yazīd.” She replied, “Because whenever I look at him I lose the fortune of my soul, and whenever I look at you I return to the fortunes of my soul.” But when he left, he [Aḥmad] said to Abū Yazīd, “Give me some advice.” He said, “Learn chivalry ( futuwwa) from your wife.”<sup>89</sup>*

It is interesting that Abū Nu‘aym also refers to Umm ‘Alī’s manly characteristics ( futuwwa). His account diverges from the Persian ones in one main detail: Umm ‘Alī was married by her husband Aḥmad to Abū Yazīd. Presumably this would have been preceded by a divorce. Whether this actually happened we cannot know, but it is interesting that Abū Nu‘aym felt it necessary to mention such a marriage, which may have been carried out in name only, in order to enable Umm ‘Alī to study under this man. Oddly, Abū Nu‘aym does not give his source for the account.

The idea of a nominal marriage is reminiscent of the Baghdādī al-Mas‘ūdī’s (d. 345/956) account of a marriage carried out on the orders of the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd between his friend the Barmakid Ja‘far and his sister ‘Abbāsa. This segment of al-Mas‘ūdī’s Murūj al-dhahab is analyzed in detail by Julie Scott Meisami in her article on love and the fall of the Barmakids.<sup>90</sup> The caliph wanted to enjoy the company of Ja‘far and ‘Abbāsa together. Al-Mas‘ūdī stresses that the marriage was one in name only, having Hārūn al-Rashīd say to Ja‘far, “which will allow you to spend evenings with her, to look upon her, and to associate with her in gatherings in which I am with you, but no more than that.” The marriage between ‘Abbāsa and Ja‘far, however, was consummated against the caliph’s wishes, and Hārūn al-Rashīd quarrelled with Ja‘far. Of course, there is a second element in our story of Umm ‘Alī, which is that she was already married and had to divorce, perhaps temporarily, in order to pursue her educational goals. Jane Khatib-Chahidi discusses how certain kinds of “fictive marriages” are still practiced by devout women in Shi‘i Iran as a way for enabling women to interact with men in a non-sexual manner. Seen in this light, the meaning of the account on Umm ‘Alī may be that she was so

devout that she even subjected herself to a nominal marriage before agreeing to study with Abū Yazīd.<sup>91</sup> The purpose of the account is thus to emphasize her piety.

Another part of Abū Nu‘aym’s characterization that stands out is the description of Umm ‘Alī as “chivalrous” (futuwwa). This seems to echo al-Hujwīrī’s earlier description of her as “a woman dressed in man’s clothes.”

It is also reminiscent of the anecdote on Umm ‘Alī’s coaching of Aḥmad on how to host a member of the futuwwa, as well as the account that, when Aḥmad brought her to Abū Yazīd, Umm ‘Alī did not behave like a normal prospective bride, who would have lowered her veil. The metaphor of futuwwa should not be read as referring to her gender; it refers non-technically to the quality of young men and, in Sufi terminology, especially to a reckless lack of self-regard. Thus, the meaning seems to be complimentary towards her, rather than derogatory or critical.<sup>92</sup>

Annemarie Schimmel explains this kind of reverse gendering: “One should not be misled by the constant use of the word ‘man’ in the mystical literature of the Islamic languages: it merely points to the ideal human being who has reached proximity to God where there is no distinction of sexes; and Rābī‘a is the prime model of this proximity.”<sup>93</sup> This explanation, seeing the term “male” as asexual and merely as indicating proximity to God, denies the implications of power enshrined in this male image. I would prefer to suggest Umm ‘Alī’s scholarly prowess might be explained only by making her “male.”

In a later source, Jāmī’s (d. 898/1492) *Nafahāt al-uns*, Umm ‘Alī is described differently. The *Nafahāt al-uns* post-dates the *Faḍā’il-i Balkh* by three centuries and is the only one of the Sufi biographical compilations mentioned so far that has a section devoted to female Sufis, with more than thirty-three entries on women. Most of these are women from Basra and Kufa in the first centuries of Islam, with a handful of eastern women, notably a woman from Khwārazm, one from Nishapur, and one from Bisṭā m.<sup>94</sup> Jāmī actually does not connect Umm ‘Alī to Balkh specifically (or any other place). A large proportion of the women are identified through their marital or family relations to men, some of whose biographical dates we know. It is, yet again, through the men’s lives that we can historicize these women. Umm ‘Alī’s life story stands out, together with a handful of others in Jāmī’s compilation, as having studied under great male scholars of the ninth and tenth centuries CE, and having achieved scholarly excellence and piety through charitable acts.<sup>95</sup> Jāmī states:

*Wa bā Aḥmad dar āncha būd muwāfiqat namūd. Bāyazīd-rā wa Abū Ḥafṣ- rā - qaddasa Allāh ta‘ālā ruḥ-huma - dīda būd wa az Bāyazīd su‘ālāt karda būd. Abū Ḥ afṣ gufta-ast ki: “Hamīsha ḥadīth-i zanān-rā makrūh mī-dāshtam, tā ān waqt ki Umm ‘Alī zawja-yi Aḥmad Khīḍrawayh-rā dīdam” . . . Bāyazīd . . . gufta-ast: “Har-ki taṣṣ a wuf warzad bāyad bi-himmatī warzad chūn himmat-i Umm ‘Alī, zawja-yi Aḥmad Khīḍrawayh.”<sup>96</sup>*

*She agreed with Aḥmad b. Khīḍrawayh on everything. She met with Abū Yazīd and Abū Ḥ afṣ 7 - may God bless their souls - and studied under Abū Yazīd. Abū Ḥ afṣ has said, “I never valued women’s ḥadīth until I met Umm ‘Alī, the wife of Aḥmad Khīḍrawayh” . . . Abū Yazīd . . . has said, “Whoever*

*wants to study Sufism must do so with the degree of effort which Umm ‘Alī, the wife of Aḥmad Khidrawayh, had shown.”*

The notable difference from the earlier accounts is that the manly characterizations of Umm ‘Alī are missing, but Jāmī continues the tradition of her strengths as a scholar who enjoyed the company of some of the greatest male Muslim mystics of her time. It is interesting that Jāmī added the sentence emphasizing that Umm ‘Alī agreed with everything that Aḥmad believed in or did: it reads almost like an effort to correct the imbalance in the relationship in favour of Umm ‘Alī that we encounter in the earlier sources.

## Conclusion

Umm ‘Alī of Balkh presents a very different case of female religious authority from that of Rābi‘a al-‘Adawiyya. The two had three things in common: their era - Rābi‘a preceded Umm ‘Alī by just one generation - their serious engagement with Muslim learning and mysticism as ‘ulamā, and their gender. Here is where the similarity ends. Each of these women had a particular path to scholarship, and each focussed on her own field of scholarship. While Rābi‘a came from the lowest stratum of society - she had been manumitted from slavery - Umm ‘Alī possessed exceptional wealth, not from her own labours but through inheritance from a family of the highest pedigree. Rābi‘a’s disciples came from all walks of life, while Umm ‘Alī’s social circle was centred on the provincial elite. Rābi‘a received many offers of marriage but rejected them all, choosing celibacy;<sup>98</sup> Umm ‘Alī had to ask Aḥmad b. Khidrawayh more than once before he sought her hand in marriage. Rābi‘a famously refused help from her friends, as a mark of her extreme asceticism and otherworldliness,<sup>99</sup> while Umm ‘Alī donated stipends to the poor. Rābi‘a developed and taught concepts in Islamic mysticism focussed on love and communion with God, while Umm ‘Alī studied and taught the Qur’an. We do not hear of Rābi‘a learning from any particular master,<sup>100</sup> while we read that Umm ‘Alī studied with her teacher Ṣāliḥ b. ‘Abdallāh, whose book of tafsīr she transmitted. Umm ‘Alī, like any good ‘ālim, travelled to study for an extended period, while travel is not highlighted in the accounts of Rābi‘a.

In terms of the representations of these women, Rābi‘a tends to be accorded her own entries in the biographical dictionaries, while Umm ‘Alī is usually mentioned in relation to her husband. This seems to reflect a historiographical tradition rather than a real weighting of these two women’s contributions to Islamic scholarship and mysticism. The author of the *Faḍā’il-i Balkh* was clearly impressed with the *mahd-i ‘aliyya* - the “[lady of ] high standing”—concluding that it was no wonder that Balkh’s *shuyūkh* were exceptional, considering how great their wives were.<sup>101</sup> This male author, rather predictably, saw accomplished women as a prerequisite for male eminence. It is reminiscent of the phrase, “Behind every successful man stands a great woman.” Could it be that behind this successful woman stood a great man? Thus, *al-Wā’iz*’s praise should not detract from the fact that the author still did not feel compelled to devote a separate biography to her.

However, the Shaykh al-Islām and other mediaeval authors of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries CE give us clues as to how a woman like Umm ‘Alī used strategies that enabled them to manoeuvre in the world of scholarship. These included reverse genderization (i.e., “being a man”) and engaging in nominal marriage. The stories of Umm ‘Alī that are repeated (with variations) in numerous sources during this period are the product of the historiographical tradition from which they spring. At some point between the mid-ninth and the early eleventh centuries, their stories became canonical in the biographical traditions and were introduced into the biographical sources and, in Umm ‘Alī’s case, into the local history of Balkh.

We find a subtle change in the later sources on Umm ‘Alī’s character: by the fifteenth century she loses those “manly” attributes that appear in the earlier sources. She becomes the virtuous woman who helps the poor and follows her husband in everything he believes - no divorce, no nominal marriage with Abū Yazīd. There is no more unveiling, no challenging or teaching her husband. Umm ‘Alī becomes pacified by historiography. Umm ‘Alī, like other women scholars in the later sources, are still represented as excelling in their scholarship and mystical experience, but social conventions eventually obliged the male authors who memorialized them to turn their legacy quiet, though not completely silent, for which we should be thankful.

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## Appendix

The following excerpt on the ninth-century Balkhī scholar Umm ‘Alī is taken from the Faḍā’il-i Balkh, written in Persian in 676/1278 and based on an Arabic original of 610/1214 that does not survive.<sup>102</sup> The Persian text has been translated and transcribed, with a commentary.

*Shaykh al-Islām Abū al-Qāsim Qushayrī, may God have mercy on him, related that, one day, an esteemed visitor arrived at Shaykh Aḥmad Khidrawayh[’s house]. The shaykh said to his wife, “I want to invite this friend in because he is the head (sayyid) of the generous and the free of all times.” The lady (khātūn) said, “Oh Aḥmad! Can’t you do that, and don’t you know how one ought to invite these people of humanity and [fol. 135b]<sup>103</sup> chivalry (murūwat wa-futuwwat)?” The shaykh said, “It cannot be, but that a meal must be prepared?” The lady explained that, “according [to practice, you must] slaughter sheep, cows, and asses and leave [their remains] at the entrance to our house.” The shaykh asked, “I understand the sacrifice of the cows, but what is the need for the asses?” The mistress of the house (kad-bānū) retorted, “If one brings an honoured guest to the house, does it matter that the alley dogs get some food thanks to that?”*

*And in the history books it has come down to us that: The mahd-i ‘aliyya (“[lady of ] high standing”)<sup>104</sup> who was the wife of Shaykh Aḥmad Khidrawayh, was the daughter of Mālik b. Ṣāliḥ, and her mother was known as Mu’mina (lit. “believer [fem.]”). [Her mother] was the daughter of Ḥasan [b.] [Ḥ]umrān, who was the governor (wālī) of Khorasan.<sup>105</sup> The grave (turbat) of the lady Mu’mina<sup>106</sup> is in a place in Ba[l]kh<sup>107</sup> called the Arch of Mu’mina (ṭāq-i Mu’mina) and it is in [a?] ribāṭ.<sup>108</sup> The lady of Shaykh Aḥmad Khidrawayh, may God have mercy on him, has transmitted the book of Tafsīr by Ṣāliḥ [b.] ‘Abdallāh. They say that she sold her own land and property for 79,000 dirhams and embarked on the ḥajj. When she arrived in Mecca, she performed the ḥajj of [fol. 136a] Islam, and completed all its rites. Then she turned to the study of Islamic learning (‘ilm). She resided [in Mecca] for seven years, becoming skilled in all the subjects of ‘ilm, and attended the sessions of ḥadīth (aḥādīth istimā‘ kard). After that, she returned to Balkh, and in Balkh she was buried near the tomb of Shaykh Aḥmad.*

*‘Alī b. Faḍl, may God have mercy on him, relates about Shaykh Aḥmad Khidrawayh, may God have mercy on him, that, Umm ‘Alī, the elder wife would say [in Arabic], “The faith of a believer is like a mountain: it is safe from the movements of the wind.” And [Shaykh Aḥmad] had another wife, Ḥakīma Zāhida, and she said, “The faith of a believer is like a supple tree that flexes [in the wind] but does not fall.” The meaning (ma‘nī) [of the Arabic] is that the faith of a believer is like a mountain that is immune to the blowing and quivering of the wind. The younger wife [on the other hand] contended that the faith of a believer was like a young tree, which leans in all directions but does not fall.*

*One day they brought the news to Umm ‘Alī that Shaykh Aḥmad had passed away. Both ladies were in the kitchen, baking bread. The younger wife rushed to the door to obtain more details, leaving off her [fol. 136b] bread-baking duties. After just a short while, the happy news arrived that*

*the shaykh was alive, having [merely] fainted and [now] regained consciousness. For a second time the younger wife had run to the door to find out everything about his recovery. [During all this time,] Umm 'Alī, who had spoken about the faith of the believer as a mountain, had remained still and seated, never stopping baking bread. She had not been upset and aggrieved by the news of the shaykh's death, nor had she been overjoyed and elated by the [subsequent] notification that he was in good health. In that moment, the wife Ḥakīma Zāhida, who had said that the faith of a believer was like a young tree that leaned in all directions but did not fall over, had understood the words of Umm 'Alī. Thus, it is clear now that each of us has his own station (maqām) and time (waqt). If the wives of these pure [ones] were such, [just think] at what levels the great shuyūkh must have been!*

## Notes

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1) Shaykh al-Islām al-Wā‘iz and ‘Abdallāh b. Muḥammad b. al-Qāsim al-Ḥusaynī, *Faḍā’il-i Balkh*, ed. ‘Abd al-Ḥayy Ḥabībī (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Bunyād-i Farhang-i Īrān, 1350/1971):227.

2) Annemarie Schimmel, “Women in Mystical Islam,” *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 5/2 (1982): 147, and Schimmel, *My Soul is a Woman: The Feminine in Islam*, trans. S.H. Ray (New York: Continuum, 1997).

3) Margaret Meriwether and Judith Tucker, *A Social History of Women and Gender in the Modern Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999).

4) This plurality stems from the non-existence of formal schools (madrasas), the regional differences in the evolution of madhāhib, and the non-alignment of individual scholars with a particular legal school or its master. Stephen Humphreys, *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1991): 199; Eyyup Kaya, “Continuity and Change in Islamic Law: The Concept of Madhhab and the Dimensions of Legal Disagreement in Ḥanafī Scholarship of the Tenth Century,” in *The Islamic School of Law*, ed. Peri Bearman et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005): 26-40; Arezou Azad, *Sacred Landscape in Medieval Afghanistan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming): 173-7.

5) Other hagiographical sources that date from around the time when the *Faḍā’il-i Balkh* was written use the term “Sufī,” usually with a reference to the Sufī mystical path, the ṭarīqa.

6) These include Ibrāhīm b. Adham (d. 161/777-8), Shaqīq al-Balkhī (d. 194/809-10) and Ḥātim al-Aṣamm (d. 237/857-8). See *Faḍā’il-i Balkh*, ed. Ḥabībī, 93-118, 129-42, 165-77; Richard Gramlich, *Alte Vorbilder des Sufitums* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1996), 2:13-62.

7) Meriwether and Tucker, *A Social History*: 1-2.

8) Mohammad Akram Nadwi, *Al-Muḥaddithat: The Women Scholars in Islam*, 40 vols. (forthcoming); summarized in Nadwi, *Al-Muḥaddithāt: The Women Scholars in Islam* (Oxford: Interface Publications, 2007).

9) Ruth Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: From Ibn Sa‘d to Who’s Who* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner, 1994), and Roded, “Islamic Biographical Dictionaries: 9th to 10th Century,” in *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures*, ed. Suad Joseph (Leiden: Brill, 2003-7).

10) Nadwi, *Al-Muḥaddithāt*: xv.

11) Irene Schneider, “Gelehrte Frauen des 5./11. bis 7./13.Jh.s nach dem biographischen Werk des Dahabi (st. 748/1347),” in *Philosophy and Arts in the Islamic World*, ed. Urbain Vermeulen and D. de Smet (Leuven: Peeters, 1998): 116-8, 121.

12) Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections*: 19-20. For a recent example, see Mervat Hatem, “A’isha Abdel Rahman: An Unlikely Heroine: A Post-Colonial Reading of her Life and Some of her Biographies of Women in the Prophetic Household,” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 7/2 (2011): 1-26.

13) The numbers increase somewhat again in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries CE but decline gradually and consistently after the sixteenth century CE (for both female and male scholars). Nadwi, *Al-Muḥaddithāt*: 245-6, 271-2.

14) Ruth Roded, *Women in Islam and the Middle East: A Reader* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999): 77-8; Ibn ‘Asākīr, *Ta’rīkh madīnat Dimashq*, ed. Muḥibb al-Dīn Abī Sa‘īd ‘Umar b. Gharāma al-‘Amrawī, 5 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1995-2000).

15) Richard Bulliet, “Women and the Urban Religious Elite in the Pre-Mongol Period,” in *Women in Iran from the Rise of Islam to 1800*, ed. Guity Neshat and Lois Beck (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003): 68.

- 16) This categorization of female subjects of biographical compilations is taken from Malīḥa Raḥmat Allāh Raḥmatallah, *The Women of Baghdad in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries as Revealed in the History of Baghdad of al-Hatib* (Baghdad: Times Press, 1963), cited in Bulliet, "Women and the Urban": 70-1.
- 17) Al-Nasafi, *al-Qand fi dhikr 'ulamā'* Samarqand, ed. Nazar Muḥammad al-Fāryābī (Jidda: Maktabat al-Kawthar, 1991): 147.
- 18) Maya Shatzmiller, "Aspects of Women's Participation in the Economic Life of Later Medieval Islam: Occupations and Mentalities," *Arabica* 35 (1988): 58.
- 19) Leslie Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- 20) Julia Bray, "Men, Women and Slaves in Abbasid Society," in *Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300-900*, ed. Leslie Brubaker and Julia M.H. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 130.
- 21) Faḍā'il-i Balkh, ed. Ḥabībī: 66, 93, 119, 129ff.
- 22) 'Atṭā' r, *Tadhkirat al-Awliyā'*, 1: 59-73; Margaret Smith, *Muslim Women Mystics: The Life and Work of Rabia and Other Women Mystics in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001): 29; Margaret Smith, "Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya al-Ḳaysiyya", *EI2* (1995) 8: 355.
- 23) Jonathan Berkey, "Women and Islamic Education in the Mamluk Period," in *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, ed. Nikki Keddie and Beth Baron (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991): 149.
- 24) Huda Lutfi, "Manners and Customs of Fourteenth-Century Cairene Women: Female Anarchy versus Male Shar'ī Order in Muslim Prescriptive Treatises," in *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, ed. Nikki Keddie and Beth Baron (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991): 115.
- 25) Christopher Melchert, "Whether to Keep Women out of the Mosque: A Survey of Medieval Islamic Law," in *Authority, Privacy and Public Order in Islam*, ed. Barbara Michalak-Pikulski and Andrzej Pikulski (Leuven: Peeters, 2006): 59.
- 26) Mathieu Tillier, "Women before the Qadi under the Abbasids," *Islamic Law and Society* 16/3-4 (2009): 301. Tillier caveated his finding with the social distinction between those who could leave their houses and came before the judge (unveiled), and those who could not. He found that high-ranking women avoided such public exposure. Other studies on women's visibility and the law include: Judith Tucker, "Muftīs and Matrimony: Islamic Law and Gender in Ottoman Syria and Palestine," *Islamic Law and Society* 1/3 (1994): 265-300, and Nicholas Awde, *Women in Islam: An Anthology from the Qur'ān and Ḥadīths* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2000). Another set of studies does not deal with women scholars per se, but provides evidence for the visibility and public political role of high-society mediaeval women in the Islamic world. Nabia Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad: Mother and Wife of Hārūn al-Rashīd* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1946); Maaïke van Berkel focussed on women at the Abbasid court of the initially under-aged caliph al-Muqtadir (r. 295-320/908-32), in "The Young Caliph and His Wicked Advisors: Women and Power Politics under Caliph al-Muqtadir (r. 295-320/908-932)," *Al-Masāq: Islam and the Medieval Mediterranean* 19/1 (2007), 3-15. Eric Hanne found similar trends amongst women in the Abbasid courts of the early eleventh to twelfth centuries CE, in "Women, Power, and the Eleventh and Twelfth Century Abbasid Court," *Hawwa: Journal of Women of the Middle East and Islamic World* 3/1 (2005), 80-110.
- 27) Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections*: 45, 58-9.
- 28) Bulliet, "Women and the Urban Religious Elite": 75.
- 29) Julie Scott Meisami, "Writing Medieval Women: Representations and Misrepresentations," in *Writing and Representation in Medieval Islam: Muslim Horizons*, ed. Julia Bray (London: Routledge, 2006): 66.
- 30) Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Denise Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past: The Legacy of 'A'isha bint Abi Bakri* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).
- 31) Scott Meisami, "Writing Medieval Women": 59-60.

32) Joan Connelly, *Portrait of a Priestess: Women and Ritual in Ancient Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007): 2-3.

33) The earliest copy - deposited at the Bibliothèque nationale française as MS Persan 115—can be placed roughly in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth centuries CE, based on its epigraphic style and paper quality. Edgar Blochet, *Catalogue des Manuscrits Persans* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1905), 1: 316-7; Francis Richard, *Catalogue des manuscrits persans. 1. Anciens fonds* (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale, 1989): 134. The text may well have undergone recension since the original was copied, but the biographies do not go beyond the late twelfth century CE, and there has been no attempt by later copyists to add more scholars to the group of seventy. The second-oldest manuscript came to light a decade ago and has been dated to the seventeenth century. ‘Ārif Nawshāhī, “Nuskha-yi naw-yāfta-yi Faḍā’il-i Balkh,” *Ma‘ārif* 19/2 (1381/2002): 61. In addition, two nineteenth-century manuscripts are deposited in St Petersburg, at the Department of Oriental Manuscripts, with the catalogue numbers C453-1 and C453-3. N.D. Miklukho-Maklai, *Opisanie tadhikskikh i persidskikh rukopisei* Institutā (Moscow: Izd-vo Akademii nauk SSSR: 1961), 2: 86-93. These St Petersburg manuscripts, together with the Paris manuscript, formed the basis for the 1350/1971 Tehran edition of the Faḍā’il-i Balkh by the Afghan scholar ‘Abd al-Ḥayy Ḥabībī, cited extensively in this article.

34) Jürgen Paul, “The Histories of Isfahan: Mafarrukhi’s Kitāb Maḥāsīn Isfahan,” *Iranian Studies* 33/1-2 (2000): 119, 126; and Jürgen Paul, “Hagiographische Texte als historische Quelle,” *Saeculum* 41 (1990): 17-45; also Stefan Leder (ed.), *Story-telling in the Framework of Non-fictional Arabic Literature* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998).

35) The biographical entries in ṭabaqāt works tend to be brief and usually involve a perfunctory listing of who transmitted from whom. The aim was to establish a proper chain of transmission (isnād) on a ḥadīth text which authenticated any given statement. Ibrahim Hafsi, “Recherches sur le genre ‘ṭabaqāt’ dans la littérature arabe,” *Arabica* 23 (1976-7): 228ff.

36) John Renard, *Historical Dictionary of Sufism* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2005): 62.

37) Shaykh al-Islām al-Wā‘iz used it as a source also for the biography of Ḥātim al-Aṣamm (d. 237/857-8). Faḍā’il-i Balkh, ed. Ḥabībī: 169.

38) Abū l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla al-Qushayrīya fī ‘ilm al-ṭaṣawwuf*, ed. Ma‘rūf Zurayq and ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Balṭajī (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1990): 228; *Al-Qushayrī’s Epistle on Sufism: al-Risāla al-Qushayrīya fī ‘ilm al-ṭaṣawwuf*, trans. Alexander Knysh (Reading, UK: Garnet, 2007): 238-9; see also Jawid Mojaddedi on Qushayrī’s *Risāla*, in *The Biographical Tradition in Sufism: The Ṭabaqāt Genre from al-Sulamī to Jāmī* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2001): 99-124. It should be noted that Qushayrī refers to these chivalrous men as ‘‘ayyār’ who were members of local urban militias in Muslim cities and towns. On the connection between the ‘ayyārān, medieval Sufism and chivalry, see Deborah Tor, *Violent Order, Religious Warfare, Chivalry, and the ‘Ayyār Phenomenon in the Medieval Islamic World* (Würzburg: Ergon in Kommission, 2007): 229 ff.

39) Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections*: 92.

40) Abū Nu‘aym al-Isfahānī, *Ḥilyat al-awliyā’ wa-ṭabaqāt al-asfīya’* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1932); ‘Alī b. ‘Uthmān al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-mahjūb*, ed. Maḥmūd Du‘ābidī (Tehran: Surūsh, 1383/2004-5); Farīd al-Dīn ‘Attār, *The Tadhkiratu ‘l-Awliya’ (Memoirs of the Saints)*, ed. Reynold A. Nicholson (London: Luzac, 1905); ‘Abd al-Raḥman b. Aḥmad Jāmī, *Nafaḥāt al-uns min ḥaḍarāt al-quds*, ed. Maḥmūd ‘Ābidī (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Ittīlā‘āt, 1370/1991). Abū Nu‘aym and ‘Attār are, in fact, cited in other biographical entries of the Faḍā’il-i Balkh. See Faḍā’il-i Balkh, ed. Ḥabībī: xxiii-xxiv, 120, 167, 220.

41) Faḍā’il-i Balkh, ed. Ḥabībī: 10. ‘Alī b. al-Faḍl’s ṭabaqāt is no longer extant, but we know that it was used widely, at least until the fifteenth century. It is referred to by al-Khatīb al-Baghdādī (d. 463/1071) in the *Ta’rīkh Baghdād*, and by al-Sakhāwī four centuries later, in the *al-I‘lān bi-l-tawbīkh li-man damma ahl al-tawrīkh*. Al-Khatīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta’rīkh Baghdād*, ed. Aḥmad b. al-Ṣiddīq (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1349/1931), 12: 47-8; al-Sakhāwī, *al-I‘lān bi-l-tawbīkh li-man dhamma ahl al-tawrīkh*, in Franz Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968): 464 and n. 1.



- 42) Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: 3. Ibn Sa'd's selection of Khorasani scholars is slim, however, and lists only men. See Ibn Sa'd, al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1957-68), 7: 365-79.
- 43) Al-Sulamī, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*, ed. Johannes Pedersen (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960): 93-7. This is an abbreviated version of al-Sulamī's non-extant *Ta'rikh al-ṣūfiyya*, and it is very likely that she was mentioned in the longer work.
- 44) Al-Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women: Dhikr al-niswa al-muta'abbidāt al-Ṣūfiyyāt*, ed. and trans. Rkia Elaroui Cornell (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999): 168-9.
- 45) The Shaykh al-Islām perhaps refers here to the chronicles on Balkh that existed in his time but are lost to us. There was, for example, the *Manāqib Balkh* written by the geographer Abū Zayd Aḥmad b. Sahl al-Balkhī (d. 322/934), which the Shaykh al-Islām cites elsewhere in his work. See *Faḍā'il-i Balkh*, ed. Ḥabībī: 54, 226.
- 46) The Shaykh al-Islām does not cite a single general history anywhere in the *Faḍā'il-i Balkh*, not even al-Ṭaḥṭā'ī's (d. 310/923) *Ta'rikh* or its Persian adaptation by Bal'amī (d. 363/974). Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭaḥṭā'ī, *Ta'rikh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, ed. M.J. de Goeje, in 15 vols and 3 series (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1879-1901); Abū 'Alī Bal'amī, *Ta'rikh-nāma-yi Ṭabarī gardānīda-yi mansūb bi Bal'amī*, ed. Muḥammad Rawshan (Tehran: Bunyād-i Farhang-i Irān, 1378/1999); *Chronique du Abou-Djafar-Mohamed-ben Djarir-ben-Yezid Tabarī*, trans. Hermann Zotenberg (Paris: Oriental Translation Fund, 1867-74).
- 47) *Faḍā'il-i Balkh*, ed. Ḥabībī: 226-7. See excerpt in appendix.
- 48) *Faḍā'il-i Balkh*, ed. Ḥabībī: 226, 219 and n. 12; Gramlich, *Alte Vorbilder*, 2: 96 and n. 7. Sāliḥ b. 'Abdallāh would also have been the name of her great-uncle (see below).
- 49) Ignaz Goldziher, *Muhammedanische Studien* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1889-90): 175-88.
- 50) Berkey, "Women and Islamic Education": 145-6; also Goldziher, *Muhammedanische Studien*: 192.
- 51) We can assume - from the statement that, when she returned, he was already buried in Balkh - that she travelled without her husband for at least part of her time in Mecca. *Faḍā'il-i Balkh*, ed. Ḥabībī: 226. We do not know whether Umm 'Alī travelled with anyone else.
- 52) Al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-maḥjūb*: 183.
- 53) *Faḍā'il-i Balkh*, ed. Ḥabībī: 219-30.
- 54) Gramlich, *Alte Vorbilder*, 2: 95-112; Mina Hafizi, trans. Farzin Negahban, "Aḥmad b. Khidrawayh (Khidrūya) al-Balkhī," in *Encyclopaedia Islamica*, 3: 261-4.
- 55) Gramlich, *Alte Vorbilder*, 2: 95; Hamid Algar, "Malāmatiyya. 2. In Iran and the Eastern Lands," *EI2*, 6: 224-5.
- 56) Gramlich, *Alte Vorbilder*, 2: 102-5. Here, Gramlich also cites the verses by the poet Rūmī on Aḥmad b. Khidrawayh's constant debt on account of his generosity (p. 104), verses 373-444, entitled "How by divine inspiration Shaykh Aḥmad, son of Khidrawayh, bought ḥalwā (sweetmeats) for his creditors." See Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī, *Mathnawī wa-ma'nawī*, ed. Reynold Nicholson (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1925-40), 4/1: 268; 4/2: 241-5, repr. (Tehran: Nashr-i Būta, 2002), 1: 350-5.
- 57) Gramlich, *Alte Vorbilder*, 2: 95-8; Hafizi, "Aḥmad b. Khidrawayh": 262. Both cite, in particular, the account by al-Sahlagī. See al-Sahlagī, "al-Nūr min kalimāt Abī (Yazīd) Ṭa'yfūr," in 'Abd al-Raḥmān Badawī, *Shata' hāt al-sūfiyya* (Kuwait: Wakālat al-Maṭbū'āt, 1976). See also *Faḍā'il-i Balkh*, ed. Ḥabībī: 169, 219.
- 58) For details, see Gramlich, *Alte Vorbilder*, 2: 98-9.
- 59) Hafizi, "Aḥmad b. Khidrawayh": 262; 'Abdallāh al-Ansārī al-Harawī, *Ṭaḥṭā'ī al-sūfiyya*, ed. Muḥammad Sarwar Mawlā'ī (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Tūs, 1362/1983): 98.
- 60) 'Alī b. 'Uthmān al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-maḥjūb*, ed. Maḥmūd Du'ābidī (Tehran: 1383/2004-5), 183.
- 61) 'Atṭār, *Tadhkirat al-awliyā'*: 288.
- 62) al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-maḥjūb*: 183.
- 63) *Ibid.*
- 64) The *Faḍā'il-i Balkh* does not make specific mention of Umm 'Alī as being "manly." As an aside, we do find this metaphor in its account of another ninth-century woman, the wife (khātūn) of the Banījūrīd ruler of Balkh, Dāwūd b. 'Abbās b. Hāshim (r. 233-56/848-70). He is said to have been preoccupied for twenty years with building his palace

Nawshād, during which time the khātūn performed the ruler's gubernatorial functions. The Faḍā'il-i Balkh gives a rare example of just, generous, and dignified rule by the khātūn. She embarrassed the (unnamed) caliph in Baghdad, who was exacting exorbitant amounts of land tax (kharāj) from the people of Balkh. The reference seems to be to the caliphal policy of farming out state revenues, with local governors as tax-collectors to make up for the loss of provincial revenues and pay for their inflated bureaucracy - an exploitative practice the khātūn was clearly not willing to support. We are told that, through the caliphal tax collector ( 'āmil-i dār al-khilāfa), the khātūn at Balkh sent a personal garment that was studded with jewels and gold wefts as a gift. The caliph rejected it, feeling ashamed, and returned the gift to the khātūn, saying, "This lady has taught us gentlemanliness ( jawān-mardī)." Faḍā'il-i Balkh, ed. Ḥabībī: 21. The anecdote is repeated, with minor variations, in Faḍā'il-i Balkh, ed. Ḥabībī: 40.

65) Florian Schwarz, Balḥ und die Landschaften am oberen Oxus XIVc Ḥurāsān III (Tübingen: Ernst Wasmuth, 2002): 68-9 (plates). These are nos. 475-6, dated 142/759-60.

66) Faḍā'il-i Balkh, ed. Ḥabībī: 226-7.

67) Ibid.: 85-9.

68) Ibid.: 82-6. The politico-religious movement of the Murji'a in eastern Khorasan and Transoxania had as its most essential element the exclusion of works from faith, that is, the actual performance of the ritual and legal obligations of Islam. Its proponents struggled for the equality of new local converts and their exemption from the payment of the jizya (poll tax) which the Umayyad administration continued to impose on them. See Wilferd Madelung, "The early Murji'a in Khorasan and Transoxania and the spread of Ḥanafism," *Der Islam* 59 (1982): 33.

69) Faḍā'il-i Balkh, ed. Ḥabībī, 28; Berndt Radtke, "Theologen und Mystiker in Ḥurāsān und Transoxanien," *ZDMG* 136 (1986): 539.

70) Faḍā'il-i Balkh, ed. Ḥabībī: 124-5, 177, 225-6, 240.

71) Azad, *Sacred Landscape*.

72) Bulliet, "Women and the Urban Religious Elite": 74.

73) Faḍā'il-i Balkh, ed. Ḥabībī: 226-7.

74) Marina Tolmacheva, "Female Piety and Patronage in the Medieval 'Ḥajj,'" in *Women in the Medieval Islamic World*, ed. Gavin R.G. Hambly (London: Macmillan, 1998): 161-6.

75) Jāmī, *Nafaḥāt al-uns*: 620-1.

76) Faḍā'il-i Balkh, ed. Ḥabībī: 20-1, 42.

77) Folio numbers relate to the folios of the Persian 115 manuscript of the Faḍā'il-i Balkh, deposited in Paris.

78) Incidentally, this mystic appears in the Faḍā'il-i Balkh too, but as the author of a poem on Balkh (Faḍā'il-i Balkh, ed. Ḥabībī: 55 and n. 3). An interpretation is provided in my article, "The Faḍā'il-i Balkh and its place in Islamic historiography," *IRAN* 50 (forthcoming). For a biography of al-Rāzī, see *Attā r, Tadhkirat al-awliyā'*: 298-312.

79) al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-mahjūb*: 184.

80) Al-Qushayrī's *Epistle on Sufism*: 75-8; Renard, *Historical Dictionary*: 159, 228.

81) al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-mahjūb*: 183.

82) Hellmut Ritter, "Abū Yazīd (Bāyazīd) Ṭā yfūr b. 'Īsā b. Surūḥān al-Biṣṭā mī," *EI2*, 1:162-3.

83) al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-mahjūb*: 183-4.

84) *Attā r, Tadhkirat al-awliyā'*: 288-9.

85) Berkey, "Women and Islamic Education": 149. From the biographies of Balkh's scholars in the Faḍā'il-i Balkh we know that teachings tended to be held in groups (majālis) in scholars' homes or in the mosque, even after the establishment of the first madrasas, in the eleventh century. Shaykh al-Islām al-Wā'iz even omits to mention that one of the Saljūq Nizāmiyyas, the madrasas founded by the great Saljūq vizier Nizām al-Mulk (d. 485/1092), was established in Balkh (in 471/1078-9). Perhaps he did not approve of this kind of centralization of education, or maybe the informal setting continued to dominate in Balkh. See Azad, *Sacred Landscape*.

86) Al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-mahjūb*: 184; *The Kashf al-Mahjūb: The Oldest Persian Treatise on Ṣūfīism*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1911): 120.

87) Alyssa Gabbay, “In Reality a Man: Sultan Iltutmish, His Daughter, Raziya, and Gender,” *Journal of Persianate Studies* 4 (2011): 46, 51-8.

88) Yossef Rapoport, *Marriage, Money and Divorce in Medieval Islamic Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 53ff.

89) Al-Isf ahānī, *Ḥ ilyat al-awliyā*, 10: 42.

90) Al-Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab wa-ma‘ādin al-jawhar*, ed. and trans. Barbier de Meynard and Pavet de Courteille, rev. and corr. Charles Pellat (Beirut: Publications de l’Université Libanaise, 1971-9): 1053-8 (§§ 2588-2601); Julie Scott Meisami, “Mas‘ūdī on Love and the Fall of the Barmakids,” *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 2 (1989): 258-9.

91) Jane Khatib-Chahidi explains that the validity of marriage (which is a civil contract under Islamic law) does not depend upon consummation of the marriage. She adds that devout Muslims make good use of temporary marriages (Ar. *mut‘a*, Pers. *sīgha*) “in its strictly nominal form” to facilitate the sharing of space with a man inside and outside the home in a legal manner. Jane Khatib-Chahidi, “Sexual Prohibitions, Shared Space and ‘Fictive’ Marriages in Shi‘ite Iran,” *Women and Space*, in Shirley Ardener, ed. (Oxford: Berg, 1993): 125-6.

92) I thank Christopher Melchert, Harry Munt, and Adam Talib for helping me to parse and translate Abū Nu‘aym’s account.

93) Schimmel, “Mystical Women”: 151.

94) Jāmī, *Nafaḥāt al-uns*: 613-34.

95) *Ibidem*: 613-34.

96) Jāmī, *Nafaḥāt al-uns*: 620-1.

97) The Nishapur mystic and blacksmith’s son Abū Ḥ afṣ al-Ḥ addād (d. 265/879).

98) Smith, *Muslim Women Mystics*: 29.

99) Smith, “Rābi‘a al-‘Adawiyya”: 354; Smith, *Muslim Women Mystics*: 99-100.

100) Smith, *Muslim Women Mystics*: 71.

101) Faḍā’il-i Balkh, ed. Ḥ abībī: 227.

102) This reading is based on the two oldest manuscripts of Faḍā’il-i Balkh: the Paris (“Persan 115”) and Pakistan manuscripts (“PK”). It stems from an ongoing revision of Ḥ abībī’s edition carried out by Ali Mir Ansari, Arezou Azad, and Edmund Herzig, as part of the “Balkh Art and Cultural Heritage” project funded by the Leverhulme Trust. ‘Abd al-Ḥ ayḥ Ḥ abībī’s edition of the excerpt (which does not include the Pakistan manuscript but does include the two late St Petersburg manuscripts) can be found in Faḍā’il-i Balkh, ed. Ḥ abībī: 226-7. For further details on the manuscripts and the text, please refer above.

103) Folio numbers relate to the folios of MS Persan 115 of the Faḍā’il-i Balkh kept in Paris.

104) Mahd, as in “level,” “position,” and “cradle,” and ‘aliyya as in “high.” Steingass, *Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary*: 1353, 865. Mahdī (“future prophet”) is given incorrectly (instead of mahd ) by Gramlich, in *Alte Vorbilder*, 2: 99.

105) The copyist’s rendering here of the name as “Ḥ asan ‘Imrān” is erroneous. “Ḥ asan b.Ḥ umrān” is rendered correctly elsewhere in the manuscript. See Faḍā’il-i Balkh, ed. Ḥ abībī: 124-5.

106) Given the ambiguity that comes with the phrase, “the lady mu‘mina,” in which mu‘mina (“pious”) could be used in a simple adjectival phrase denoting “the pious lady,” there is a slight possibility that the author is referring here to Umm ‘Alī, but it seems more likely that he means her mother, called Mu‘mina.

107) The Faḍā’il-i Balkh’s editor Ḥ abībī read “Banj” here, not “Bakh,” and suggested that it was a place near Samarqand that is mentioned by Yāqūt in the *Kitab buldān* (Beirut: 1955), 1:498. A ṭāq-i Mu‘mina is not mentioned in the *Qandiyya*. See *Qandiyya dar bayān-i mazārāt-i Samarqand* (*Qandiyya on the Tombs of Samarqand*), ed. Īraj Afshār (Tehran: *Kitābkhāna-yi Tāhūrī*, 1955).

108) The term “ribāṭ” here may be the term used to denote Sufi refuges and/or military outposts. The author of the Faḍā’il-i Balkh uses the term in these senses in other parts of the book. See, for example, Faḍā’il-i Balkh, ed. Ḥ abībī: 215; also Jacqueline Chabbi, “Remarques sur le développement historique des mouvements ascétiques au Khurāsān,” *Studia Islamica* 46 (1977): 35, and Chabbi, “Ribāṭ (A.), a Military-religious Institution of Mediaeval Islam. 1. History and Development of the Institution”, *EI2*, 8: 493-506. “Ribāṭ”

appears also as a well-known toponym of a place between Bukhara and Samarqand, which could change the reading here somewhat, but seems less likely. One of the manuscripts of the *Ta' rīkh-i Bukhāra* refers to the *Ribāt-i Malik* that stands in a desert. *Narshakhī, Ta' rīkh-i Bukhāra*, trans. Richard Frye (Cambridge, MA: The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1954): 13.

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