

Political Authority and Cultural Patronage of Timurid Royal Women: A Comparative Analysis of The Chronicles of Sharaf Al-Din Ali Yazdi And Abd Al-Razzaq Samarqandi

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Abstract: The political and cultural roles of Timurid royal women have long remained overshadowed by studies focusing primarily on rulers and military elites. Nevertheless, medieval Persian chronicles preserve substantial evidence demonstrating that royal women actively participated in dynastic politics, diplomatic relations, charitable patronage, and the cultural development of the Timurid state. This study examines the representation of Timurid royal women in two major historical chronicles: *Zafarnama* by Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi and *Matla' al-Sa'dayn wa Majma' al-Bahrayn* by Abd al-Razzaq Samarqandi. Employing a comparative source-based methodology, the research analyzes how these historians portrayed the political influence, public authority, religious patronage, and social status of prominent royal women, including Saray Mulk Khanum (Bibikhanum), Gawharshad Begim, Khanzada Begim, Tuman Agha, and Shadmulk Begim. The findings indicate that Timurid royal women functioned not merely as members of the royal household but also as influential actors in state governance, dynastic legitimacy, diplomatic negotiations, architectural patronage, and court politics. Although both chroniclers generally present these women within the framework of dynastic history, their narratives differ in emphasis according to their historiographical objectives and political contexts. The study argues that integrating comparative historiography with gender-oriented historical analysis provides a more comprehensive understanding of women's agency within the Timurid Empire and contributes to broader discussions on medieval Islamic political culture.

Keywords: Timurid Empire; royal women; Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi; Abd al-Razzaq Samarqandi; *Zafarnama*; *Matla' al-Sa'dayn*; gender history; historiography; political authority; cultural patronage.

Introduction: The political history of the Timurid Empire has traditionally been interpreted through the activities of rulers, military commanders, and male members of the ruling dynasty. As a result, the contribution of royal women has often received limited scholarly attention despite the considerable evidence preserved in contemporary historical sources. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Timurid royal women participated in dynastic politics, diplomatic negotiations, religious and educational patronage, and the legitimization of political authority.

Among the principal sources for examining these

activities are Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi's *Zafarnama* and Abd al-Razzaq Samarqandi's *Matla' al-Sa'dayn wa Majma' al-Bahrayn*. Although primarily devoted to political and military history, both chronicles contain valuable information on royal women that illuminates the political, social, and cultural dimensions of Timurid governance. They also provide insight into how medieval historians represented female authority within the Timurid court.

Recent studies in gender history have highlighted the active role of women in medieval Islamic societies, emphasizing their influence through dynastic marriages, political mediation, religious patronage, and

cultural sponsorship. However, within Timurid historiography, research has largely concentrated on individual royal women or broader political developments, while comparative analyses of how contemporary chroniclers portrayed female authority remain limited.

To address this gap, the present study undertakes a comparative analysis of *Zafarnama* and *Matla' al-Sa'dayn wa Majma' al-Bahrayn*. Rather than reconstructing biographies alone, it examines how Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi and Abd al-Razzaq Samarqandi represented royal women and what these representations reveal about political legitimacy, dynastic continuity, and cultural patronage in the Timurid Empire. Particular attention is given to Saray Mulk Khanum, Gawharshad Begim, Khanzada Begim, Tuman Agha, and Shadmulk Begim, whose activities illustrate different forms of female participation in imperial governance.

Using a comparative source-based approach that combines historical criticism and historiographical analysis, this study seeks to contribute to Timurid studies and to broader discussions of gender, political authority, and medieval Islamic historiography. It addresses three research questions:

RQ1. How are Timurid royal women represented in the chronicles of Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi and Abd al-Razzaq Samarqandi?

RQ2. What political, diplomatic, cultural, and religious roles are attributed to them in these sources?

RQ3. To what extent do differences between the two chronicles reflect distinct historiographical perspectives rather than historical reality?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on the Timurid Empire has traditionally focused on political history, military campaigns, dynastic succession, and state administration. The studies of Beatrice Forbes Manz, Maria Eva Subtelny, John E. Woods, Maria Szuppe, and H. R. Roemer established the principal framework for understanding Timurid political ideology and Persian historiography. Their works demonstrate that Timurid chronicles functioned not only as historical records but also as instruments of dynastic legitimation.

Within this tradition, Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi's *Zafarnama* and Abd al-Razzaq Samarqandi's *Matla' al-Sa'dayn wa Majma' al-Bahrayn* remain the principal primary sources for reconstructing the political, diplomatic, and cultural history of the Timurid Empire. Their detailed accounts of court life, elite networks, and state affairs have made them indispensable sources for modern Timurid studies.

Despite extensive research on Timurid political history, the role of royal women has received comparatively limited attention. Earlier scholarship generally referred to queens and princesses within genealogical or dynastic contexts, while their political, diplomatic, religious, and cultural activities remained largely overlooked.

More recent gender-oriented scholarship has challenged this perspective by emphasizing women's participation in political mediation, dynastic legitimacy, architectural patronage, and cultural production. Studies of figures such as Saray Mulk Khanum and Gawharshad Begim demonstrate that royal women contributed significantly to court politics, public patronage, and the consolidation of Timurid authority. At the same time, modern historiography increasingly interprets medieval chronicles as ideological narratives shaped by the political objectives of their authors rather than as purely objective historical records.

Nevertheless, an important research gap remains. Most existing studies either examine individual royal women or focus on the broader political history of the Timurid dynasty. Comparative analyses of how Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi and Abd al-Razzaq Samarqandi represented female authority remain limited.

This study addresses that gap through a comparative source-based analysis of *Zafarnama* and *Matla' al-Sa'dayn wa Majma' al-Bahrayn*. By integrating comparative historiography, gender history, and source criticism, it examines how both chroniclers constructed the image of Timurid royal women and what these representations reveal about political legitimacy, dynastic continuity, and cultural authority within the Timurid Empire.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative historical research design based on comparative source analysis. Rather than reconstructing historical events chronologically, the research investigates how Timurid royal women were represented in two major Persian chronicles and examines the similarities and differences in their historical narratives. The methodological framework combines comparative historiography, historical source criticism, and qualitative content analysis to identify recurring patterns in the depiction of female political and cultural agency.

The primary sources consist of Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi's *Zafarnama* and Abd al-Razzaq Samarqandi's *Matla' al-Sa'dayn wa Majma' al-Bahrayn*. These chronicles were selected because they represent two of the most authoritative contemporary narratives of the Timurid period and provide extensive information concerning members of the Timurid ruling family. Although both

works primarily document political and military history, they also contain numerous references to royal women involved in dynastic succession, diplomacy, charitable activities, architectural patronage, and court administration.

The analysis was conducted in three successive stages. First, all textual passages referring to Timurid royal women were identified and classified according to the historical figures discussed. Particular attention was given to Saray Mulk Khanum (Bibikhanum), Gawharshad Begim, Khanzada Begim, Tuman Agha, Shadmulk Begim, and other women whose activities extended beyond the domestic sphere.

Second, the extracted materials were coded according to five analytical categories: (1) political authority, (2) dynastic legitimacy, (3) diplomatic activity, (4) cultural and religious patronage, and (5) historiographical representation. These categories were developed from previous studies on medieval Islamic political history, gender history, and Persian historiography and served as the analytical framework for comparing both chronicles.

Third, the narratives of Yazdi and Samarqandi were systematically compared in order to identify convergences and divergences in their representation of royal women. Particular emphasis was placed on the language used by each historian, the historical contexts in which women appeared, and the functions assigned to them within political and cultural processes. Rather than treating differences between the chronicles as factual contradictions, the study interprets them within the broader historiographical traditions and political circumstances in which each work was produced.

To enhance analytical reliability, the interpretation was supported by secondary scholarship on Timurid history, Persian historiography, and gender studies. The comparison therefore combines internal textual analysis with external historical contextualization, enabling a more balanced interpretation of the historical evidence. This methodological approach makes it possible to evaluate not only the historical activities of Timurid royal women but also the ways in which medieval historians constructed their political and cultural significance.

RESULTS

Royal Women as Instruments of Dynastic Legitimacy.

A comparative examination of *Zafarnama* and *Matla' al-Sa'dayn wa Majma' al-Baḥrayn* demonstrates that Timurid royal women occupied a far more significant position than that traditionally assigned to them in political historiography. Rather than appearing merely as wives or daughters of rulers, they functioned as essential components of dynastic legitimacy whose

marriages, family relationships, and public authority reinforced the political stability of the Timurid state. Both chroniclers consistently connect royal women with moments of dynastic transition, succession, and political consolidation, suggesting that their presence within the historical narrative served ideological as well as historical purposes.

One of the clearest examples is Saray Mulk Khanum (Bibikhanum). Both chronicles present her not simply as Timur's principal consort but as a woman whose Chinggisid lineage considerably strengthened Timur's political legitimacy. Since Timur himself did not belong to the direct lineage of Chinggis Khan, marriage alliances with women possessing Chinggisid ancestry provided symbolic legitimacy that supported the ruler's claims to universal sovereignty. Consequently, Saray Mulk Khanum appears not merely as a member of the royal household but as an important political institution whose status enhanced the ideological foundations of Timurid authority.

A similar pattern is visible in the representation of Khanzada Begim, whose successive marriages illustrate the diplomatic function of royal women within dynastic politics. Both historians emphasize that her marriages were closely associated with political alliances rather than personal relationships. Through these marital connections, she contributed to preserving political cohesion among different branches of the Timurid dynasty while simultaneously reinforcing relations with influential regional elites. Such narratives demonstrate that royal marriages constituted deliberate instruments of statecraft rather than private family affairs.

The chronicles therefore portray women as active participants in maintaining dynastic continuity. Genealogical references are rarely presented as simple family records; instead, they establish legal succession, strengthen political legitimacy, and reinforce the ideological continuity of Timurid rule. This narrative strategy reflects the broader historiographical objective of presenting the dynasty as a stable and divinely sanctioned political order.

These findings suggest that female authority within Timurid political culture was closely connected with dynastic legitimacy. The chroniclers consistently integrate royal women into the political narrative whenever questions of succession, legitimacy, or elite alliances emerge, indicating that female agency formed an indispensable element of imperial governance rather than a peripheral aspect of court life.

Political Influence and Court Authority. The comparative analysis of the two chronicles demonstrates that Timurid royal women exercised

political influence through mechanisms that were largely informal but nonetheless effective. Although they rarely occupied official administrative positions, they actively participated in decision-making processes, mediated conflicts among members of the ruling dynasty, influenced succession politics, and occasionally shaped appointments within the court administration. These activities reveal that political authority in the Timurid Empire extended beyond formal governmental institutions and frequently operated through family relationships and court networks.

Among the most influential women represented in both chronicles is Gawharshad Begim, whose political activities considerably exceeded the conventional responsibilities of a queen. Rather than remaining within the private sphere of the palace, she appears as an active participant in the political life of the empire. The chronicles describe her as a trusted adviser to Shahrukh Mirza and emphasize her influence over state affairs during one of the most stable periods of Timurid rule. Her authority was reinforced not only by her position within the royal family but also by her ability to maintain cooperation among members of the Timurid elite.

A different model of political authority is represented by Shadmulk Begim, whose influence became particularly visible during the reign of Khalil Sultan. Unlike Gawharshad Begim, whose authority was generally associated with political stability, Shadmulk Begim is portrayed as a controversial figure whose personal influence extended deeply into governmental affairs. The chronicles indicate that she participated in administrative appointments, influenced political decisions, and intervened in the redistribution of authority within the court. Such descriptions reveal that medieval historians recognized the capacity of royal women to shape political developments, although these activities were often evaluated through moral and ideological judgments reflecting the historians' own perspectives.

The narratives also suggest that political influence was closely connected with the chroniclers' attitudes toward female authority. Women whose activities supported political stability were generally described in positive terms, whereas those associated with court conflicts or succession disputes frequently received more critical evaluations. This difference illustrates that the chronicles should not be interpreted merely as objective records of political events but also as literary constructions shaped by the political ideals of their authors.

The comparison therefore demonstrates that Timurid

royal women exercised political authority primarily through advisory roles, dynastic mediation, and informal court influence rather than through official administrative office. Their political agency operated within the framework of family relationships, yet its impact extended to broader questions of governance and imperial stability.

Religious, Educational, and Architectural Patronage. Beyond their political activities, the chronicles consistently associate Timurid royal women with religious, educational, and architectural patronage. Such activities served not only charitable purposes but also strengthened the public legitimacy of the ruling dynasty by linking political authority with Islamic piety and cultural development.

Among the women discussed in both historical traditions, Gawharshad Begim occupies a particularly prominent position. She is presented as an outstanding patron of Islamic architecture, education, and religious institutions whose foundations contributed significantly to the cultural prosperity of the Timurid Empire. Her sponsorship of mosques, madrasas, and charitable complexes transformed royal patronage into an instrument of state-building, demonstrating that women participated directly in shaping the cultural landscape of the empire.

The chronicles likewise record that other royal women established charitable institutions, financed public buildings, and supported religious foundations. These activities extended the influence of the royal family beyond the palace and strengthened relations between the ruling elite and urban society. Architectural patronage therefore functioned simultaneously as an expression of personal piety, dynastic prestige, and political legitimacy.

The significance of these activities becomes particularly evident when viewed from a comparative perspective. While military victories and political achievements dominate the narratives of male rulers, women's contributions are primarily represented through educational, religious, and charitable institutions that produced long-term social and cultural effects. This complementary distribution of historical roles illustrates that political authority within the Timurid Empire cannot be understood exclusively through military history or administrative structures.

Consequently, both chronicles portray cultural patronage as one of the principal mechanisms through which Timurid royal women exercised public authority. Their investments in architecture, education, and religion demonstrate that women were active contributors to the intellectual and cultural development of the Timurid world rather than passive

members of the imperial household.

Diplomatic Functions of Timurid Royal Women. The comparative analysis further reveals that Timurid royal women played an important role in diplomatic relations and the preservation of political stability. Their participation in diplomacy was rarely formal; instead, it was exercised through dynastic marriages, mediation between rival branches of the ruling family, and the maintenance of strategic alliances. Consequently, royal women became essential actors in the political communication that connected the Timurid court with neighboring dynasties and regional elites.

The chronicles repeatedly demonstrate that marriage within the Timurid dynasty was not merely a private institution but an instrument of state policy. Women such as Khanzada Begim appear within narratives that emphasize political reconciliation and dynastic continuity rather than domestic life. Their marriages established alliances, reduced political tensions, and strengthened the legitimacy of ruling elites across different territories. In this respect, matrimonial diplomacy represented one of the most effective non-military mechanisms through which the Timurid state preserved internal cohesion.

The diplomatic significance of royal women also becomes visible during periods of succession disputes. Both Yazdi and Samarqandi indicate that queens and princesses frequently acted as intermediaries between competing political factions. Although the chroniclers seldom describe these negotiations in detail, repeated references to their presence during critical political events suggest that women occupied positions of trust within the ruling elite. Their authority derived not from military power but from kinship, prestige, and the ability to facilitate consensus among influential members of the dynasty.

This evidence demonstrates that diplomacy within the Timurid Empire extended beyond official embassies and military negotiations. Informal diplomatic practices conducted through members of the royal household constituted an integral component of imperial governance. Consequently, the chronicles portray royal women as important diplomatic actors whose influence contributed to political continuity during periods of uncertainty.

Comparative Historiographical Perspectives. Although both chronicles recognize the importance of Timurid royal women, they differ considerably in the manner in which female authority is represented. These differences reflect not only the individual perspectives of the authors but also the distinct political and historiographical environments in which the chronicles

were produced.

Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi generally introduces royal women within narratives centered on Timur's political achievements and the consolidation of imperial authority. Female figures therefore appear primarily when their activities reinforce dynastic legitimacy, support the ruler's authority, or contribute to major political events. The narrative remains predominantly ruler-centered, with women's roles integrated into the broader history of imperial expansion.

By contrast, Abd al-Razzaq Samarqandi devotes comparatively greater attention to the political and cultural environment of the Timurid court. His descriptions provide more detailed information concerning family relationships, court ceremonies, charitable activities, and the participation of women in the social and cultural life of the empire. As a result, female agency appears more visible within his historical narrative, particularly in relation to educational patronage, religious foundations, and court politics.

These differences should not be interpreted simply as contradictions between historical sources. Rather, they illustrate how medieval historians selected, organized, and emphasized historical information according to their intellectual objectives and political circumstances. The representation of women therefore constitutes an important historiographical category through which broader ideological priorities of Timurid historical writing can be identified.

Synthesis of Findings. The comparative examination of both chronicles reveals four interrelated dimensions of female agency within the Timurid Empire.

First, royal women served as guardians of dynastic legitimacy, strengthening political authority through genealogy, marriage alliances, and succession strategies. Their presence within the chronicles demonstrates that legitimacy was constructed not solely through military success but also through carefully maintained dynastic relationships.

Second, they exercised political authority by participating in advisory functions, influencing court decisions, and contributing to the resolution of internal political conflicts. Although their authority was generally informal, it frequently affected the functioning of the state.

Third, royal women acted as patrons of religion, education, and architecture, supporting mosques, madrasas, charitable institutions, and monumental construction projects. These activities reinforced both public welfare and the symbolic legitimacy of the Timurid dynasty.

Finally, they fulfilled important diplomatic functions,

particularly through dynastic marriages and mediation among competing political groups. Such activities demonstrate that political communication within the Timurid Empire relied not only on official institutions but also on informal networks centered around the royal household.

Taken together, these findings indicate that the historical image of Timurid royal women preserved in the chronicles extends well beyond traditional domestic roles. Both Yazdi and Samarqandi portray them as participants in the political, diplomatic, cultural, and religious development of the empire, although each historian emphasizes different aspects of their activities. Consequently, the comparative analysis confirms that female agency constituted an integral component of Timurid statecraft and that medieval Persian historiography preserves valuable evidence for reconstructing this often-overlooked dimension of imperial history.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study contribute to a growing body of scholarship that reconsiders the position of women in medieval Islamic societies. Rather than confirming the traditional perception of Timurid royal women as passive members of the imperial household, the comparative analysis demonstrates that they performed diverse political, diplomatic, religious, and cultural functions that were closely connected with the operation of the Timurid state. Their historical significance therefore cannot be understood solely within the framework of family history but must also be interpreted as part of the broader political structure of the empire.

One of the principal contributions of this research lies in its comparative historiographical perspective. Previous studies have generally examined *Zafarnama* and *Matla' al-Sa'dayn wa Majma' al-Bahrayn* independently or have used them primarily as repositories of historical information. By comparing the representation of the same historical figures across both chronicles, the present study demonstrates that medieval historians constructed female authority according to different narrative and ideological priorities. Consequently, the chronicles should be approached not only as sources of historical facts but also as literary texts that shaped political memory and dynastic identity.

The analysis further indicates that female political authority within the Timurid Empire was exercised predominantly through informal institutions. Unlike modern concepts of political office, influence was derived from kinship, dynastic prestige, marital alliances, religious patronage, and personal authority

within the court. This observation corresponds with broader studies of medieval Islamic political culture, which emphasize that governance frequently relied upon personal networks and household politics alongside formal administrative institutions.

Another important finding concerns the relationship between political authority and cultural patronage. The chronicles consistently associate prominent royal women with the construction of mosques, madrasas, charitable foundations, and architectural monuments. These activities should not be interpreted merely as expressions of individual piety. Rather, they functioned as instruments through which the Timurid dynasty strengthened its legitimacy, projected imperial prestige, and reinforced its relationship with urban society. In this respect, cultural patronage represented a significant form of political communication.

The comparative evidence also illustrates the limitations of interpreting medieval chronicles literally. Both Yazdi and Samarqandi selected historical events according to their literary objectives, political affiliations, and intended audiences. Consequently, differences in their descriptions of royal women should be understood as historiographical choices rather than simple factual inconsistencies. Applying comparative source criticism therefore enables a more balanced reconstruction of women's historical agency than reliance upon a single narrative.

Overall, this study demonstrates that integrating comparative historiography with gender history offers a more comprehensive understanding of Timurid political culture. Royal women emerge not as marginal figures but as active participants in dynastic governance, diplomacy, cultural production, and religious patronage. Their representation within Persian historiography reflects both historical realities and the ideological processes through which medieval authors interpreted political authority.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the representation of Timurid royal women in the chronicles of Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi and Abd al-Razzaq Samarqandi through a comparative source-based approach. The analysis demonstrates that royal women occupied important positions in dynastic legitimacy, political decision-making, diplomatic relations, cultural patronage, and religious life. Although the two chroniclers differ in narrative emphasis, both acknowledge the significant contribution of women to the political and cultural development of the Timurid Empire.

The research further shows that medieval Persian chronicles should be interpreted not only as historical records but also as historiographical constructions

reflecting the political and ideological contexts of their authors. Comparative analysis therefore provides a more balanced understanding of women's agency than the use of individual chronicles in isolation.

The principal contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that Timurid royal women were active participants in imperial governance rather than peripheral members of the royal household. By combining comparative historiography, historical source criticism, and gender-oriented analysis, the study expands current understanding of political authority in the Timurid world and highlights the importance of integrating women's history into broader narratives of medieval Central Asian history.

Future research may extend this approach by incorporating additional Timurid chronicles, documentary sources, waqf records, architectural inscriptions, and comparative evidence from other Islamic dynasties to achieve a more comprehensive reconstruction of women's political and cultural roles across the Persianate world.

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