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Spy or Rebel? The Curious Incident of the Temürid Sultān-Ḥusayn's Defection to the Mamluks at Damascus in 803/1400–1

The warlord Temür (d. 807/1405) is a figure who inspires not only great interest among historians, but usually a host of additional reactions ranging from admiration to revulsion. Reasons for these reactions include his ability to fuse the disparate political elements of late fourteenth-century Transoxanian society into an effective whole, the decades he spent and thousands of miles he covered in pursuit of military goals, and his complicated, charismatic, and probably magnetic character with its odd mix of contrary traits. Among these were the ability to express both great affection to his family and great cruelty to his enemies. Equally important was Temür's endless obsession with the history, legacy, and ideological challenge posed by the family of the Mongol conqueror Chingiz Khan (d. 1227), which occupied many of Temür's waking thoughts even though—or perhaps because—he did not rank among their number. It is no surprise, therefore, that much has been written about Temür's life and exploits, and scholarship on these topics will surely continue. Far less work, however, has been done on Temür's sons and grandsons, to say nothing of his wives, concubines, and daughters, who have been virtually ignored by historians so far. Yet these family members deserve attention too, both for their own activities and lives, and for the fact that they were often on the receiving end of Temür's complex interests, prejudices, and desires. This article will therefore present some ruminations on the life and stunted career of one of Temür's grandsons, Sultān-Ḥusayn, in an effort to demonstrate the effect Temür may have had on the people closest to him.

In the winter of 803/1400–1, a curious incident happened in the Mamluk city of Damascus. At the time, the city lay caught between the fearsome attacking armies of Temür on one side and the defending armies of the Mamluk sultan al-Nāṣir Faraj (first r. 801–8/1399–1405) on the other.¹ Temür had arrived in Syria in the autumn, and in a bold and startlingly successful strike, had captured both Aleppo and all the Syrian Mamluk commanders who had gathered in the city to defend it. Temür had then worked his way south towards Damascus, acquiring the now helpless smaller Syrian cities along the way. Although Faraj and his advisors and

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¹ For the locations of the respective forces see Walter J. Fischel, *Ibn Khaldūn and Tamerlane: Their Historic Meeting in Damascus, 1401 A.D. (803 A.H.): A Study Based on Arabic Manuscripts of Ibn Khaldūn's "Autobiography," with a Translation into English, and a Commentary* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1962), 57, notes 18, 19.



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DOI: [10.6082/M1R78CB4](https://doi.org/10.6082/M1R78CB4). (<https://doi.org/10.6082/M1R78CB4>)

DOI of Vol. XIV: [10.6082/M1N877WP](https://doi.org/10.6082/M1N877WP). See <https://doi.org/10.6082/HBNW-HW25> to download the full volume or individual articles. This work is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC-BY). See <http://mamluk.uchicago.edu/msr.html> for more information about copyright and open access.

armies had set out from Cairo too late to help Aleppo, they at least managed to arrive in Damascus first on 6 Jumādā I 803/23 December 1400, followed shortly thereafter by Temür's forces.² Once there, the two armies observed one another warily, exchanging messengers and demands and skirmishing periodically.

Many of the commanders in Temür's army were his sons and grandsons, whom he liked to provide with military opportunities. It is therefore no surprise that the Temürid forces in one skirmish on 25 December/8 Jumādā I were led by Temür's grandson through his daughter Agha Beki, Sulṭān-Ḥusayn.³ The curious incident mentioned above took place a few days after the skirmish, possibly on 13 Jumādā I/30 December, when Sulṭān-Ḥusayn suddenly defected to Mamluk Damascus. Unfortunately, the details of his flight are completely unknown: did he leave his grandfather's camp openly or in secret? During the day or at night? Alone or accompanied, and if the latter, by whom? The histories do not reveal how Sulṭān-Ḥusayn made his way from his grandfather's camp into the city. What we do know, however, is that once in Damascus he was swiftly brought to meet with Sultan Faraj.⁴

It is not surprising that the sources present disparate views of this event. Temürid authors suggest variously that Sulṭān-Ḥusayn engaged in this strange behavior because he was drunk, misled by poor advisors, or simply reckless and foolish.⁵ By contrast, Mamluk sources make no mention of alcohol, bad advice or stupidity, but they unfortunately do not attribute any other motive to Sulṭān-Ḥusayn, either. But both sides can agree that the Mamluks were thrilled to see their unexpected guest, perhaps not only because of his identity, but also because

² For the date see Fischel, *Ibn Khaldūn*, 55–56, note 15.

³ 'Alī ibn Dāwūd al-Khaṭīb al-Jawharī al-Ṣayrafī, *Nuzhat al-Nufūs wa al-Abdān fī Tawārikh al-Zamān*, ed. Ḥasan Ḥabashī (Cairo, 1970–94), 2:82. Persian sources do not mention the raid.

⁴ The sources merely say, vaguely, that he went (Persian) or came (Arabic) to Damascus. Ibn al-Ṣayrafī, *Nuzhat*, 2:82–83 (no date); Aḥmad Ibn 'Arabshāh, *'Ajā'ib al-Maqdūr fī Nawā'ib Timūr*, ed. Aḥmad Fā'iz al-Ḥumsī (Beirut, 1987), 243; and idem, *Tamerlane or Timur the Great Amir*, trans. J. H. Sanders (Lahore, 1936, repr. 1976), 140 (hereafter Ibn 'Arabshāh/Sanders, *'Ajā'ib/Tamerlane*); Abū Bakr Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah, *Tārikh Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah*, ed. 'Adnān Darwīsh (Damascus, 1977–), 4:165, possible date of 13 Jumādā I/30 December 1400; Niẓām al-Dīn Shāmī, *Zafarnāmah: Tārikh-i Futūhāt-i Amīr Timūr Kūrkānī*, ed. Felix Tauer (Prague, 1937), 230–31, date of Jumādā I/December 1400–January 1401; Mu'īn al-Dīn Naṭanzī, *Muntakhab al-Tawārikh-i Mu'īnī*, ed. Jean Aubin (Tehran, 1957), 376, and *ibid.*, ed. Parvīn Istakhrī (Tehran, 2004), 278–79 (no date); Aḥmad al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk fī Ma'rīfat Duwal al-Mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad Muḥammad Amīn and Sa'īd 'Ashūr (Cairo, 1956–73), 3:1039 (news in a letter that arrived in Cairo in Jumādā II /January–February 1401), 3:1042 (date of 13 Jumādā I/30 December for the actual defection); Sharaf al-Dīn 'Alī Yazdī, *Zafarnāmah*, ed. Muḥammad 'Abbāsī (Tehran, 1957–58), 228.

⁵ For drunkenness see Yazdī, *Zafarnāmah*, 228, and Naṭanzī, *Muntakhab*, 376/278; for bad advisors see Shāmī, *Zafarnāmah*, 231; for recklessness see Ibn 'Arabshāh/Sanders, *'Ajā'ib/Tamerlane*, 243/140.



of his reportedly favorable appearance—he was tall, handsome, and, according to some, even wearing a jeweled crown (?).⁶ At any rate, the Mamluks welcomed Sulṭān-Ḥusayn with high honors and gave him a glorious ceremonial robe, as well as a horse with a golden saddle and other impressive trappings.⁷ Such gifts, especially the bedecked animal, were typically reserved for elevated members of the Mamluk aristocracy or extremely important foreign diplomats. In this context they demonstrated the great enthusiasm the Mamluk commanders felt about Sulṭān-Ḥusayn's arrival.⁸ Then, in an unusual step during or perhaps after the gift-giving ceremony, the Mamluks cut off Sulṭān-Ḥusayn's hair, thereby making him conform to Mamluk norms. They may also have hoped to dissuade him from going back to his grandfather by providing visible evidence of his change of sides.⁹ While meeting with Faraj and his commanders, Sulṭān-Ḥusayn provided them with intelligence about Temür's army—its numbers, its morale, and whether it might be defeated.¹⁰ We may assume the Mamluks were very interested in this information, although they ultimately made poor use of it.

Meanwhile, messengers continued to pass back and forth between Faraj and Temür. Shortly after Sulṭān-Ḥusayn's defection (according to the Persian sources) or before it (according to the Mamluks), Temür wrote demanding the return of a prisoner the Mamluks had held in Cairo for several years, but the letter does not appear to mention Sulṭān-Ḥusayn.¹¹ At any rate, Sulṭān-Ḥusayn himself continued to live under Mamluk patronage during these few days.¹² The skirmishes between the two armies also continued until one larger battle took place on 19 Jumādā I 803/5 January 1401, during which Sulṭān-Ḥusayn fought for the Mamluks. On the Temürid side were none other than his own uncles, Temür's sons Mirānshāh and Shāh Rukh. During the skirmish the Temürid forces encountered the runaway among the Mamluk soldiers. Sulṭān-Ḥusayn may have been unusually visible because of his height and because he was using his own standard; just in case,

⁶ For the crown see Ibn al-Ṣayrafī, *Nuzhah*, 2:82; Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah, *Tārīkh*, 4:165; for the warm welcome see Naṭanzī, *Muntakhab*, 376/278; Shāmī, *Zafarnāmah*, 231; Yazdī, *Zafarnāmah*, 228; Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah, *Tārīkh*, 4:165; Ibn 'Arabshāh/Sanders, *'Ajā'ib/Tamerlane*, 243/140.

⁷ Ibn al-Ṣayrafī, *Nuzhah*, 2:82; al-Maqrizī, *Sulūk*, 3:1042.

⁸ See Anne F. Broadbridge, *Kingship and Ideology in the Islamic and Mongol Worlds* (Cambridge, 2008), 23.

⁹ Ibn 'Arabshāh/Sanders, *'Ajā'ib/Tamerlane*, 243/140; V. V. Bartold, *Four Studies on the History of Central Asia II: Ulugh Beg*, trans. V. and T. Minorsky (Leiden, 1963), 31.

¹⁰ Ibn al-Ṣayrafī, *Nuzhah*, 2:82–83; Naṭanzī, *Muntakhab*, 376/278–79; Ibn 'Arabshāh/Sanders, *'Ajā'ib/Tamerlane*, 243/140.

¹¹ Ibn al-Ṣayrafī, *Nuzhah*, 2:82; Shāmī, *Zafarnāmah*, 231; Yazdī, *Zafarnāmah*, 228.

¹² His host was the financial official (*nāẓir al-khāṣṣ*, controller of the sultan's fisc) Sa'd al-Dīn Ibn Ghurāb. Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah, *Tārīkh*, 4:165.



however, he identified himself to them once the fighting grew hot.¹³ Eventually, a Temürid commander maneuvered close enough to seize the reins of Sulṭān-Ḥusayn's horse and drag it and the prince over to the Temürid side.¹⁴

Sulṭān-Ḥusayn was swiftly sent back to Temür, who had him and some of his advisors chained and imprisoned.¹⁵ It is unclear whether Agha Beki tried to help her son, but a few days after Sulṭān-Ḥusayn's capture Shāh Rukh interceded on behalf of his nephew. Temür accepted the intercession, pardoned Sulṭān-Ḥusayn, and reinstated him in the Temürid armies. Temür does not appear to have shown similar leniency to Sulṭān-Ḥusayn's advisors, although their ultimate fate is unclear.¹⁶ This is consistent with the scholarly claim that when Temürid princes behaved badly, Temür preferred to punish advisors, particularly bureaucratic ones, more harshly than the Temürids themselves.¹⁷ Later Sulṭān-Ḥusayn was permitted to take part in campaigns on his grandfather's behalf throughout Iraq and Anatolia, although he was always accompanied by other Temürid princes.

Meanwhile, after Sulṭān-Ḥusayn's return to the Temürid side, the Mamluk leadership unexpectedly fled for Cairo on the eve of 21 Jumādā I 803/7 January 1401 to avert a potential coup there.¹⁸ This forced the Mamluk armies to follow the next morning in great haste and disarray, while the helpless city of Damascus surrendered to Temür and thereafter suffered his detailed, painful and systematic methods of plunder.¹⁹

The curious incident of Sulṭān-Ḥusayn's defection is no more than a tiny subplot in the larger narrative of Temür's devastation of Damascus and the complete Mamluk failure to defend the city. Small wonder, then, that the story earned no more than a few lines at most, and often considerably less, in the Persian and Arabic historical works. And yet the incident deserves more attention than this from modern historians, since it illuminates not only the ways in which Temür

¹³ For the height see Naṭanzī, *Muntakhab*, 377/279, for the standard see Yazdī, *Zafarnāmah*, 2:234; for Sulṭān-Ḥusayn identifying himself see Shāmī, *Zafarnāmah*, 233.

¹⁴ Naṭanzī, *Muntakhab*, 376/278; Yazdī, *Zafarnāmah*, 2:234.

¹⁵ Yazdī, *Zafarnāmah*, 2:234–35.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Beatrice Forbes Manz, *The Rise and Rule of Tamerlane* (Cambridge, 1989), 114; for Sulṭān-Ḥusayn's advisors see Shāmī, *Zafarnāmah*, 233; Naṭanzī, *Muntakhab*, 377/279; Yazdī, *Zafarnāmah*, 2:234–35.

¹⁸ This was the night between January 6 and 7; see Fischel, *Ibn Khaldūn*, note 22 on pp. 59–60 for the date.

¹⁹ Ibn al-Ṣayrafī, *Nuzhah*, 2:83; Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah, *Tārīkh*, 4:166; Fischel/Ibn Khaldūn, *Ibn Khaldūn and Tamerlane*, 30 and note 19 on p. 57; al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 3:1045; Shāmī, *Zafarnāmah*, 233–34; Yazdī, *Zafarnāmah*; Naṭanzī, *Muntakhab*, 378/279; Ibn 'Arabshāh/Sanders, *'Ajā'ib/Tamerlane*, 245/141. For Temür's methods of plunder see Jean Aubin, "Comment Tamerlan prenait les villes," *Studia Islamica* 19 (1963): 83–122.



asserted and maintained control over his offspring, but also the way in which the question of succession to Temür as ruler of his empire—and especially the role played by women in determining that succession—affected the Temürid princes' opportunities for meaningful career advancement.

Before we examine these issues, however, we must first determine what Sulṭān-Ḥusayn was doing. It is possible that he was sent either to spy on the Mamluks or to spread falsehoods in order to demoralize and weaken them, since Temür routinely used such techniques to enhance the effectiveness of his military campaigns. This hypothesis, however, soon proves to be untenable. Temür preferred to employ religious men for this purpose, especially mystics, who could be highly mobile and whose frequent wanderings therefore were unlikely to seem unusual.²⁰ They were also generally not Temür's own relatives. In addition, the Mamluks were convinced that Temür had previously sent agents to Mamluk lands, and they thus had executed an entire embassy from Temür in 796/1394 on the suspicion that it was composed of spies. Mamluk territory was therefore a particularly dangerous place to anyone working for Temür.²¹ It is out of the question that Temür would assign such a risky task to his grandson in this perilous region, especially when there were more expendable persons to do it.

Furthermore, if Sulṭān-Ḥusayn had gone to the Mamluks as Temür's agent of confusion, this would have rendered Temür's punishment of him after his return inexplicable, to say nothing of the disapproving tone used by the Temürid chroniclers when they described the incident: Niẓām al-Dīn Shāmī (fl. 806/1404), author of an official history of Temür's career, pointed out how strange Sulṭān-Ḥusayn's behavior was and explained that it had been brought on by the bad counsel of corrupt advisors (*mufassidān*).²² Sharaf al-Dīn 'Alī Yazdī (d. 858/1454), writing for Temür's grandson Ibrāhīm-Sulṭān ibn Shāh Rukh (d. 838/1435), echoed Shāmī regarding the advisors but added that Sulṭān-Ḥusayn was drunk, while Mu'īn al-Dīn Naṭanzī (fl. 816–17/1413–14), employed by Temür's grandson Iskandar ibn 'Umar Shaykh (d. 818/1415), ignored the bad advisors and attributed Sulṭān-Ḥusayn's rash behavior entirely to drunkenness.²³ Given that these authors worked either for Temür or for his grandsons, it seems unlikely that they would have criticized Sulṭān-Ḥusayn so clearly if he had gone to Damascus on Temür's orders. Even a Temürid-era author who was hostile to the warlord, Ibn 'Arabshāh (d. 854/1450), attributed Sulṭān-Ḥusayn's defection not to any subterfuge from

²⁰ H. R. Roemer, "Timür in Iran," *Cambridge History of Iran*, ed. P. Jackson (Cambridge, 1968), 6:49–50.

²¹ Broadbridge, *Kingship and Ideology*, 180.

²² Shāmī, *Zafarnāmah*, 231.

²³ Yazdī, *Zafarnāmah*, 2:228; Naṭanzī, *Muntakhab*, 376/278. For these authors see Woods, "Timurid Historiography," 89, 99–100.



Temür, but to Sulṭān-Ḥusayn's own foolish and reckless personality.²⁴ It is therefore more likely that Sulṭān-Ḥusayn went to Damascus of his own volition. If so, then a better hypothesis is that he was seeking the patronage of the Mamluk sultan in hopes of improving his opportunities for career advancement. But why might one of Temür's grandsons do such a thing? The answer lies in the complex ways in which Temür related to his family, especially the men in it, and the way Temür tended to squash the career opportunities of his offspring.

Like many of the other Temürids, Sulṭān-Ḥusayn was an ambitious young man. The clearest proof of this appeared in 807/1405, that is, a few years after his defection at Damascus, when he tried to take over Samarqand soon after his grandfather's death. But Sulṭān-Ḥusayn failed to capture the city, which became the possession of his cousin Khalīl-Sulṭān instead. Nevertheless Sulṭān-Ḥusayn remained undaunted, arranged to work for Khalīl-Sulṭān, and then later tried to use an army that Khalīl-Sulṭān gave him, not for Khalīl-Sulṭān's business but for his own purposes. Unfortunately for Sulṭān-Ḥusayn, he failed here, too, and fled to his uncle Shāh Rukh, who put a definitive end to his nephew's hopes by having him killed.²⁵ Sulṭān-Ḥusayn's ambitions were therefore unmistakable, although his ability to achieve them was low. It is reasonable to assume that he had been similarly ambitious those few years earlier when he found himself outside Damascus with his grandfather's armies.

In Sulṭān-Ḥusayn's case, however, the opportunity to pursue ambition was just as important as the mere presence of ambition itself. It is in this realm of opportunity that Temür's personality may have helped spur Sulṭān-Ḥusayn to his rebellious behavior. Temür appears to have loved his children and grandchildren, but does not seem to have trusted them. As a result, opportunities for the Temürids in general, and for Sulṭān-Ḥusayn in particular, were constrained because Temür liked to control his family members just as he controlled his followers and his forces.

Beatrice Forbes Manz has discussed this phenomenon at some length. Temür frequently gave his sons and grandsons important administrative and military positions, but while doing so he always took pains to limit their independence so that none could establish a base of support to rival his own. Thus, although he appointed some of his offspring as governors to rule particular regions in his absence, he also transferred them periodically to keep them from establishing themselves in any one place. Similarly, he furnished all the Temürids with appropriate entourages, including advisors, but then always ensured that some of

²⁴ Ibn 'Arabshāh/Sanders, *ʿAjā'ib/Tamerlane*, 243/140.

²⁵ Manz, *Rise and Rule*, 132; see also H. R. Roemer, "The Successors of Timür," *The Cambridge History of Iran*, volume 6, *The Timurid and Safavid Periods*, ed. Peter Jackson (Cambridge, 1986), 100.



these advisors were his own followers, often related to him by marriage, whose status and authority rivaled that of the princes themselves. This allowed the advisors to keep the princes in line. Temür also gave armies to some of his sons or grandsons, especially those whom he made governors, but he then borrowed these armies to use on campaign and left temporary forces in their place. This limited the princes' ability to establish durable ties with the fighting men who worked for them, but strengthened the connections between the fighting men and Temür himself.²⁶ Likewise, when Temür sent out a military campaign under the leadership of his offspring, he usually appointed several different Temürid princes, each of whom was accompanied by advisors, which created a system of checks and balances not only on each prince, but among them as well. In this context of balanced opportunity and control, therefore, a Temürid like Sulṭān-Ḥusayn could win appointments or fight in campaigns, but only with other Temürids and advisors present to keep him in line. Surely Sulṭān-Ḥusayn knew that he, along with his cousins and uncles, was unlikely to realize any greater ambitions while his grandfather kept such a grip on them all.

To make matters worse, the limitations the Temürids felt were not merely a problem during their grandfather's lifetime, for the larger challenge they faced was the way they would still be restricted even after his death. But how could Temür control his relatives from beyond the grave? The answer lies in the question of succession to Temür as ruler of his empire. Succession was a thorny problem in Central and East Asian nomadic society, since an unusually wide range of factors made a man eligible for consideration as the next ruler when a beg or khan died. One important element of succession was the concept of seniority within a family, which meant that a dying or dead ruler's brothers, uncles, or cousins could legitimately assert their right to rule.²⁷ (In some cases a senior woman might also enter the fray, albeit not for herself but only acting as regent for a son.) This elder generation could therefore be pitted against the deceased ruler's sons, and the elders' superior experience and resources could give them an advantage over the ruler's younger, less practiced, and less powerful offspring. It was this principle of seniority that Temür's own role model and idol, Chingiz Khan, avoided by choosing to limit succession to his sons, which he did at a gathering of Mongol notables (*quriltay*) in 1218, and which effectively excluded the conqueror's brothers from consideration. Although Chingiz Khan's heir, his third son, Ögedei (r. 1229–41), ruled without challenge, it is not surprising that when Ögedei died, Chingiz Khan's brother Temüge-Otchigin sought to reestablish the principle of seniority and override the claims of Ögedei's sons and grandsons

²⁶ For details see Manz, *Rise and Rule*, 84–88.

²⁷ Paul Ratchnevsky, *Genghis Khan: His Life and Legacy*, trans. T. N. Haining (Oxford, 1991), 125.



in favor of his own right to rule. Although Temüge-Otchigin's claim fit squarely within the structure of nomadic inheritance by following the principle of seniority, however, he failed to achieve his goal for military reasons, and this failure led to his censure, trial, and ultimate death.²⁸ Similarly, Chingiz Khan's grandson Batu (d. 1255), ruler of Central Asia and Russia, was seen as the senior member of his generation among Chingiz Khan's grandsons, and his word therefore carried great weight in struggles over succession in the 1240s. Batu helped delay the coronation of his cousin Güyük (r. 1246–48) for years, then allowed another cousin, Möngke, to become Great Khan (r. 1251–59) even though Möngke was from the weakest branch of the family and should not have had a chance.²⁹ Batu's seniority therefore helped him control the politics of the empire, although Batu never proposed himself as a candidate for Great Khan.

But even when succession deviated from the principle of seniority and was limited to a ruler's sons and grandsons, the wealth of possibilities here, too, made selection difficult. Khans could invoke primogeniture, ultimogeniture, or simply their own choice to determine their heir. Chingiz Khan used this last option, ruler's choice, in 1218 when designating Ögedei to be the next Great Khan, and Ögedei followed suit in selecting his grandson Shiremün (although Shiremün never actually managed to hold the position).

To complicate matters still further, one additional requirement for a man's sons to succeed him, which modern scholars sometimes fail to enumerate, was the identity of a son's mother. In nomadic ideology not all mothers were created equal, and thus the sons of some mothers enjoyed opportunities that the sons of other mothers did not, even when all the sons shared the same father. In general, the children of a principal wife (or principal wives) held greater status than the sons of secondary wives or concubines, and therefore enjoyed better career opportunities.³⁰ Thus, at the meeting of 1218, Chingiz Khan was not in fact choosing a new Great Khan from among all his sons, but was rather limiting his choice to those sons borne by his principal wife, Börte—his sons with other women did not enter into consideration. It was thus Börte's identity as Chingiz

²⁸ Ratchnevsky, *Genghis Khan*, 125; Anonymous, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, trans. Igor de Rachewiltz (Leiden, 2006), 1:182–88; 'Alā' al-Dīn 'Atā' Malik Juvaynī, *Tārīkh-i Jahān Gushā*, trans. J. A. Boyle as *The History of the World-Conqueror* (Seattle, 1997), 248, 255; Rashīd al-Dīn, *The Successors of Genghis Khan*, trans. J. A. Boyle (New York, 1971), 178, 182; Thomas T. Allsen, *Mongol Imperialism: The Policies of the Grand Qan Möngke in China, Russia and the Islamic Lands 1251–59* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1987), 20.

²⁹ Juvaynī, *World-Conqueror*, 249; Rashīd al-Dīn, *Successors*, 180, 200–5; Allsen, *Mongol Imperialism*, 19–20. For the origins of the strife between Batu and Güyük see Anonymous, *Secret History*, 201–2, 205–9.

³⁰ On this point see Juvaynī, *World-Conqueror*, 40.



Khan's most important wife that determined which of his progeny were eligible to inherit the empire; the choice did not extend to all of Chingiz Khan's sons unilaterally.³¹ At the other end of the spectrum, the Ottomans also recognized the importance of a mother's status in the politics of succession, but they responded by working to eliminate the question entirely. This they did by stipulating that the reproductive partners of the sultans be concubines, not wives, which meant that the status of these "royal mothers" depended entirely on their ability to bear sons of the Ottoman house, and not either on their marital positions or on their links to outside families. In fact, after the early years of the dynasty the Ottoman sultans stopped marrying anyone, since the presence of wives in the Ottoman family might have complicated succession by subjecting the imperial house to unwanted stresses from outside powers.³²

It is this final principle, that of mother's identity, that seems to have most strongly affected Temürid succession, and through it, the opportunities available to individual Temürid princes like Sultān-Ḥusayn. Unlike the Ottomans, who required that the mothers of heirs be concubines, Temür appears to have required the opposite, namely that the mothers of heirs be wives (and therefore free). Although Temür had four sons who survived to adulthood—ʿUmar-Shaykh (d. 796/1394), Jahāngīr (d. 777/1376), Mīrānshāh (d. 810/1408), and Shāh Rukh (d. 850/1447)—only Jahāngīr's mother, Turmish Agha Khatun, was Temür's wife; the mothers of the other three sons were concubines. But Jahāngīr could not succeed his father as ruler, since he died during Temür's lifetime (as did Temür's oldest son, ʿUmar-Shaykh). This meant that when Temür came to choosing an heir he was left with only two sons, Mīrānshāh and Shāh Rukh, and numerous grandsons. Unfortunately for Mīrānshāh and Shāh Rukh, however, the fact that both of their mothers had been Temür's concubines appears to have eliminated them from consideration. Instead, Temür seems to have combined the principles of mother's identity and ruler's choice to skip over Mīrānshāh and Shāh Rukh entirely and designate a grandson as heir: Jahāngīr's son Muḥammad-Sultān.

Temür seems to have decided that Muḥammad-Sultān was the best candidate to succeed him for two reasons. First, as explained above, his father Jahāngīr was the only one of Temür's sons whose mother was free and an actual wife to Temür. Second, Muḥammad-Sultān's own mother, Sevin Beg, was herself a free woman and lawful wife to Jahāngīr, and as an added attraction, she was

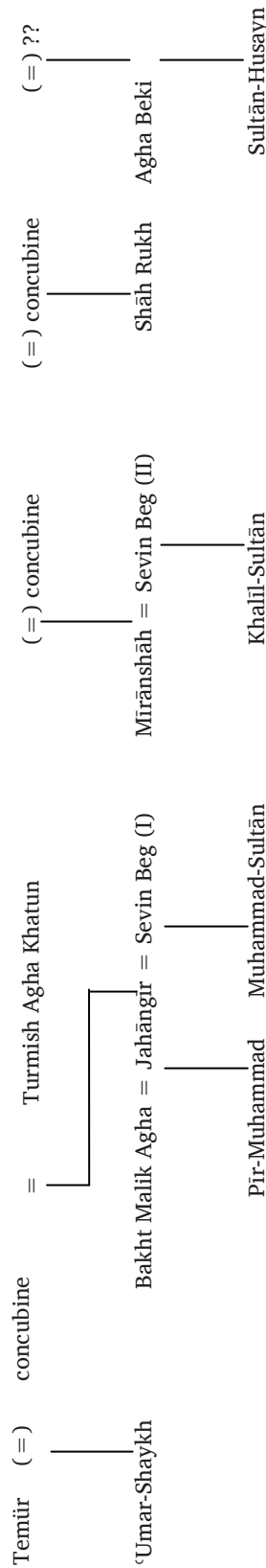
³¹ Juvaynī, *World-Conqueror*, 40, claims that Chingiz Khan had many sons and daughters from Börte and from other wives and concubines, but specifies that only Börte's sons were eligible to succeed their father. On two sons of concubines who were never even considered for succession see Allsen, *Mongol Imperialism*, 18, note 1.

³² Leslie P. Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (Oxford, 1993), 28–31, 37–42.

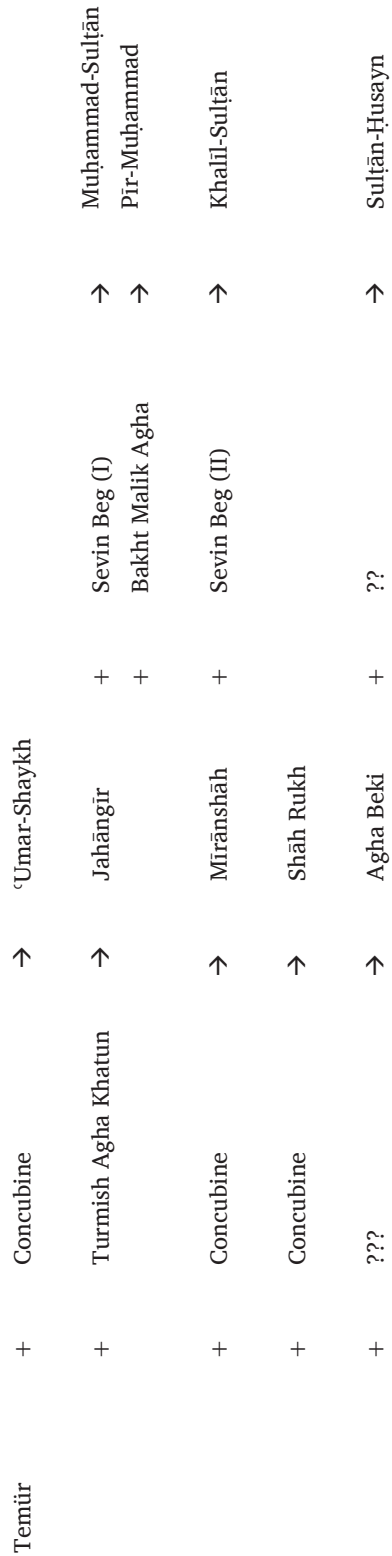


Partial Temürid Family Tree(s)

Traditional View



Revised View



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DOI: [10.6082/M1R78CB4](https://doi.org/10.6082/M1R78CB4). (<https://doi.org/10.6082/M1R78CB4>)

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maternally descended from the Jochid line of the Chingizid family, which Temür revered.³³ After Jahāngīr died, Sevin Beg married his brother Mīrānshāh and with him had another son, Khalīl-Sulṭān. Unfortunately for Temür, however, the heir Muḥammad-Sulṭān died in 805/1403, and he was forced to look for another candidate. When he did so, Temür did not choose Sevin Beg's second son Khalīl-Sulṭān (i.e., the deceased heir's uterine half-brother). Rather he settled on Pīr-Muḥammad, Jahāngīr's other son by a different wife who was also, of course, free, but who was not a Chingizid.³⁴ By limiting his choices to Jahāngīr's line, Temür demonstrated the importance of Jahāngīr's mother's status as a free and married woman; by choosing Muḥammad-Sulṭān before Pīr-Muḥammad, Temür demonstrated the importance of a Chingizid wife over a non-Chingizid. We may assume that Temür skipped over Khalīl-Sulṭān entirely, even though his mother was Muḥammad-Sulṭān's mother and a Chingizid, because Khalīl-Sulṭān's father, Mīrānshāh, had already been disqualified from succession as a result of his concubine mother's slave status.³⁵

Clearly, therefore, the status of a son's mother in the question of succession was just as much a problem for the Temürids as for the Chingizids and other nomadic dynasties. Even though Temür had two experienced, full-grown sons, to say nothing of his numerous grandsons, the succession ideology to which he subscribed meant that very few members of the family actually qualified as contenders for rule. Since this was true for those Temürids who were connected to the conqueror in a direct paternal line, i.e., his sons and their sons, then how much more true was it for Sulṭān-Ḥusayn, whose relatively low status as the son of Temür's daughter Agha Beki surely disqualified him even more? Certainly Sulṭān-Ḥusayn himself felt he was a worthy candidate to rule his grandfather's empire, as his first major act after Temür's death was to try to take over the capital city, Samarqand. But it is likely that during Temür's lifetime Sulṭān-Ḥusayn understood that Temür's ideas about succession meant he had no real opportunity for overall rule. This hard truth must have been clear by 800–1/1398, at which point Temür had chosen Muḥammad-Sulṭān to succeed him, and which was at least two years before Sulṭān-Ḥusayn saw his opportunity to escape the system by running away at Damascus.³⁶

Supporting the idea that Sulṭān-Ḥusayn was trying to defect to the Mamluks to

³³ Her own mother was Shakar Beg, daughter of the Jochid Janibeg Khan. See Woods, "Genealogy," 112.

³⁴ This was Bakht Malik Agha. See Woods, "Genealogy," 113, for a family tree.

³⁵ The details come from Woods, "Genealogy," 112–14; the concepts about the role of the mother in succession come from John Woods himself during class discussions in 1997 at the University of Chicago.

³⁶ Woods, "Genealogy," 113.



gain greater career opportunities is the fact that he was not the first or only prince to seek to elude Temür's control. A slightly earlier and more famous example of a rebellious Temürid had been Sulṭān-Ḥusayn's uncle Mīrānshāh, whose suddenly erratic behavior as governor of Azerbaijan around 801–2/1399 was characterized by official Temürid sources as a form of temporary insanity resulting from a fall from his horse.³⁷ The reality, however, was probably that Mīrānshāh was trying to establish himself as an independent ruler.³⁸ At the time of this episode Mīrānshāh was in his early thirties, and like Sulṭān-Ḥusayn, he already knew that Temür was passing over him as an heir to rule the entire empire. But Temür heard of his son's behavior from the advisors whom he had set to check the prince, as well as from Mīrānshāh's wife, and returned to Azerbaijan from campaigning in northern India to replace Mīrānshāh as governor and take him along on his final campaign in Iran, the better to keep an eye on him.³⁹ Similarly, Temür's grandson Pīr-Muḥammad ibn 'Umar Shaykh avoided going on a campaign in 802/1399–1400, even though Temür had directly ordered him to do so; he, too, was punished for this insubordination.⁴⁰ Like Mīrānshāh and Sulṭān-Ḥusayn, Pīr-Muḥammad may have felt his opportunities under Temür to be limited because of the slave status of his grandmother, 'Umar-Shaykh's mother, who had been Temür's concubine, not wife. And even Shāh Rukh, also passed over for rule because of his concubine mother, but who became Temür's unintended heir by defeating the other princes and taking control of a smaller version of the empire (r. 1411–47), deliberately rejected many of Temür's Turko-Mongol pretensions in favor of Islamic ideas in a sort of quiet rebellion against his father after his death.⁴¹

When we set Sulṭān-Ḥusayn's defection to the Mamluks at Damascus in the proper context of Temürid family ideology, therefore, it becomes clear that the opportunities for Sulṭān-Ḥusayn under the Mamluk sultan may have looked far more promising than they did under his own grandfather. Surely the situation must have seemed particularly appealing during the reigns of Faraj's father, al-Zāhir Barqūq (r. 784–91/1382–89, 792–801/1390–99), who was a strong sultan and ruled for nearly seventeen years. Those of Barqūq's exploits that arose from his interactions with Temür were hardly secret, and it can therefore be reasonably assumed that Sulṭān-Ḥusayn knew about them. For example, during

³⁷ John Woods, "Turco-Iranica II: Notes on a Timurid Decree of 1396/798," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 43, no. 4 (1984): 333–35; also see Manz, *Rise and Rule*, 72–73, 114. Bartold does not question the insanity conclusion in *Ulugh Beg*, 33–34.

³⁸ Woods, "Genealogy," 113.

³⁹ Bartold, *Ulugh Beg*, 34–35.

⁴⁰ See *ibid.*, 35; Manz, *Rise and Rule*, 114.

⁴¹ For Shāh Rukh's preference for Islamic norms and deliberate rejection of the Turko-Mongol ideas that Temür favored see Woods, "Genealogy," 115–16.



Barqūq's sultanate Temür had threatened to approach the northern Mamluk city of Aleppo, but had not actually done so because Barqūq demonstrated his own warlike qualities by leading out a sizable army and spending part of the summer of 796/1394 in Syria, simply waiting for Temür to appear. Barqūq also opposed Temür by being the single most important patron of other regional rulers; he counted among his protégés Qara Yusuf, leader of the Qara Qoyunlu Turkmen in northern Iraq, whom Temür fought multiple times during his second major Iran campaign (794–98/1392–96) without ever capturing him or permanently defeating his men. To add insult to this injury, Qara Yusuf later seized Temür's man Atlamish, commander of a fort near Tabriz, and sent him to Barqūq to show the Mamluk sultan his loyalty. Barqūq kept Atlamish in Cairo for years and refused to return him to Temür, despite Temür's repeated demands.⁴² Another of Barqūq's protégés was the Jalayirid Sulṭān-Aḥmad, who fled from Temür at Baghdad in 795/1393 and ran directly to Cairo for help, where Barqūq welcomed him lavishly, housed him in style, showered him with gifts and honors, married his niece, and sent him off with an army to reinstate himself in Baghdad.⁴³ Barqūq also extended his patronage to other regional rulers like the Artuqids at Mardin, Qāḍī Burhān al-Dīn at Sivas, and the Ottoman ruler Beyazid in Anatolia, although with less dramatic results.⁴⁴ It was therefore clear that Barqūq was a sovereign of significant stature, enough to oppose Temür successfully when many others failed. Furthermore, the Mamluk Sultanate had a long history of welcoming refugees and immigrants, especially Turko-Mongol military men, who were generally incorporated into some level of the military forces. Certainly, many of these refugees to Mamluk territory had belonged to an earlier time period, that of Ilkhanid rule in Iran (1258–1335).⁴⁵ Nevertheless, if Sulṭān-Ḥusayn's knowledge of Mongol history was similar to Temür's, he is likely to have known something about these men and the fact that they were almost always welcomed into Mamluk society. It is understandable that Sulṭān-Ḥusayn may have rightly deduced that Mamluk territory was a place that held some promise, and Barqūq was surely a man who could protect and promote him, if only he could reach him.

Unfortunately for Sulṭān-Ḥusayn, however, by the time the opportunity for flight presented itself at Damascus, the situation had changed dramatically. Barqūq was dead, his son Faraj was not yet a teenager, and Faraj's advisors were of a far

⁴² Broadbridge, *Kingship and Ideology*, 186–87, 189, 190, 192, 193.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 176, 180–81, 185–86.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 174–76.

⁴⁵ David Ayalon, "The Wafidiya in the Mamluk Kingdom," *Islamic Culture* 25 (1951): 89–104, reprinted in his *Studies on the Mamluks of Egypt (1250–1517)* (London, 1977); Reuven Amitai-Preiss, *Mongols and Mamluks: The Mamluk-Ilkhanid War, 1260–1281* (Cambridge, 1995), 108–9; Broadbridge, *Kingship and Ideology*, 31, 70–73, 102, 105, 106–7, 117–24.



lesser caliber than Barqūq had been. At the time of Sulṭān-Ḥusayn's defection, the Mamluk leadership's sorry decision to run back to Cairo to forestall a coup was still a few days away, but certainly the Mamluks had already demonstrated a significant lack of decisiveness by waiting so long to respond to rumors of Temür's advance that their delay had contributed to the loss of Aleppo and all the Syrian Mamluk commanders with it. For all we know, therefore, Sulṭān-Ḥusayn may indeed have been drunk, as Naṭanzī and Yazdī suggest, if only to give himself the courage to take such a drastic step when the rewards were suddenly so uncertain. And he was fortunate that Temür preferred to punish his family members only lightly when they disobeyed him, since otherwise the consequences of his flight and recapture might have been much more severe.

In sum, then, Sulṭān-Ḥusayn's curious defection earned little attention in either the Persian or Arabic histories, especially when considered against the dramatic backdrop of events at Damascus. Nevertheless, this tiny sub-plot in the larger narrative is important for what it can illuminate about the dynamics of the Temürid family. In particular it suggests that Sulṭān-Ḥusayn may have been seeking career advancement among the Mamluks, that is, outside the confines of his grandfather's system. This could have been a result not only of Temür's general policies of control, but also of his rigid and limited views on the question of legitimacy, rule, and succession. Nor was Sulṭān-Ḥusayn the only Temürid who chafed under the warlord's policies: Mirānshāh, Pir-Muḥammad ibn 'Umar-Shaykh and, much later, Shāh Rukh all made attempts to resist Temür's dominance. Unfortunately for Sulṭān-Ḥusayn, his opportunity for flight came too late, after his would-be patron had died. His recapture sent him back to his grandfather for punishment, but he emerged relatively unscathed, only to wait until Temür's death to make yet another unsuccessful bid for power.

The incident also raises a question: why was Temür so lenient with his rebellious offspring? The repercussions for Mirānshāh's attempt to establish himself independently were mild, as he was merely removed from office and forced to accompany Temür on campaign. This may have posed an emotional challenge—was it galling? Infuriating? Something to accept with resignation?—but Mirānshāh's life and physical health do not appear to have been in danger from his grandfather. Sulṭān-Ḥusayn's defection at Damascus may even have been colored by his knowledge of this leniency, and his hope that if his attempt failed, his grandfather might not punish him too much. The reasons for Temür's complicated treatment of his sons and grandsons—encouraging them with jobs and opportunities, limiting them with watchdog advisors, and refusing to punish them seriously when they misbehaved—also deserve further study.

