



## FAŽĀ'EL-E BALĶ

**FAŽĀ'EL-E BALĶ**, a thirteenth-century local history from [BalĶ](#) in eastern Khorasan, with a collection of biographies of BalĶ's early Islamic scholars and mystics ([Figure 1](#)).

The *Fażā'el-e BalĶ* is the earliest surviving local history of BalĶ, a major city and district in Khorasan. The *Fażā'el-e BalĶ* differs from many other local histories of medieval Islamic cities (see [Historiography iii](#)) in that it comprises a mix of historical, topographical, and prosopographical information on a select number of 'ulamā' of BalĶ, covering six centuries from the advent of Islam to the late 12th century. The *Fażā'el-e BalĶ* survives in a Persian adaptation of the lost Arabic original that was authored by ŠayĶ-al-Eslām Šafi-al-din Abu Bakr 'Abdollah b. 'Omar b. Moĥammad b. Dāvud al-Vā'eẓ al-BalĶi in 1214. 'Abdollah [b. Moĥammad] b. al-Qāsem al-Ĥoseyni translated the book into Persian in 1278 under the patronage of a certain Abu Bakr 'Abdollah b. Abi'l-Farid al-BalĶi (*Fażā'el-e BalĶ*, p. 4).

There are four known manuscripts of the *Fażā'el-e BalĶ*. The oldest, dated from the late 14th or early 15th century, is held at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris under the call number Persan-115 (Blochet, pp. 316-17; Storey, I/2, pp. 1296-97; idem, II/1, pp. 122-23; Storey/Bregel, II, pp. 1053-54). The manuscript lacks the incipit and the last third of the book. A second, uncatalogued manuscript belonged to the private collection of Kalil al-Raĥmān Dāvudi in Lahore. This second most complete manuscript of the work dates probably from the 17th century (Nawšāhi, p. 61). Two manuscripts are kept in one binding in the Russian Academy of the Sciences in St. Petersburg under



the call numbers C453-1 and C453-3. This latter is the most complete of the four manuscripts. The binding of these last two manuscripts is sealed by Moḥammad Šarif b. Mollā Ḥasan K̄vāja al-Bokāri with the date 1866 (Miklukho-Maklai, II, pp. 86-93).

Charles Schefer was the first editor of the *Fażā'el-e Balk*, transcribing the first and second parts of the work, i.e., the historical and geographical sections, as found in the Ms. Persan-115, together with a commentary (Schefer, I, pp. 66-103 [Persian text], 69-94 [editor's notes]). Šādeq Kiā published an abridgement of Schefer's transcription in 1938 (Kiā, pp. 26-31). In 1963, 'Ali Šari'ati composed a thesis on the *Fażā'el-e Balk*, providing a transcription and abridged translation into French of its third part based on the Ms. Persan-115 (Mazinani-Shariati; cf. Rahnema, pp. 118-20). 'Abd-al-Ḥayy Ḥabibi published a critical edition in Tehran of the whole work on the basis of the Ms. Persan-115 and the two manuscripts kept in the Russian Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg. This edition is currently under revision by the Balkh Art and Cultural Heritage Project (<http://www.balkheritage.org>).

There are considerable questions on the title and authorship of the work. It is possible that the title, *Fażā'el-e Balk*, was assigned to the text by European cataloguers de Carcavy and Poterie in 1668. The *Fażā'el-e Balk* refers to earlier, extinct versions of local histories and *ṭabaqāt* works focused on Balk (*Fażā'el-e Balk*, p. 10; Azad 2012, pp. 88 ff.). The *Fażā'el-e Balk*'s historical narrative ends in 1188-89, which may explain why Šafi-al-din makes no direct reference to the advent of the Mongols, who occupied the city of Balk in 1212. Thus, the book must have been written between 1188 and 1214, most probably in the 1190s under the K̄vārazmšāhi rule. The 13th-century geographer Yāqut (I, p. 143) attributes to the 9th-century geographer, Abu Zayd al-Balki, a book entitled *Fażā'el-e Balk* which was lost in his time, while Šafi-al-din refers to a *Manāqib-e Balk* by Abu Zayd Balki which is different from his own work, the *Fażā'el-e Balk* (*Fażā'el-e Balk*, p. 54). Large parts of Šafi-al-din's *Fażā'el-e Balk* are found in later texts, such as the *Baḥr-al-asrār* (ca. 1645) by Maḥmud b. Amir Vali's and the 18th-century *Jarida* by Moḥammad Mo'men Balki.

Information about the author comes only from the book itself. Accordingly, it is known that Šafi-al-din was ten years old in 1179-80 (*Fażā'el-e Balk*, pp. 36-7). He visited tombs of Balk's saints in 1186-87 in Bukhara and "Fāryāb of Jowzjānān" and traveled six years later to Vāšgerd located in Badakšān. The transcription of his speeches was completed in 1214 (idem, pp. 130, 166, 12). The identity of the Persian translator, 'Abdollah [b. Moḥammad] b. al-Qāsem

al-Ḥoseyni, is equally obscure. He seems to have a good grounding in religious scholarship, given his Arabic skills as well as his solid knowledge of the method of historical falsification used in Islamic scholarship. (*Fažā'el-e BalĶ*, pp. 18-19, 371).

Ḥabibi's critical edition contains prefaces by the translator and the author, Chapter 1 ("On the merits of the text [*fī faḍā'elehā al-mantūra*]"), Chapter 2 ("On the genre that is peculiar and can be found in the text [*fī šamā'el al-maḵṣusa al-maḥsusa be-hā*]"), Chapter 3 ("On the 'Olamā'"), and the Epilogue (*Ḳātema*). The first chapter, which can be loosely called the "historical section," is largely a collection of pre-Islamic traditions and selected Islamic historical traditions on BalĶ. The historical section does not continue to the author's time, but ends with the 9th-century Simjurids. Chapter 2 is essentially geographic, based on the author's observations. Full of praise, it reads like a personal exposé or tourist brochure on the delights of the city, its notables (religious and secular), and its inhabitants generally. The language is heavily influenced by the Islamic concepts of purity, abundance, and fertility. Chapter 3, which forms the bulk of the work, is a collection of seventy biographies, or rather, hagiographies, of BalĶ's *šayĶs*. The focus is on the subjects' scholarly achievements and writing, while the tone is filled with effusive praise and respectful deference. The biographies are organized chronologically, beginning with a purported companion of the Prophet who was from BalĶ and ending with the Arabic author's teacher who died there in 1188-89.

The *Fažā'el-e BalĶ* includes important and rare information on aspects of the history of BalĶ in particular and the eastern Iranian world in general. These include the relationship between scholarly and political elite circles, the confluence of Šari'a-minded approach to Islam and local mysticism in Khorasan during the early Islamic centuries, and the topography and sacred geography of the city of BalĶ (Schwarz, pp. 434-43; Madelung, pp. 32-39; Azad, 2013 [forthcoming]). A source-critical study also brings to light a number of minor legal and juridical texts and local *rejāl* and *ṭabaqāt* works (Azad 2010, pp. 88-98).



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