

The Fall of the Khwarazm Empire

Felinah Memo Hazara Khan-ad-Din

O'er Persian lands and more in mystic east,
Mohammed ruled, a proud Khwarazm Shah.
From warm Shiraz, where southern sun ne'er ceased,
To Samarkand, whose splendor garnered awe,
To freezing desert sands of black and red,
Mohammed, son of Tekesh, found no flaw.

No storm nor sun's eclipse foreshadowed dread
When to the border, Mongol traders came.
For mighty Ghengis Khan had sent ahead
Rich gifts to Shah Mohammed in his name.
And in Bukhara had Mohammed seen,
The golden wealth that Ghengis Khan could claim.

So when to Utrar, border town serene,
A caravan from Eastern lands did ride,
The governor met all with gracious mien.
But as their gold and silk and furs he eyed,
His greed o'erwhelmed his soul, he'd not accept
Mere trading was their goal, and claimed they spied.

He wrote unto his Shah before he slept,
And warned of Mongol threat in what he sent.
The answer, into which Shah's fear had crept,
Agreed that spying was the Khan's intent.
By two, from greed and fear, the dice were cast,
Whose roll began Khwarazm's fell descent.

Then Utrar's lord, on Khan's men sentence passed:
To him all goods were forfeit — spies all died.
Four hundred fifty died, but one at last
Escaped and found his Khan, a desp'rate ride.
With great restraint, the Khan sent three to hear
The Shah's defense, or empires would collide.

Mohammed, foolish in his pride and fear,
First killed one Mongol envoy out of hand,
Then burned the others' beards to shame them dear,
And sent them, humbled, back to Mongol care.
He fanned the breeze of Mongol ire to gale,
Whose mighty wind would sweep his empire bare.

His patience ripped in twain, the Khan did hail
His sons and armies back from China's land,
And swearing Mongol vengeance would prevail
Spent two long years in gath'ring his command.
The Mongol horde razed Utrar 'neath its tread,
Then blackened gloried arts of Samarkand.

As rich Bukhara wailed and burned and bled,
Mohammed Shah tried yet to foil his fate.
But courage failed when needed, and he fled
Across his crumbling realm from Mongol hate.
Despair alone he carried from defeat,
Alone and shamed, he entered death's estate.

While Shah Mohammed made his long retreat,
His son, Jalal-ad-Din, took up the flame.
Heroic son achieved a vict'ry sweet,
And garnered for Khwarazm lasting fame.
Though wide did Shah Mohammed's lands extend,
Long Mongol mem'ry never sang his name.

The fate of empires rests with acts of men,
And hist'ry judges harshest with its pen.

This narrative poem is written in terza rima, as might have been attempted in late 16th century England by a member of the aristocracy experimenting with less common forms of verse and entranced by tales of exotic Persian heroes brought back from that land to England by Elizabethan traders.

The terza rima form:

This verse form consists of interlocking triplet rhymes in which the second line of the triplet sets the rhyme for the first and third lines of the following triplet, creating the rhyme scheme of aba bcb cdc ded, etc. The poem may be of any length, but concludes with a couplet using a new rhyme, or with a single line that rhymes with the middle line of the last triplet, e.g. ...xyx yzy z.¹ This interlocking rhyme scheme provides a flowing continuity to the narrative², but creates a complex pattern not easily edited. The first and last rhymes are used only in two lines each, but all other rhymes appear in three lines. In classic terza rima, repeats of rhymes within a canto are few, and typically spaced well apart to make them less noticeable. English rhymes are both relative scarce and more strongly stated than those found in Italian, making this form a particular challenge in that language³. The interlocking rhyme scheme also makes it very difficult to add or delete lines from the poem, once written.⁴

The history of terza rima:

This poetic form of interlocking rhymes written in iambic triplets first appears in Dante's *Inferno* in medieval Italy. The repeating interlocking triplets of the terza rima may have evolved from the three-lined *riourhel* of earlier Italian poets, or from the *servientes* of the troubadours of Provence, but a perhaps more likely source is the *sestet* form of the 13th century Italian sonnet that contained two *terzines* with interlocking rhymes.⁵ Dante, very proud of his work, may have developed the terza rima form in part to prevent later mistakes by copyists⁶.

The first appearance of terza rima in English is debated, with Chaucer and Sir Thomas Wyatt being the most often cited. Chaucer's "A Complaint to his Lady" contains a passage of twenty-five lines in terza rima, although the meter does not fit the form perfectly, and he does not try the form again. Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542) is cited as having written the first complete terza rima poem in English⁷ in his *Second Satire: The Country Mouse and the Town Mouse*⁸. Interestingly, the 1911 *Encyclopedia* claims Samuel Daniel (1562-1619) wrote the first "genuine" terza rima poem in English in the form of his "Epistle to the Countess of Bedford".⁹ Sir Phillip Sidney (1554-1586) included examples of terza rima in his collection of poems entitled *Arcadia*, although most modern critics are less than inspired by the quality displayed in this collection¹⁰.

The Judgement of History: The Fall of the Khwarazm Empire:

The Form:

This narrative poem consists of 18 *terzines* in the classic terza rima interlocking rhyme scheme, with a concluding couplet with a separate rhyme. The relative scarcity of rhymes in English leads poets

writing this form to modify the classic form to some degree. Wyatt, in *Satire II*, used near rhymes on three occasions within the first 18 couplets (6th, 9th and 10th rhymes), and in one instance includes a complete non-rhyming word (14th rhyme: appear-loud-rood). In *The Fall of the Khwarazm Empire*, I have chosen to repeat rhymes rather than use near rhymes. Two of the repeated rhymes are spaced at least 30 lines apart, which exceeds Dante's smallest separation of rhymes (at 23 lines¹¹). Two are closer, but serve to maintain consistent use of true rhymes.

The Story:

In the early 13th century, Persia, Afghanistan, much of Iraq, Uzbekistan and Turkistan formed an empire ruled by the Khwarazm (Khor-á-zum) Shah, Ali-ad-Din Mohammed II. The original homeland of the Khwarazm Turks was found along the Amu Darya near the Aral Sea, including the rich lands of the river delta and bordered by the waste of the Kizil Kum ("red sands") desert. The region between the Amu Darya (Áh-moo Dár-ya, or Oxus) and Syr Darya (Seer Dár-ya, or Jaxartes) rivers, called Transoxiana, contained some of the richest cities of the region, including fabled Samarkand (Sám-ar-kánd) and Bukhara (Boo-kár-ah), as well as the desolate Kara Kum (black sand) desert. When Ghengis Khan conquered the Kara-Khitai ("Black Khitai", Bhuddist nomads), the Syr Darya river became the Khan's eastern border and the two rulers became neighbors.

The first encounter between Khwarazmian and Mongol envoys went well, although accounts differ on who sent the envoy and who received it¹². In either case, Mohammed received gifts from the great Khan, but was also read a letter proposing that the Syr Darya be considered the natural boundary between the sovereign empires of east and west, and stating that the Khan considered the "Lord of the west" as his son. Before Ghengis Khan could receive Mohammed's response, the Khan sent the first caravan of rich gifts described in the narrative. The insult Mohammed took from this reference to him as the Khan's "son" may have contributed to his response; the story of the Khwarazmian response and its consequences for Utrar (Óo-trar) and the Khwarazmian empire are told in the poem.¹³

Shah Mohammed's generals were at such odds with each other that the Shah could not gather his mighty army in one location; if he had, his army would have outnumbered the Khan's by at least 5 to 1. The piecemeal defense this problem created led to one Mongol victory after another. Mohammed eventually lost heart and fled across his empire, finally dying alone on an island in the Caspian sea. His son, Jalal-ad-Din, led a courageous but ultimately futile series of battles across southern Persia, eventually being pushed back to the Indus river, where he pushed his horse into a spectacular leap off a cliff into the river and escaped across into India. The great Khan is said to have encouraged his men to emulate such actions.¹⁴

The Elizabethan connection:

Elizabethan adventurers explored much of the world, carrying tales of exotic lands back to England. Anthony Jenkinson, a factor of the Muscovy company departed from Moscow in April of 1558 to travel the lands of southern Russia and Persia ruled by the Khwarazm Shah in the 13th century. Jenkinson traveled down the Volga with two other men and a Tatar translator, crossed the Caspian Sea and traveled by caravan through the homeland of Timur Malik. He visited with several local governors and rulers on his journey, speaking with several of them at length about their lands and peoples. He was received by Timur, Sultan of Khwarazm, and "spoke familiarly" with the king of Bukara before obtaining a trade agreement from the Shah of Persia. This gave Jenkinson and his men ample opportunity to hear stories of legendary heroes of Khwarazm and tell those tales to colleagues back in England. Jenkinson recorded many of his impressions of his journey through Khwarazm in a report to the Muscovy company written in 1560 in Russia while he waited to sail back to England. It was published by Richard Hakluyt (1552-1616) in his book, "Voyages and Discoveries. The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation." ¹⁵

Elizabethan English interest in Persian heroes is demonstrated by the play, "Cambyses, King of Persia," written by Thomas Preston (1537-1598) and imprinted in 1569. Although most attribute the play to the Latin scholar of this name, some doubts have been raised over exactly which Thomas Preston wrote the play and exactly when between 1552 and 1569 it was written¹⁶. The play concerns a king of ancient Persia, whose reign was described by Herodotus¹⁷, although Preston appears to have used a contemporary short history of the world by Carion as his source for the play.

So it is not unreasonable to expect that Jenkinson and his fellow travelers spread tales of other legendary heroes and villains of Khwarazm, which could have inspired an Elizabethan aristocrat to pen a narrative poem such as the one presented here.

APPENDIX: Satire II: The Country Mouse and the Town Mouse by Sir Thomas Wyatt.
This text is copied from the site: <http://www.theotherpages.org/poems/wyatt01.html>.

MY mother's maids, when they did sew and spin,
They sang sometime a song of the field mouse,
That for because her livelihood* was but thin [livelihood]
Would needs go seek her townish sister's house.
She thought herself endured to much pain:
The stormy blasts her cave so sore did souse
That when the furrows swimm'd with the rain
She must lie cold and wet in sorry plight,
And, worse than that, bare meat there did remain
To comfort her when she her house had dight:
Sometime a barleycorn, sometime a bean,
For which she labored hard both day and night
In harvest time, whilst she might go and glean.
And when her store was 'stroyed with the flood,
Then well away, for she undone was clean.
Then was she fain to take, instead of food,
Sleep if she might, her hunger to beguile.
"My sister," quoth she, "hath a living good,
And hence from me she dwelleth not a mile.
In cold and storm she lieth warm and dry
In bed of down, and dirt doth not defile
Her tender foot, she laboreth not as I.
Richly she feedeth and at the rich man's cost,
And for her meat she needs not crave nor cry.
By sea, by land, of the delicates the most
Her cater seeks and spareth for no peril.
She feedeth on boiled, baken meat, and roast,
And hath thereof neither charge nor travail.
And, when she list, the liquor of the grape
Doth goad her heart till that her belly swell."
And at this journey she maketh but a jape*: [joke]
So forth she goeth, trusting of all this wealth
With her sister her part so for to shape
That, if she might keep herself in health,
To live a lady while her life doth last.
And to the door now is she come by stealth,
And with her foot anon she scrapeth full fast.
The other for fear durst not well scarce appear,
Of every noise so was the wretch aghast.
"Peace," quoth the town mouse, "why speakest thou so loud?"
And by the hand she took her fair and well.
"Welcome," quoth she, "my sister, by the rood."
She feasted her that joy is was to tell
The fare they had; they drank the wine so clear;
And as to purpose now and then it fell
She cheered her with: "How, sister, what cheer?"
Amids this joy there fell a sorry chance,
That, wellaway, the stranger bought full dear
The fare she had. For as she looks, askance,
Under a stool she spied two steaming eyes
In a round head with sharp ears. In France
was never mouse so feared*, for though the unwise [afraid]
Had not yseen* such a beast before,

Yet had nature taught her after her guise

¹<http://www.poeticbyway.com/gl-t.html>. This glossary in Bob's Byway provides a description of terza rima.

²Tatlock, JSP. *Dante's Terza Rima*. *PMLA* **1936**, 51(4):895-903, p. 900.

³Kean, PM. Chaucer as Englishman Elusively Italianate. *The Review of English Studies* **1983**, 34(136):388-94, p. 391.

⁴Tatlock, JSP, 1936, p. 895.

⁵Ibid, p. 897-9.

⁶Ibid. p. 901.

⁷Watson, MR. Wyatt, Chaucer, and Terza Rima. *Modern Language Notes* **1953**, 68(2):124-5.

⁸<http://www.theotherpages.org/poems/wyatt01.html>. This site contains the text of Wyatt's Satire II.

⁹<http://1911encyclopedia.org/index.html>. See entries for "Samuel Daniel" and for "terza rima".

¹⁰Spencer, T. The Poetry of Sir Philip Sidney. *ELH* **1945**, 12(4):251-78, p. 256.

¹¹Tatlock, JSP, 1936, p. 896.

¹²Barthold, W. *Turkestan Down to the Mongol Invasion*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 1992, p. 394. Legg, S. *The Barbarians of Asia*. New York: Dorset Press, 1970, p. 259-60.

¹³Barthold, W, 1992, p. 395-400 (the two caravans); p. 406-7 (siege of Utrar); p. 409 (attack on Bukhara); p. 412-14 (attack on Samarkand). Legg, S, 1970, p. 260-1 (the two caravans).

¹⁴Barthold, W, 1992, p. 419-426 (Mohammed's flight from the Mongols); p. 426-7 (Mohammed's death and Mongol's scorn); p. 446-7 (Jalal-ad-Din's exploits). Legg, S, 1970, p. 272-3 (Mohammed's defeat and flight); p. 273-6 (the exploits of Jalal-ad-Din).

¹⁵<http://depts.washington.edu/uwch/silkroad/texts/jenkinson/bukhara.html>. Edited by Lance Jennott, 2001. Includes Jenkinson's map and the text selection is taken from Richard Hakluyt's *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation*, 12 vols. (Glasgow, 1903-1905), vol. II, pp. 449-479. See especially p. 459-65 and 469-72.

¹⁶Linthicum, MC. The Date of Cambyses. *PMLA* **1934**, 49(3):959-61.

¹⁷Allen, DC. A Source for Cambyses. *Modern Language Notes* **1934**, 49(6):384-7, p. 385-6.