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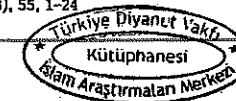
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Cover image: Rabi'a Balkhi on the Wall of Poets, Balkh, Afghanistan, 2019 (photo by Shamim Homayun).



ARTICLE

Unearthing Rabi'a's Grave: Placemaking, Shrines, and Contested Traditions in Balkh, Afghanistan

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Abstract

Rabi'a Balkhi was a princess and poet who, according to medieval accounts, flourished in 10th-century Balkh. She gained wide popularity in 20th-century Afghanistan, where she has been the subject of books, poems, and movies. This article recounts the story of her grave's discovery in the center of Balkh's town park in the 1960s, the emergence of a shrine around it, and its integration with Balkh's landscape of antiquity. Drawing on parallels from across the Muslim world, I argue that Rabi'a's shrine emerged through a dialogue between state officials and local forms of placemaking. But although initially motivated by nationalist sentiment, the Afghan state lost its ability to define Rabi'a's life on nationalist terms. As Afghanistan fragmented through war, her shrine survived as a space where her life was constantly reinterpreted and where disputed visions over the nation's past and future played out.

Keywords: Afghanistan; culture; nationalism; poetry; shrines; sufism; women

In the town park of Balkh, Afghanistan, there is a modest turquoise-tiled grave attributed to the 10th-century poetess Rabi'a Balkhi.¹ A simple reinforced concrete structure was built around it, and a small door led down into a subterranean chamber, where the grave was covered in green cloth (Fig. 1). I visited the tomb on numerous occasions between 2008 and 2019, first as part of family visits and later during anthropological fieldwork. At the grave, I observed practices typically associated with other central Asian shrines: locks and cloth-tying, sweeping of dust, and healing prayers offered by the shrine's dervish (*malang*). The tombstone above Rabi'a's grave, embedded in concrete, described her as a sufi who was martyred for her love. On the wall behind the grave, a banner described Rabi'a as a poetess who "scattered the glory and splendor of her father's kingdom at the feet of love." This banner was once covered with graffiti: memorial scribbles, visitors' signatures, and love notes. One intriguing piece of graffiti read, in English, "This is what a feminist looks like." This banner was later removed—along with other material culture of the shrine—following a "cleaning up" of informal religious practices (Fig. 2).

I was first brought to Rabi'a's shrine by my relatives who lived nearby, and who had farmed and traded in Balkh for generations. My grandfather owned a fabric store in the market near Rabi'a's shrine, and lived much of his life in a village to the south of the Balkh old city walls. Some of his children went to the nearby school, and his grandchildren still farm the fertile land of a nearby village, and sell their fruit and vegetables in the Balkh market. On visits to my family village between 2008 and 2011, relatives often brought me to

¹ Dates for the life of Rabi'a are unknown. She is reported to have flourished during the Samanid era (819–999) and been a contemporary of the poet Rudaki (880–940/41).

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