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THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF STUDYING THE LEGACY OF IMAM AL-TIRMIDHI

Abstract. *This article examines the life, scholarly formation, principal works, and enduring contemporary relevance of the hadith scholar Imam Abu ‘Isa Muhammad al-Tirmidhi (209/824–279/892 CE), who hailed from the city of Termez in southern Uzbekistan. The study analyses Tirmidhi’s distinctive contributions to hadith science – most notably his introduction of the category of “hasan” hadith and his systematic integration of jurisprudential organization within the canonical collection “Sunan al-Tirmidhi” – and situates these contributions within the broader intellectual landscape of ninth-century Transoxiana, characterized by an extraordinary concentration of hadith scholars across the region. The article also surveys post-independence Uzbek scholarship on Tirmidhi’s legacy and reflects on the ethical and educational dimensions of his exemplary scholarly conduct for the contemporary reader.*

Keywords: *Imam al-Tirmidhi; Sunan al-Tirmidhi; hadith science; hasan hadith; Transoxiana; Islamic scholarship; Siḥāḥ al-sitta; hadith classification; Central Asian Islam; Termez.*

INTRODUCTION

The hadith scholar who emerged from the city of Termez in what is today the Surkhandarya region of southern Uzbekistan accomplished a great work in the science of hadith. Living in the same century as Imam al-Bukhari and acquiring the science of hadith from him, he bequeathed to posterity his renowned hadith collection known as

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“Sunan al-Tirmidhi.” The full name of this scholar is Imam Abu ‘Isa Muhammad ibn ‘Isa ibn Sawra ibn Musa ibn Zayd al-Sulami al-Darir al-Bughi al-Tirmidhi. He was born in 209/824 CE in the village of Bugh – located in the present-day district of Sherobod, approximately six farsakhs (60 km) from the city of Termez – which is situated on the right bank of the Amu Darya in the region then called by the Arabs Mawara’ al-Nahr (Transoxiana), meaning “the land beyond the river” (Yaqut al-Hamawi, 1977, vol. 5:45). The region was later designated “Turkistan” (Yaqut al-Hamawi, 1977, vol. 2:23). After a long scholarly life, the Imam passed away in 279/892 CE in the village of Bugh, his place of birth in Termez.

According to information provided in such works as Abu Hafs al-Nasafi’s “Kitab al-Qand” and Abu Sa’d al-Sam‘ani’s “Kitab al-Ansab,” more than three thousand eminent hadith scholars lived and worked in Transoxiana between the eighth and twelfth centuries CE. Of these, more than one thousand resided in Samarqand, more than six hundred in Bukhara, and more than four hundred in Nasaf. Of the remaining thousand scholars, more than seventy came from Shash, more than sixty from Ferghana, a comparable number from Kesh, more than forty from Khwarazm, and more than fifty were associated with the territory of Termez (al-Nasafi, 1999:18–19). These figures demonstrate that an extraordinarily large number of hadith scholars emerged from the region of Termez.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative historical-biographical approach, drawing on classical Islamic biographical and hadith-critical literature, primary source editions, and post-independence Uzbek scholarship on Imam al-Tirmidhi. Primary sources consulted include Yaqut al-Hamawi’s “Mu‘jam al-Buldan,” Abu Hafs al-Nasafi’s “Kitab al-Qand,” Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani’s “Tahdhib al-Tahdhib,” al-Dhahabi’s “Tadhkirat al-Huffaz,” and the collected works of Imam al-Tirmidhi himself, particularly “al-Shama’il al-Muhammadiyah” (al-Tirmidhi, 1988). Secondary sources include the monograph by Uvatov (2005) and the hadith studies textbook compiled by Murotov, Rahimjonov, and Alimova (2019), as well as relevant web-based encyclopaedic resources. The analysis proceeds thematically, examining Tirmidhi’s biography, scholarly formation, principal works, critical reception, and contemporary relevance in turn.

RESULTS

Teachers and scholarly formation. Imam al-Tirmidhi had numerous teachers. Among them was Imam al-Bukhari, from whom he transmitted many hadiths. The great hadith masters Imam Muslim and Abu Dawud were also among his teachers. The scholar additionally received instruction in hadith science from the shaykhs of Basra, Kufa, Khurasan, and the Hijaz. Imam al-Tirmidhi's works – above all his “Sunan al-Tirmidhi” – occupy a position among the six recognized canonical hadith collections, ranking after “Sahih al-Bukhari” and “Sahih Muslim.” The sources record that Imam al-Bukhari, in the company of his disciple al-Tirmidhi, said to him: “The benefit I have derived from you is greater than the benefit you have derived from me” (Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani, *Tahdhib al-Tahdhib*, vol. 9:388), thereby paying the highest tribute to Tirmidhi's knowledge and intellect.

Prodigious memory. Imam al-Tirmidhi possessed an extraordinary memory, and accounts of his capacity for memorizing hadiths are recorded in the sources. One shaykh, wishing to test Imam al-Tirmidhi, recited to him forty rare hadiths. Imam al-Tirmidhi then recited all forty without error, from beginning to end, without misplacing a single letter. The shaykh, upon witnessing this, declared: “I have never encountered anyone like you” (islom.uz, 2025). The scholar's disciple Abu Sa'd 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Muhammad al-Idrisi (d. 1015 CE) described his master and noted that proverbs were composed about his capacity for memorization and his acuity of mind. Abu Sa'd al-Idrisi was himself the author of the historical-biographical works “Ta'rikh Astarabad” and “Kitab al-Kamil fi ma'rifat al-rijal bi-Samarqand” (“The Complete Book on the Knowledge of the Narrators of Samarqand”) (al-Nasafi, 1999:18–19).

Imam al-Tirmidhi himself narrated an account concerning his memory: “While on my way to Mecca, I had written down two portions of the hadiths that a certain shaykh had collected. By chance I encountered that very shaykh. The hadiths in question were similar in content to his but were in fact different hadiths. After an exchange of greetings, I requested to hear the hadiths directly from his own lips. He agreed and began to narrate. When he looked at the blank sheets of paper in my hand and saw that they were empty – with nothing written on them – he said: ‘Are you not ashamed of me for this conduct?’ I

apologetically told him the truth: ‘I know all the hadiths you have narrated by heart,’ and recited them back to him one by one, word for word. The shaykh, unwilling to believe me, said: ‘Did you memorize them especially before coming to me?’ I replied: ‘No. If you do not believe me, recite other hadiths.’ He then narrated forty of his rare hadiths, and I recited them all back from beginning to end. Whereupon he said: ‘I have never encountered anyone like you’” (Uvatov, 2005:9).

Scientific journeys (rihla). From his youth, Imam al-Tirmidhi was consumed by a thirst for knowledge and, in accordance with the requirement placed upon hadith scholars of his era, spent many years undertaking the rihla – journeys in pursuit of learning. Alongside acquiring knowledge from the scholars of Transoxiana, he also set out for Khurasan and the Hijaz to study under the scholars of those regions. The sources report that his scholarly journeys began around 240/850 CE, when he was approximately twenty-six years of age. Among the places he visited were Bukhara, Merv, Rayy, Basra, Kufa, and the Hijaz (Khamidov, 2025). Wherever he went, both his teachers and the disciples who received knowledge from him acknowledged that he was a person without peer in learning and intelligence.

Principal works. Imam al-Tirmidhi was the author of a number of scholarly works (Khamidov, 2025). These include: Sunan al-Tirmidhi; al-‘Ilal al-Saghir; al-‘Ilal al-Kabir; Tasmiyat Ashab Rasulillah (peace be upon him); al-Shama’il al-Nabawiyya; al-Zuhd; al-Tarikh; al-Asma’ wa al-Kuna; Kitab Tafsir; Ruba’iyyat fi al-Hadith; Kitab fi al-Jarh wa al-Ta’dil; and Kitab fi al-Athar al-Mawqufa. Current scholarly research indicates that only approximately one quarter of these works has survived to the present day. Among the lost works, it is specifically noted that “al-Zuhd” has not come down to us (Khamidov, 2025).

Sunan al-Tirmidhi. The first work listed above is one of the six canonical hadith collections, and scholars have recorded close to ten titles for it. The most celebrated of these titles is “al-Jami’ al-Mukhtasar min Sunan ‘an Rasulillah (peace be upon him) wa Ma‘rifat al-Sahih wa al-Ma‘lul wa ma ‘Alayhi al-‘Amal.” The second work – “al-‘Ilal al-Saghir” – was appended to the end of the “Sunan” and published together with it (Khamidov, 2025). The reason that scholars of hadith designate this magnum opus “Sunan” lies in the fact that within it the hadiths are arranged according to jurisprudential

topics. The principal aim of hadith scholars in compiling hadiths was to contribute to the resolution of religio-social issues that arose in Muslim society. It was therefore for ease of reference that the transmitted hadiths were organized in the same thematic order as works of jurisprudence. On the basis of what has been said, one may conclude that Imam al-Tirmidhi was thoroughly versed not only in hadith but in other Islamic sciences as well.

When Imam al-Tirmidhi had completed his canonical hadith collection, he presented it to the scholars of Khurasan for their review. They received it with unanimous approval. The sources record that it was said of this work: “Whoever has this book in his home – it is as though the Prophet (peace be upon him) himself is speaking in that house” (al-Dhahabi, *Tadhkirat al-Huffaz*, p. 634; Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani, *Tahdhib al-Tahdhib*, n.d. 389).

The concept of *hasan* hadith. Imam al-Tirmidhi is celebrated for having introduced the concept of “*hasan*” into hadith science. Ibn al-Salah writes in his “*Muqaddima*”: “The book of Abu ‘Isa al-Tirmidhi is the primary source for knowledge of the *hasan* hadith. For it is Imam al-Tirmidhi who gave prominence to the designation of *hasan* hadith and cited many such hadiths in his ‘*Jami*’.”

Specimens of transmitted hadiths from *al-Shama’il al-Muhammadiyah*. It would be instructive to cite several valuable hadiths from the scholarly heritage of Imam al-Tirmidhi. The “*al-Shama’il al-Muhammadiyah*” transmits that when the Prophet (peace be upon him) was entering Mecca to perform ‘*Umra*, Ibn Rawaha walked at his side and began to chant verses in poetry proclaiming the victory of the Muslims. ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab (may God be pleased with him) said to him: “Are you reciting poetry in the presence of the Messenger of God, and in the Sanctuary at that?” Thereupon the Messenger of God (peace be upon him) said: “Leave him, O ‘Umar. What he says is swifter for these people than arrows” – meaning that a word spoken in verse spreads among the people faster than an arrow flies (al-Tirmidhi, 1988:117).

Another hadith in “*al-Shama’il al-Muhammadiyah*,” transmitted by Jabir, states: “I was present in the gatherings of the Messenger of God (peace be upon him) more than a hundred times. Some of his Companions would recite poems and recall certain things from the Age of Ignorance. The Messenger of God (peace be upon him) would sit in silence or would smile” (al-Tirmidhi, 1988:117).

Manuscript tradition. The manuscripts of Imam al-Tirmidhi's "Sunan al-Tirmidhi" are preserved in a number of cities around the world. One of them is held at the Institute of Oriental Studies named after Abu Rayhan Biruni, part of the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan. The fact that this work has been printed and reprinted many times is a vivid demonstration of its importance in the Islamic world.

Post-independence Uzbek scholarship. During the years of independence, a considerable body of work has been accomplished in Uzbekistan in the study of Imam al-Tirmidhi's scholarly legacy. In particular, Professor Ubaydullah Uvatov's doctoral dissertation on the topic "The Role of Transoxianan and Khurasanian Scholars in the Development of Hadith Science (al-Bukhari, Muslim, al-Tirmidhi)" and the numerous books, treatises, and articles he published as a result of this research were dedicated to illuminating the honourable contributions of hadith science and its scholars (Murotov et al., 2019:28–29). In his work "Two Great Sages," the scholar examined in detail the life, scholarly activity, and works of the two Termezi scholars – Hakim al-Tirmidhi and Abu 'Isa al-Tirmidhi (Uvatov, 2005).

Critical reception. Imam al-Tirmidhi was not without his critics. He was accused of leniency in his assessment of the reliability of narrators, and of classifying certain hadiths as sahih or hasan even when they did not meet the threshold for those grades. One of those who voiced such criticism was the historian Shams al-Din al-Dhahabi, who expressed his objection in his work "Mizan al-I'tidal." However, a number of researchers who have studied Imam al-Tirmidhi's scholarly output in depth have demonstrated with sound scholarly conclusions that al-Dhahabi's objections are in most cases without foundation. For Imam al-Tirmidhi himself, upon completing his collection, submitted it to the judgment of the leading scholars of his era and subjected it to their deliberation (Uvatov, 2005:17).

DISCUSSION

The century in which Imam al-Tirmidhi lived is called "the Golden Age of Hadith Science." It was precisely in this century that the authors of the six canonical hadith collections lived, compiled their works, and bequeathed them as an immortal legacy to subsequent generations. The extraordinary intellectual environment of Transoxiana in this period – which, as the figures from al-Nasafi's "Kitab al-Qand" demonstrate,

produced more than three thousand eminent hadith scholars across the region (al-Nasafi, 1999:18–19) – provided both the competitive stimulus and the scholarly infrastructure that made Tirmidhi’s formation possible.

All of Imam al-Tirmidhi’s disciples acknowledged their master with the statement: “After the death of Imam al-Bukhari, there was no one in Khurasan who could match Abu ‘Isa al-Tirmidhi in learning, acuity of mind, piety, and asceticism.” The sources also identify Imam al-Tirmidhi’s deep piety and frequent weeping as the cause of the blindness that afflicted him in his final years.

Tirmidhi’s distinctive contribution of the “hasan” category to hadith classification deserves particular attention in the context of this discussion. As Ibn al-Salah observed, before Tirmidhi, hadith scholars had tended to work within a binary classification of sahih (sound) and da‘if (weak), with no widely recognized intermediate category. Tirmidhi’s formalization of “hasan” as a distinct grade – applied systematically throughout the “Sunan” and defined in his supplementary work “al-‘Ilal al-Saghir” – gave subsequent hadith scholars a more refined and practically useful classificatory tool. This innovation alone would suffice to secure his place among the most significant contributors to hadith methodology (Murotov et al., 2019:28).

The critical debate surrounding his classification practices, initiated most prominently by al-Dhahabi in “Mizan al-I‘tidal,” reflects a broader methodological tension in hadith science between rigorous grading standards and the practical needs of legal reasoning. The fact that Imam al-Tirmidhi himself submitted his collection to peer review by the leading scholars of his era (Uvatov, 2005:17) – a remarkable act of scholarly humility and methodological transparency – provides important context for evaluating the subsequent criticisms.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the study of the rich scholarly and spiritual legacy of Imam al-Tirmidhi carries great importance for addressing the social and ethical questions of the present day. In particular, the study of the scholar’s hadith works is of great assistance in educating the young as complete human beings of high moral character. The more deeply these sources are studied, the more clearly the elevated human qualities concealed within them are revealed.

The most fundamental of the benefits to be derived from studying Imam al-Tirmidhi's legacy in the present day is the exemplary life path of this scholar himself. From his youth he distinguished himself from his contemporaries by his thirst for knowledge. He undertook the rihla – years of physically demanding journeys in pursuit of learning – visiting Bukhara, Merv, Rayy, Basra, Kufa, and the Hijaz (Khamidov, 2025). His extraordinarily prodigious memory, his unfailing piety, his willingness to submit his life's work to the scrutiny of his peers, and the breadth of his mastery across multiple Islamic sciences – all these qualities render him an enduring model of scholarly excellence (Uvatov, 2005:9; Murotov et al., 2019:28–29).

The manuscripts of “Sunan al-Tirmidhi” preserved in institutions including the Abu Rayhan Biruni Institute of Oriental Studies in Tashkent, and the work's repeated reprinting across the Islamic world, testify to the sustained vitality of Imam al-Tirmidhi's contribution. As a native son of Transoxiana who reached the highest ranks of Islamic scholarship through dedication, intellectual brilliance, and unwavering piety, he remains a source of pride for the scholarly heritage of Uzbekistan and an inexhaustible resource for contemporary Islamic learning.

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