

LITERARY-CRITICAL REMARKS IN THE BABUR-NAME

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Abstract: This article focuses on examining Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur's approach to literature and his literary-critical thoughts as presented in his *Babur-name*. The paper analyzes Babur's engagement with literature, his comments on literary figures, and his reflections on literary criticism within his memoirs. Babur, through his work, provides insights into the social and cultural role of literature in his time. The article delves into Babur's objectivity in evaluating works, his reflections on poetic activity, and his historical judgments on literary practices in the Timurid period. His remarks on the works of poets and intellectuals in the context of his reign highlight the significant interplay between literature and politics, showing how Babur's personal experiences shaped his views on literary traditions and their social implications.

Keywords: Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur, Babur-name, literature, literary criticism, Chagatai literature, Uzbek literature, Timurids, poets, literary studies

Among the many interests of the author of Babur-name, Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur,¹ is literature, especially contemporary literature. As usual, he does not mince his words here and often expresses himself in a blunt manner. While he strives for objectivity and reasoned judgment in most cases, this is not entirely assured in cases where, in his opinion, certain basic principles have been violated by those criticized; this is especially true in the case of his (in the truest sense of the word) sworn enemy, the Uzbek leader Muhammad Shaybani. This article attempts to summarize Babur's most important literary-critical (and literary-historical) remarks. The question of his own work, the literature read in Babur's circle, or which literature he cites on various occasions in his memoirs outside of his literary-critical remarks must remain unaddressed here.

The material we wish to examine is very heterogeneous. It includes biographies of poets in the passage on Sultan Husayn Mirza of Herat (1469-1506), remarks of varying length on poetic activity in other biographies, mentions of literary figures in descriptions of milieus, and references to literature through quotations in various text types (historical narrative, description of milieu, description of characters, biography, interspersed episodes). The material ranges from detailed remarks on the work of individual authors, both on a formal level (in the context of a self-review)² and on a content level (enriched with biographical information and illustrative episodes), to succinct mentions of poetic activity, the presence, or the origins of a poet. Some of the accounts are illustrated with quotations from the person being discussed. Authors of various types of literature include: Islamic jurists, Shaykhulislam, mullahs, other dignitaries, (anonymous) astronomers, professional poets, and educated amateur poets such as emirs, princes, sultans, and khans, as well as Babur himself.³ The image Babur conveys of literature also provides insight into the social role(s) of literature at the time. It should be noted here that poetry (in Persian and Chagatai), at least for those who came from the "civilized" regions of Mawarannahr and

Khorasan (both Timurid), was a fairly widespread "cultural practice." The fact that they wrote poetry is treated in the same context as their military achievements in the case of sultans, princes, and emirs, and in the same context as the fulfillment of their respective professional duties in the case of clergy, scientists, and others. This, of course, is initially only Babur's perspective – but this is precisely what underpins the relevance of his remarks: he proves himself to be an alert and, in many cases, objective observer and critical mind in many other areas as well, and (ultimately, as a *pâdišâh*), he has, based on his biography, promoted the literary-critical position he advocated through his own initiative or influence on those around him – as this essay also shows (along with many other works on Chagatai literature, which, of course, also and sometimes primarily make use of the information contained in the Babur-name). What do we learn about the approach to literature in Babur's time? Babur and his entourage were bilingual (Persian-Chagatai), and thus poetry and recite (sing) were written in both languages, which is impressively documented on the occasion of a wine-fueled excursion (249b/German 6384). Apparently, among poetry enthusiasts in Babur's time, the creation of chronograms, i.e., writings in which the added numerical value of the Arabic letters indicates the date of an event, was a fashion. Three Persian poems referring to the historical events of Ulugh Beg and his patricidal son Abdullatif Mirza are cited without an author's citation;⁵ the third of these poems contains in its last line the chronogram of Abdullatif Mirza's death (and here the precise Arabic transcription really plays a role): *Bâbâ Husayn kušt 'Baba Husayn slew him'* (50b/German 182) = year 853 of the Hijra.⁶ Furthermore, after the victory over the Rajput leader Rana Sangha (Rana Sangram Singh), Shayx Zayn found the chronogram *fath-i pâdišâh-i islâm* ('Victory of the Ruler of Islam' (325a/German 787 f.)), as well as, and independently of, him also Mir Gesu; this coincidence is repeated in the chronogram on the occasion of the conquest of Dipalpur, where both found the words *vasat-i šahr-i rabî'u'l-avval* ('mid-month of Rabi'ulavval'). The birth of Babur's son Humayun is also commemorated with chronograms. Thus, the poet Mavlana Sayyidi found the chronogram *Sultân Humayûn Xân*, while another, less well-known and unnamed poet found *Šâh-i firûzqadr* ('king victorious by force') (215b/German 537). Satirical reworkings of traditional literature were also enjoyed. When describing the entertainment district of Gulkana (German: *Gülgine*) in Samarkand, Babur quotes a Persian parody of a Hafiz verse about this district: "Oh, happy times, when carefree / we lingered in *Gülgine* / Many a day in the circle of nefarious rabble" (128b/German: 346, 910).⁷ As he admits, he also wrote humorous and satirical verses himself, until, while writing the *Mubin*,⁸ the thought occurred to him that it would be foolish to use a language with so many beautiful words for "ugly" sentences. When Babur once forgets his resolutions and writes another joke poem, he promptly falls ill, vows to finally improve, and expresses his regret in poem form (253a/German 647 f.). With several of his statements, Babur proves himself more of a literary historian than a literary critic. The following is a brief overview of these somewhat historically interesting but rather brief remarks on the subject of literature from descriptions of the milieu and biographies of emirs. For example, in the comprehensive description of Ferghana, in the partial description of Marghinan, he mentions that the author of the *Hidâya* comes from the village of Rishdan, which belongs to Marghinan (3b/German 87);⁹ his work on Islamic law is held in high esteem by members of the Hanafi school of law, which is mentioned in the description of Samarkand in connection with the mention of other Islamic scholars (45a/German 172). Also mentioned in the Ferghana passage is the poet Asiruddin Axsikat, who comes from Aysi, which was formerly called Axsikat (4b/German 89).

Shayx Abu Manshur¹⁰ is mentioned in the Samarkand description. He originally came from the *Mâturîd* district of Samarkand, which is why the school he founded is called *Mâturîdiyya*, in contrast to the *Ash'ariyya* (45a/German 172).¹¹ *Xvâja Ismâ'il*, the author of the *Saḥîḥ-i Buxârî*, who came from Transoxiana (45a/German 172), also appears here.¹² We learn from the biographies of the emirs in the description of Sultan Ahmad Mirza that a certain Darvish Beg was an expert in music, played several instruments, and had an inclination towards poetry (21a-b/German 123). Babur reports that one of Sultan Husayn Mirza's emirs, Mirza Ahmad 'Alî Farsi

Barlas, was a talented man and well-versed in poetry, but he did not write poetry himself (172a/German 440). Another of Sultan Husayn Mirza's emirs, Hasan 'Alî Jalayir, composed masterful qasids under the name Tufaylî. He joined Babur when he conquered Samarkand and dedicated many beautiful qasids to him during the five or six years of his service. As a person, however, he was unscrupulous, extravagant, and a lover of handsome boys, dice, and board games (174b-175a/German 445 f.). A poet of Sultan Husayn Mirza, 'Abdullâh Masnavîgûy, who wrote under the name Hatifi, came from Jam, was a sister's son of Jami, and (as his nickname indicates) composed Mesnevis. He wrote a Haft Manzar based on Nizâmî's Haft Paykar, and his Temür-nâme is based on Nizâmî's Alexander Book. His supposedly most famous mesnevi, Laylâ-u

Maĵnûn, is, however, overrated (180b/German 458).¹³ Another poet of Sultan Husayn Mirza, Mîr Husayn Mu'amâ'î, dedicated his entire life (as his nickname suggests) to the art of riddle-making, which he mastered uniquely. Babur attests to his modest, unpretentious nature, without any trace of malice.

(180b/German 458) Another poet of Sultan Husayn Mirza, Mullâ Muḥammad Badakši, came from Ishkemiš, which is not even in Badakšan. He entered Babur's service while still in Samarkand and was pleasant to be around. His works are said to have not reached the quality of other poets of Sultan Husayn Mirza. He

wrote a treatise on riddles, but his own riddles were not very successful. (181a/German 458) Another poet of Sultan Husayn Mirza, Yusuf Badi,

seems to have been known to Babur only by name, for he expresses himself in indirect perspective by saying that his Qaseeds were not bad (qasîdanî yaman aytmas ekândur, 181a/German 459). Another poet of Sultan Husayn Mirza, Ahi, who "later" (songralar) was in the service of Ibn-i Husayn Mirza, composed beautiful ghazals and also left behind a Divan. (181a/German 459) Another poet of Sultan Husayn Mirza, Shah Husayn Kami, is rated by Babur as "not bad" (yaman emäs). Babur does not seem to have a thorough knowledge of his work, as he mentions his ghazals, while he is uncertain whether a Divan also exists. Another poet of Sultan Husayn Mirza, Ahli, was a common man who wrote a Divan; Babur also judges his verses to be not bad. A wrestler of Sultan Husayn Mirza, Muhammad Bu Sa'id, was very pleasant to be around and had all kinds of talents. He also wrote verses and composed; Babur especially mentions a good (yaxshi) song in the style of chargah.

A poet of Sultan Husayn Mirza, Mavlana Abdurrahman Jaami, was considered a paragon of knowledge of sacred and secular matters. He was the greatest of the court poets; after him came Shayxim Suhayli and Hasan Ali Tufayli Jalayir. Surprisingly, he is not commented on further, which is probably due to the fact that his work is already considered well-known.

Some legal scholars and their works are also examined in more detail. A Shaykhulislam of Sultan Husayn Mirza, Mulla 'Abdulgafûr Lar Mavlana, was a student of Jami and a highly educated, modest, and unpretentious man. He had recited most of his teacher's poetry in his presence and written a kind of commentary on Nafahâtu'l-Uns ("Breaths of Familiarity"), 17 i.e., on a collection of 582 saints' lives compiled in 1478.

Another Shaykhulislam of Sultan Husayn Mirza, Qâzî Ixtiyâr, is the author of an outstanding treatise on jurisprudence, written in Persian. He also compiled a collection of Quranic verses of similar significance to shed light on their meaning. Scientific literature is also mentioned. When mentioning the Korâgân tablets, Babur makes a brief excursion into astronomical and astrological literature. These astronomical tables were compiled on the orders of Ulugh Beg and, in Babur's time, were still in use "throughout the world" ('âlamda); other tables are said to be rarely used. Previously, the Ilkhanic tables, compiled by Xvâja Nasir Tûsî¹⁹ at the behest of the

Ilkhan (or better: El-xan) Hülägü in Maragha, were used. Before that, there were the Ma'munic tables, commissioned by the Caliph al-Ma'mun (46b-47a/German: 175 f.).

In some cases, Babur takes the trouble to introduce the author being presented with a sample of his work. This happens especially when he recognizes at least a certain talent in the respective author or finds his work otherwise noteworthy.

A Persian distich is quoted from one of the emirs of Omar Shayx Mirza (Babur's father), Ḥasan Ya'qûb Beg, which can be rendered as follows: "Come back,

O phoenix, for without the parrot of your down / the raven is about to carry away

my bones" (13b).²⁰ One of the emirs of Sultan Ahmad Mirza, Aḥmad Ḥâjjî Beg, who

under the name Vafâ'î, wrote a divan and was a patron of Nava'i when he was exiled to Samarkand by the Timurid ruler Abu Said. According to Babur, his poems were not bad at all, and he quotes the following lines (originally in Persian): "I'm drunk, muhtasib. Leave me alone today. / Chastise me on a day you find me sober" (21a).²¹ A son of Sultan Mahmud Mirza, Baysonğor Mîrzâ,²² loved wine, was generous, just, and also talented in calligraphy and painting. He, too, composed beautiful verses, but they are not sufficient for a divan; he is quoted with the following lines (originally in Persian): "Like a shadow I stumble and fall from weakness. / If I don't lean against a wall I fall down" (68b). His poems were said to be found in almost every house in Samarkand.

One of Sultan Husayn Mirza's fourteen sons, Shah Gharib Mirza, wrote poetry in Persian and Turkish under the name Gurbati, such as the Persian lines:

"I spied a beauty in the lane and became mad for her. / What is her name?" I do not know her house." (166a).²⁴ He was lame and deformed,

but of good nature; his father made him governor of Herat; he died childless, even before his father. Another son of Sultan Husayn Mirza,

Muḥammad Husayn Mirza, is said to have had some talent as a poet, so much so that he

quotes the Persian lines: "Covered with dust, whom are you hunting down? / Drenched in sweat, into whose warm heart have you penetrated?" (166b).²⁵ He is said to have been imprisoned in Iraq together with the Safavid Shah Ismail, where he became his student and thus a (Shiite) "heretic," who died in Astarabad. Perhaps this is why Babur's judgment is such that, although he was praised for his bravery, no deed of his is worthy of recording.

For Sultan Husayn Mirza's eldest son, Badî'uzzamân Mîrzâ,²⁶ a certain Mullâ Muḥammad Tâlib Mu'amâ'î ('the Riddle Maker') composed the following Persian lines about the citadel of Kabul: "Drink wine in Kabul citadel, send round

the cup again and again, / for there is both mountain and water, both city and

countryside" (129a). An emir of Sultan Husayn Mirza, Shayxîm Beg, was called Shayxîm Suhaylî by the people because he wrote poetry under the name Suhaylî. He is said to have composed fantastic, terrifying verses and left behind a divan and several mesnevis. The following (Persian) verse is quoted: "On the night of grief, the whirlpool of my cries swept the celestial spheres away. / The dragon of my torrential tears carried off the inhabited quarter of the world" (174a). It is mentioned that the poet Jami then said: "Are you writing verses or do you

want to frighten people?" (174a).

In some places, Babur takes a position, both good and bad, on the work of various authors. He expresses his criticism without regard for the person, which is often supported by arguments. According to Babur, Sultan Husayn Mirza, the Timurid ruler of Herat, was quite gifted as a poet. He composed a collection of poems under the name *Husaynî*, which he claimed was not bad, even though it was consistently written in the same meter (164b).²⁹ An emir of Sultan Husayn Mirza, *Xvâja 'Abdullâh Murvârîd*, was first a *sadr*.³⁰ He played the dulcimer (*qânûn*) excellently and had his own method of plucking the strings. He was also a calligrapher, a good letter writer, and a poet who used the name *Bayânî*; however, his poetic abilities did not match his other talents. He loved sinful pleasures, as a result of which he became ill; apparently paralyzed in his arms and legs, he languished for several years (175a). One of Sultan Husayn Mirza's poets was *Asafî*, who called himself that because he was the son of a vizier.³¹ Babur, who met him in Khorasan, attests that his poems (almost exclusively ghazals) contain "color and feeling" (*rang-u mufid*), but they do not convey "passion and enthusiasm" (*'isq-u hâl*). Babur further suspects that *Asafî*, by remarking that he did not want to compile a *divan*, was inaccurately trying to boast of his modesty, since this was done by his younger brother and close relatives (179b). Another poet of Sultan Husayn Mirza, *Sayfî* from Bukhara, was also a *mulla*; to underline this, he sometimes presented a list of the books he had read. He wrote two *divans*, one of which deals with the benefits of craftsmanship. There are also numerous parables (*masal*), but no *mesnevi*; the poet's programmatic renunciation is justified in a Persian *qit'a* quoted by Babur: "Although *mathnawi* is the stock in trade of poets, / I consider the ghazal obligatory upon myself. / If there are five lines that are pleasing / they are better than the two *Khamsas*."³² *Sayfî*'s Persian work on poetry did not find favor with Babur, as it dealt with the important matters too briefly or not at all, while dealing with the unimportant in great detail. He was a heavy drinker who could become very unpleasant when drunk; he also possessed strength in his fists (180b). A *Shayxulislam* of Sultan Husayn Mirza, *Mir 'Aṭa'ullah* of Mashhad, wrote a treatise on the art of rhyme in Persian. According to Babur, a major flaw is that the examples are all taken from his own poems, and the explanations always begin with the words "As can be observed in the following verses of your humble servant...".³³ However, the work is entirely meritorious and successful, which even his opponents acknowledge. Another treatise, *Badayi' al-sanayi'* ('Wonders of (Poetry) Art'), even receives the rating "very good" (*xaylî yaxši*) (179a).

Babur's *Babur-name* presents a unique perspective on literature and literary criticism, reflecting the social and political roles of literature during his time. His judgments on poets and literary figures, both positive and negative, reveal his engagement with the cultural dynamics of his era. Babur's literary approach is also reflected in his personal involvement with literature, influencing those around him and leaving a significant imprint on the literary landscape. This article provides valuable insights into Babur's literary views and contributes to understanding the distinctive characteristics of literature during the Timurid period.

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