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BABUR'S ASSESSMENT OF HIS OPPONENTS IN "BABURNAMA"

Olimov Muhammadqosim Hoshimovich

Chairman, Bukhara Regional Council of the Federation of Trade Unions of Uzbekistan

Email: olimovmuhammadqosim58@gmail.com

Abstract

The present article examines Zahiriddin Muhammad Babur's nuanced literary portrayals of three prominent figures who stood in opposition to him throughout his political and military career: Shaybani Khan, Khisravshah, and Ahmad Tanbal. Drawing on the autobiographical chronicle "Baburnama," this study analyzes how Babur, despite his personal animosity toward these adversaries, maintained a remarkably balanced and objective narrative voice. He acknowledged their virtues — religious piety, administrative capacity, and military prowess — while simultaneously exposing their moral failings, treachery, and injustices through concrete evidence. The article argues that Babur's assessments of his opponents reveal not only a sophisticated historical consciousness but also the ethical and political philosophy of a statesman of exceptional integrity. His ability to render impartial judgment even in adversity underscores the enduring literary and historical value of "Baburnama" as a source of biographical and cultural knowledge.

Keywords: Baburnama, Babur, Shaybani Khan, Khisravshah, Ahmad Tanbal, Timurid dynasty, historical biography, literary portrayal, political ethics, Central Asian history

Zahiriddin Muhammad Babur's "Baburnama" stands as one of the most extraordinary works of autobiographical literature in the Turkic and Persian literary tradition. Written in the Chagatai language, it offers an unparalleled firsthand account of the political turbulence, military campaigns, and personal experiences of its author — a prince who lost and recaptured thrones, wandered as a fugitive, and ultimately founded the Mughal Empire in the Indian subcontinent[1]. Among the most intellectually compelling aspects of the work is Babur's treatment of those who opposed him. Rather than reducing his adversaries to caricatures of villainy, he portrayed them as complex individuals whose strengths and weaknesses he recorded with candor and precision. This quality of intellectual honesty distinguishes "Baburnama" from conventional court chronicles and

elevates it to the status of literary masterpiece[2].

Of the many opponents Babur encountered throughout his life, Shaybani Khan — founder of the Shaybanid Khanate and the ruler who ultimately drove Babur from Samarkand — occupies the most prominent place. Shaybani Khan was the grandson of Abu'l-Khayr Khan, the first ruler of the Uzbek state in the Dashti Qipchaq steppes, a domain stretching from Lake Balkhash and the lower reaches of the Syr Darya all the way to the lower Dnieper. His father, Shah Budaq Khan, was a man of learning who commissioned translations of Persian works into the Turkic tongue. Shaybani Khan himself was raised at his grandfather's court, and his religious formation was shaped by Muhammad Khitai, a prominent representative of the Yassawi Sufi order. From these origins he rose through service to Timurid vassals, most notably as a commander under Muhammad Mazid Tarkhon, governor of Turkistan and Otrar, through whose patronage he gained intimate knowledge of the Timurid state's growing weakness. By the late 1480s he had assembled a formidable force in the steppe, and in 1499 he captured Bukhara, followed a year later by Samarkand, forcing Babur into exile[3].

Despite the deep personal loss this represented, Babur's account of Shaybani Khan is notable for its balance. He acknowledged that Shaybani Khan rose early for morning prayer, never neglected the five daily prayers, possessed knowledge of Quranic recitation, and demonstrated exceptional talent as a military commander. Yet Babur did not permit these virtues to obscure Shaybani Khan's moral transgressions[4]. He documented, with specific evidence, the execution of Sultan Ali Mirza and his spiritual guide, and then the cynical manner in which Shaybani Khan attributed responsibility for those deaths to his own subordinates — an act Babur judged more shameful than the crime itself. "His excuse," Babur wrote, "was worse than the offense." In his account of Shaybani Khan's conduct at Herat, which he captured in 1507 and proceeded to plunder — a city that had long been the cultural and intellectual heart of the Timurid world — Babur wrote that despite his piety and his knowledge of Quranic recitation, foolish, ignorant, and faithless words and deeds flowed from him in abundance[5]. Through such precision of moral reasoning, Babur revealed the contradictions of a man who observed religious ritual yet acted with cruelty and political cowardice. Shaybani Khan was ultimately killed in December 1510, when Shah Ismail Safawi, exploiting Shaybani Khan's weakened forces after a costly campaign against the Kazakhs, surrounded and annihilated his army near Merv. He remains, in Babur's reckoning and in history alike, the last ruler to have reunified a great Central Asian state under a single sovereign[6].

Khisravshah, who had served as deputy governor of the Hisar region under the Timurids before seizing Kunduz for himself and operating with near-total independence, represents another fascinating subject of Babur's literary assessment. Of Kipchaq-Turkistani origin, he entered Timurid service under Sultan Mahmud Mirza, in whose time his personal retinue already numbered five or six thousand soldiers. By the time of the subsequent generation of Timurid princes, his forces had swelled to twenty thousand, and his administration of vast territories was marked, in Babur's own account, by generosity, financial discipline, and religious observance. Babur acknowledged these qualities candidly — his piety, his discipline in food, his open-handedness — yet followed each acknowledgment with searing condemnation[7].

Khisravshah had blinded his own patron, Sultan Mas'ud Mirza, for whom he had cared since childhood, in pursuit of political power. He had conspired against and martyred the refined and virtuous Baysunghur Mirza, a prince of noble lineage and cultivated character, after first drawing him from Hisar to Kunduz under pretense of military need. For these acts, Babur invoked damnation in terms both personal and universal, declaring that anyone who heard of these deeds and did not curse Khisravshah was equally deserving of condemnation[8]. What makes this passage remarkable is not merely its moral passion but its structural honesty: Babur listed Khisravshah's genuine qualities before delivering his verdict, ensuring that the condemnation carried the full weight of documented contradiction rather than mere polemical assertion. Sultan Husayn Mirza, for his part, twice marched against Khisravshah but was unable to subdue him — a failure Babur identifies as one of the enabling conditions for Khisravshah's continued crimes[9]. When the Shaybanid threat finally made further independence untenable, Khisravshah humbled

himself before Babur and his allies in a scene described with almost theatrical vividness in the Baburnama: the once-powerful lord prostrating himself twenty-five or twenty-six times in succession, utterly exhausted, as Babur's soldiers looked on. Khisravshah later fled to Sultan Husayn Mirza at Herat, and was ultimately captured and executed by Shaybani Khan's forces — a fate Babur regarded as fitting justice[10].

The case of Ahmad Tanbal is somewhat different in character, though equally revealing of Babur's narrative method. Tanbal was among the beks who served Babur in his early campaigns, and Babur initially showed him considerable favor, placing him among the inner ranks of his commanders and granting him distinction beyond even the senior beks. Yet Tanbal's betrayal was swift and personal. While Babur was engaged in holding Samarkand — a city that had been won with the strength of Andijan's forces and that Babur had always understood to depend on maintaining that home base — Tanbal abandoned him without consultation, returned to Andijan, and conspired with Ali Do'st and Uzun Hasan to install Babur's younger brother Jahangir Mirza on the throne[11]. The blow was devastating. Babur later wrote of that moment with uncharacteristic rawness, confessing that since becoming a king he had never been separated from his soldiers and territories in this manner, and that he wept uncontrollably — a rare admission in a text otherwise defined by stoic self-command[12].

The subsequent years brought repeated confrontations, including physical combat in which Babur himself sustained a head wound from a sword blow delivered by Tanbal. "Baburnama" records these encounters with directness and without theatrical embellishment, presenting Tanbal as a man of moral darkness — ungrateful, treacherous, and incapable of loyalty — whose actions caused suffering not only to Babur but to the broader population under his administration[13]. Of Uzun Hasan and Tanbal, Babur wrote plainly that they were unjust, dissolute, and faithless men, from whom the people and the territory suffered greatly. Yet even here, Babur's narrative purpose extends beyond personal grievance. By documenting Tanbal's conduct in detail — his manipulation of the Tashkent Khan through his brother Bek Telba, his shifting alliances, his repeated opportunism — Babur created a cautionary account of how those entrusted with power can betray both their benefactors and their communities in pursuit of self-interest. When offered the chance to reconcile with Tanbal and jointly expel Moghul forces from Fergana, Babur declined, stating that to serve the Khan who was his kinsman was worth more to him than to have Tanbal as his king — a reply that illuminates his understanding of honor and legitimacy as inseparable from political action[14].

What unites Babur's treatment of these three figures is a consistent ethical framework that privileges truth over convenience. In each case, he acknowledged the positive qualities of men who had wronged him, refused to allow personal animosity to distort his historical record, and delivered judgment through the accumulation of verifiable fact rather than emotional rhetoric. This methodology reflects a statesman's understanding that history serves future generations, and that a chronicle distorted by hatred is ultimately a chronicle of its author's weakness rather than its subject's. Babur's assessments of Shaybani Khan, Khisravshah, and Ahmad Tanbal thus reveal, above all, the extraordinary moral and intellectual character of Babur himself — a ruler of great heart, measured courage, and profound experience in the affairs of governance. "Baburnama" endures not simply as a record of events, but as a testament to the possibility of honest judgment in an age of fierce political struggle[15].

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