Reading Babur's Dreams: Religiosity and Kingship in Sixteenth Century South and Central Asia

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The Muslim ruler Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur founded the Timurid-Mughal Empire in the early sixteenth century. His memoir, entitled Vagyi or “Events” and commonly referred to as the Baburnama, is considered to be the first autobiography in Islamicate literature and is an important source for understanding the rich history of medieval Central and South Asia. Babur’s religiosity is perhaps most evident in the dream narratives included in the Baburnama, which record his interactions with Sufi awliyā, or saints; however, many scholars tend to downplay the role of religion in the Baburnama, disassociating Babur from Islam. It is, however, undeniable that investigating Babur’s Islam helps us to better understand the religious worldviews and the political culture of his epoch.

**Introduction**

Before he conquered Kabul in 910/1504–1505, Babur was advised by Khwaja Ahrar in a dream; Babur describes this experience in the following dream narrative: “I dreamed that Khwaja Ya’qub, son of Khwaja Yahya and grandson of Khwaja Ubaydullah [Ahrar], was coming straight toward me on a dappled horse, surrounded by a group also mounted on dappled horses. ‘Grieve not,’ he said. ‘Khwaja Ahrar has sent me to you. He has said that we were to assist you and seat you on the royal throne. Whenever you are in difficult straits, think of us and speak. We will be there. Now victory and triumph are coming to you. Raise your head and awake!’” (Babur, 138)

**Historical Context**

The milieu in which Babur crafted his memoir was marked by “extreme political fragmentation,” with Uzbeks, Mongols, and Timurid princes all competing for political supremacy (Subtelny, 102). Before his ascent to power in Hindustan, Babur, like many of his contemporaries, experienced a period of qazaqlīq—or “throneless times”—during which he wandered Central Asia in search of sovereignty (Lee, 29). It was during this period of political uncertainty that Babur encountered Sufi saints in his dreams.

**The Sufi Worldview**

Sufi awliyā play a sizeable role in Babur’s memoir. Babur interacts with select awliyā by communicating with living saints, by visiting the tombs of deceased saints, and, most interestingly, by dreaming about saints. In his dream narratives, awliyā appear as sources of personal inspiration and guidance. Specifically, Babur recounts his interactions with Khwaja Ahrar, a Sufi saint from the powerful Naqshbandi order, whose members “could act as kingmakers” due to their influence in Timurid Central Asia (Moin, 71).

**Guiding Questions**

- To what extent did Babur fit into the Sufi worldview of his epoch?
- How did Babur’s dreams influence his religiosity?
- What were the effects of Babur’s dreams on the imperial attitude toward Islam in the Timurid-Mughal Empire?
- What role did the awliyā play in the formation of the Timurid-Mughal Empire?
- What was Babur’s purpose in writing an autobiography, a genre that had practically no historical precedent in Islamicate literature during his era?

**Conclusions**

Babur’s religiosity is evident in his dream narratives, which describe his encounters with Sufi awliyā, or saints. Analysis of these episodes suggests that Babur adhered to an Islamic worldview that emphasized the importance of one’s relationships with the awliyā. Babur also seems to have evaluated the religiosity of his contemporaries in terms of their devotion to and respect for Khwaja Ubaydullah Ahrar, an influential Naqshbandi Sufi saint. Furthermore, he appears to have attributed his early victories in battle, which ushered him out of his qazaqlīq—or “thoneless times”—and thus allowed him to reach political ascendancy in India, to his visionary encounters with Khwaja Ahrar. Ultimately, this project offers new perspectives on the role of religion in the Baburnama.

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**References**

**Primary Source**


**Secondary Sources**


