

THE SCALES OF THE KING: JUSTICE IN THE POEMS AND POLITICAL THOUGHT OF BABUR SHAH

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the concept of justice ('adl, dād) in the poetry and political thought of Zahīr al-Dīn Muḥammad Bābur (1483–1530), the great son of Andijan and founder of the Mughal dynasty. It situates Babur within the Perso-Islamic and Turco-Mongol traditions of royal justice — the “circle of justice” of the mirror-for-princes literature and the customary law of the steppe — and then traces how these inherited ideals are refracted through his own writings. Three registers are distinguished. In the memoirs, justice appears as narrated practice: the graded punishment of wrongdoers, the protection of the peasantry from plundering soldiers, and the evaluation of rulers past and present by the measure of equity. In the dīvān, justice appears as a poetic ethic: the celebrated quatrain on fidelity and cruelty formulates a law of moral reciprocity, while the complaint against the tyranny of fate constructs, by inversion, the image of the just king as the answer to an unjust world. In the didactic works, justice appears as promulgation: the versified law-book and the ethical translations enact the sovereign's duty to teach the right order. The article argues that in Babur's corpus justice is not one theme among many but the hinge that joins his poetry to his politics: the quality by which he judges the world, judges himself, and asks to be judged.

Keywords: Babur, justice, 'adl, circle of justice, political thought, Chaghatay poetry, mirror for princes, Timurid tradition.

АННОТАЦИЯ

В статье рассматривается концепция справедливости (адл, дад) в поэзии и политической мысли Захир ад-Дина Мухаммада Бабура (1483–1530), великого сына Андижана и основателя династии Великих Моголов. Бакур помещается в контекст персидско-исламской и тюрко-монгольской традиций царской справедливости — «круга справедливости» литературы «зерцал для государей» и обычного права степи, — после чего прослеживается преломление этих идеалов в его собственных сочинениях. Различаются три регистра. В мемуарах справедливость предстаёт как описанная практика: соразмерное наказание виновных, защита крестьян от грабежа солдат, оценка правителей прошлого и настоящего мерой беспристрастности. В диване справедливость предстаёт как поэтическая этика: знаменитое четверостишие о верности и жестокости формулирует закон нравственной взаимности, а жалоба на тиранию судьбы создаёт, по принципу инверсии, образ справедливого государя как ответа несправедливому миру. В дидактических сочинениях справедливость предстаёт как провозглашение:

стихотворный свод законов и этические переводы осуществляют долг государя учить правильному порядку. Автор утверждает, что в творчестве Бабур справедливость — не одна из тем, а стержень, соединяющий его поэзию с его политикой: качество, которым он судит мир, судит себя и просит судить себя самого.

Ключевые слова: *Бабур, справедливость, адл, круг справедливости, политическая мысль, чагатайская поэзия, зеркало для государей, тимуридская традиция.*

INTRODUCTION

Every political tradition has a master-word, and in the world that formed Zahīr al-Dīn Muḥammad Bābur that word was justice. The prince born in Andijan in 1483, tried by two decades of struggle in Transoxiana and Kabul, and founder from 1526 of the Mughal dynasty in the southern subcontinent, inherited a political culture in which the legitimacy of a throne was measured, before all else, by the equity of its occupant.¹ He also inherited — and mastered — a poetic culture in which that same equity was praised, demanded, mourned in its absence and modelled in verse. This article asks how the two inheritances meet in Babur's own writing: what justice means in his poems and his political practice, how the poems talk about justice, and how — at times — they administer it.

The argument proceeds in five steps. Section 2 reconstructs the ideal of royal justice that Babur inherited, in its Perso-Islamic and Turco-Mongol strands. Section 3 examines justice as narrated practice in the memoirs: the sovereign judging, punishing, protecting and — no less important — judging other sovereigns. Section 4 turns to the *dīvān* and reads the poetry's ethic of reciprocity and its complaint against fate as two faces of a single conception of justice. Section 5 considers the didactic works as acts of promulgation, and the crisis of 1527 as the moment when Babur's conception of just rule was publicly redefined. Section 6 concludes. Throughout, the aim is to show that justice is not simply a topic in Babur's corpus but its organising value — the standard by which the poet judges the world and the king asks the world to judge him.

The Inherited Scales: Royal Justice before Babur

The Perso-Islamic theory of kingship that reached Babur through the mirror-for-princes literature rested on a simple and ancient figure: the circle of justice. There is no kingship without the army, no army without revenue, no revenue without the prosperity of the subjects, and no prosperity without justice; the king who oppresses the peasant therefore saws through the branch on which his own throne rests. Lambton traced the deep history of this doctrine in the Persian theory of rule, and Darling has followed the circle of justice across three millennia of Middle Eastern

¹Stephen Frederic Dale, *Babur: Timurid Prince and Mughal Emperor, 1483–1530* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

statecraft.² Its classic textbook was Nizām al-Mulk's *Siyāsat-nāma*, whose opening chapters make the hearing of grievances and the restraint of officials the first duties of the crown.³ In this tradition, justice is not one royal virtue among others; it is the functional definition of kingship itself.⁴

To this Persian strand Babur's world added a second: the Turco-Mongol heritage of the *töre* — the customary law of the steppe, the code of Chinggisid and Timurid precedent that governed succession, the division of spoils, the mutual obligations of khan and warrior. A Timurid mirza was expected to be just in both registers at once: to protect the taxpaying subject according to the circle of justice, and to deal equitably with his begs and soldiers according to the custom of his ancestors. The brilliant court culture of the late Timurid age, in which Babur was formed, wrapped both registers in a third — the adab of the just and generous prince celebrated in poetry and prose.⁵ Babur's originality, as the following sections argue, lies not in inventing a new doctrine of justice but in the unprecedented directness with which he wrote himself — his judgements, his punishments, his failures and his self-accusations — into the tradition's frame.

Justice as Narrated Practice: The Judging Sovereign of the Memoirs

The memoirs show the doctrine at work, and they show it with the unsparing concreteness that is Babur's hallmark. Three recurring scenes stand out. The first is the protection of the weak against the strong — above all, of the peasant against the soldier. From his earliest campaigns Babur records punishing his own men for plundering villagers: troops who seized grain, oil or livestock from the population were beaten or put to death, and the memoirs report these episodes not as regrettable necessities but as the elementary duty of a ruler who intends to be obeyed with consent.⁶ The circle of justice, learned from books, appears here as camp discipline: the sovereign's first act of equity is to restrain his own instrument of power.

The second scene is measured retribution. The most striking example is the poisoning affair of 1526, when members of the defeated old order attempted to kill Babur through his kitchen. His narrative of the investigation and the sentences is a small treatise on proportionality: each participant received a punishment graded to the degree of guilt — the taster, the cook, the instigators, each dealt with differently — and the account is written so that the reader can verify the proportion.⁷ Justice here is not vengeance but measurement; and the very act of recording it in the memoirs —

²Ann K. S. Lambton, "Justice in the Medieval Persian Theory of Kingship," *Studia Islamica* 17 (1962): 91–119.

³Linda T. Darling, *A History of Social Justice and Political Power in the Middle East: The Circle of Justice from Mesopotamia to Globalization* (London: Routledge, 2013).

⁴Nizām al-Mulk, *The Book of Government or Rules for Kings (Siyāsat-nāma)*, trans. Hubert Darke (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960).

⁵Maria Eva Subtelny, "Socioeconomic Bases of Cultural Patronage under the Later Timurids," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 20, no. 4 (1988): 479–505.

⁶Wheeler M. Thackston, trans., *The Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor* (Washington–New York: Freer Gallery of Art / Oxford University Press, 1996), 202–226.

⁷Thackston, *Baburnama*, 349–351, on the poisoning affair of 1526 and the graded punishments.

laying the scales open to posterity — belongs to the practice. Dale has shown that the memoirs were composed as a document for successors;⁸ in these judicial narratives, the document functions as a case-book of royal equity.

The third scene is the judgement of other rulers. Babur's famous portrait gallery of the princes, viziers and begs of his age evaluates each figure by a consistent set of measures, and equity stands beside courage and culture among them: this khan was brave but tyrannical, that mirza generous but negligent of his subjects, this beg upright in judgement. The gallery quietly universalises the standard — no rank exempts a man from the scales — and it includes, remarkably, the author himself: Babur records his own youthful injustices, broken undertakings and errors of temper with the same coolness he applies to others. This reflexivity is perhaps the memoirs' deepest contribution to the theory of justice: the just king is defined not as the king who is never unjust, but as the king who keeps honest accounts, including against himself.

The Poetry of the Scales: Reciprocity and the Complaint against Fate

The *dīvān* — more than one hundred and twenty ghazals and over two hundred rubā'īs in Yücel's edition — approaches justice from the other side: not as administration but as ethic and as lack.⁹ Its most concentrated statement is the celebrated quatrain of reciprocity, in which Babur declares — to paraphrase — that the faithful will find faithfulness, the cruel will meet cruelty, the doer of good will reap good and the doer of evil, evil. The poem states, in four lines, a complete moral cosmology: the world itself keeps scales, and every act returns upon its author. Read politically, the quatrain is the circle of justice interiorised — transferred from the mechanics of revenue and army to the mechanics of the soul — and it functions simultaneously as counsel to subjects, warning to enemies and standard for the king who utters it: a sovereign who publishes such a law invites his own conduct to be measured by it.

Around this centre, the *dīvān* deploys the classical vocabulary of justice in its negative mode: the complaint. The tyranny is fate's — the treacherous wheel of the sky, the cruelty (*jafā*) of the age, the faithlessness of fortune that gives thrones and takes them without desert. Critics have long recognised that in Babur's hands this conventional complaint carries the weight of lived political catastrophe;¹⁰ what deserves emphasis here is its structural role in his conception of justice. By indicting the world's injustice with such insistence, the poems construct — by pure inversion — the image of what a just order would be: constancy instead of betrayal, desert instead of caprice, protection instead of predation. The complaint against fate is thus the lyric shadow of the political programme: the king's task, the poems imply, is to be within his realm what fate refuses to be within the world — a power that keeps

⁸Stephen Frederic Dale, "The Poetry and Autobiography of the Bâbur-nâma," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 55, no. 3 (1996): 635–664.

⁹Bilâl Yücel, *Bâbü'r Dîvânı (Gramer–Metin–Sözlük–Tıpkıbasım)* (Ankara: Atatürk Kültür Merkezi, 1995), 91ff.

¹⁰M. Fuad Köprülü, "Bâbur," in *İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, vol. 2 (Istanbul: Millî Eğitim Basımevi, 1949), 180–187.

faith and observes proportion. The lyric “I” who suffers injustice and the royal “I” who dispenses justice are two positions in one moral geometry.

Nor is the poetry only reflective; at datable moments it administers the standard it proclaims. The versified reproach to Khwāja Kalān weighs a beloved servant’s fault and delivers a measured penalty of words; the satire on the astrologer after the crisis of 1527 executes a public sanction against a man whose false prophecy had endangered the army; the verses of praise distribute the reward side of the scales. In a court where honour was capital, these poetic acts were juridical in effect: the sovereign’s metre was one of the instruments by which desert was required.¹¹

Justice Promulgated and Redefined: The Didactic Works and the Turn of 1527

A ruler persuaded that justice is the essence of kingship must not only practise it but teach it, and Babur’s didactic works discharge exactly this duty. The *Mubayyan*, his versified exposition of Ḥanafī law, places the rules of right conduct — worship, contracts, obligations — into memorisable metre for soldiers and subjects: the king as promulgator, translating the sharia’s order into the register his people can retain.¹² The verse rendering of the *Risāla-i Vālidīyya*, undertaken in fulfilment of a vow during the illness of 1528, sets the inner counterpart beside the outer law: the purification of the heart from which just conduct flows.¹³ And the letter of counsel to his son Humāyūn — with its insistence on consultation, diligence and fairness toward companions — extends the teaching into the dynasty’s future: justice as the substance of succession.¹⁴

The crisis of spring 1527 shows the conception under redefinition. Facing a formidable coalition with a demoralised army, Babur staged the great renunciation — the wine vessels shattered, the treasure distributed as alms, the public vow proclaimed in verse — and took the title of ghāzī after the victory.¹⁵ Read through the lens of justice, the episode is a double settlement of accounts. Toward heaven, the vow acknowledges the moral debt of past excess and pays it publicly: the king applies the scales to himself before asking God for victory. Toward the realm, the alms convert private luxury into public benefit at the moment of common danger: the circle of justice enacted as ritual. The ghāzī title that follows re-founds the king’s legitimacy on a claim inseparable from equity — the defender of the community — and the verses in which Babur afterwards confesses how hard the renunciation proved keep the account honest: the standard, once published, is allowed to bite its own author. Schimmel observed how this image of the first sovereign — severe with

¹¹Thackston, *Baburnama*, 379–387, on the renunciation of 1527 and the ghāzī title.

¹²Tanju Oral Seyhan, *Zahîrüddîn Muhammed Bâbüir Mirzâ: Mübeyyen der-Fıkh (Giriş–Metin–Dizin–Tıpkıbasım)* (Istanbul: Çağrı Yayınları, 2004).

¹³Reşit Rahmeti Arat, ed., *Gazi Zahirüddin Muhammed Babur, Vekayi: Babur’un Hâtıratı*, 2 vols. (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1943–1946), vol. II, 346–348.

¹⁴Thackston, *Baburnama*, 428–429, the letter of counsel to Humāyūn.

¹⁵Dale, *Babur*, on the crisis of 1527 and its aftermath.

himself, generous to others, exact in his accounts — coloured the ideal of rule inherited by the whole dynasty.¹⁶

CONCLUSION

Justice in Babur's corpus proves to be less a theme than an architecture. The inherited doctrine — the circle of justice of the Persian mirrors, the equity of the steppe custom — supplies the frame; the memoirs fill it with narrated practice, from the protection of villagers against his own soldiers to the graded sentences of 1526 and the evaluative gallery in which no ruler, himself included, escapes the scales; the *dīvān* gives the doctrine its ethical core in the quatrain of reciprocity and its negative image in the complaint against fate; the didactic works promulgate it; and the crisis of 1527 shows the king turning the scales, dramatically and in public, upon himself.

Three conclusions may be drawn. First, in Babur poetry and politics meet precisely at the point of justice: the same conception of desert, proportion and kept faith governs the *rubā'ī* and the sentence, the complaint and the decree. Second, Babur's distinctive contribution to the tradition he inherited is reflexivity: the just king of the mirrors judges others; the just king of the memoirs and poems also — relentlessly — judges himself, and it is this self-application of the standard that gives his justice its enduring credibility. Third, the case commends a method: to read the political thought of the ruler-poets of the Turkic and Persianate world not only in their treatises but in their verse, where the values of rule are tested against the experience of suffering them. For that method, the writings of the great son of Andijan — studied today with such devotion in Uzbekistan and with growing energy in the international academy — remain the richest of all archives: the record of a king who asked, in his own words and of his own deeds, the oldest question of his tradition — whether the scales were true.

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¹⁶Annemarie Schimmel, *The Empire of the Great Mughals: History, Art and Culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004).

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