

BABUR AS A BRIDGE: CONNECTING PAKISTAN, UZBEKISTAN AND THE WIDER TURKIC WORLD

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses Zahīr al-Dīn Muḥammad Bābur (1483–1530) as a connective figure — a “bridge” — linking Pakistan, Uzbekistan and the wider Turkic world. Babur’s life spanned the Fergana Valley, Kabul and the southern subcontinent; his memoirs and poetry, written in Chaghatay Turkish, belong to the common classical heritage of the Turkic languages; and the empire he founded frames Pakistan’s official narrative of Muslim statehood in South Asia. The article first reconstructs the transregional “Chaghatay commonwealth” within which Babur wrote, then examines the two principal national appropriations of his memory — the poet-ancestor of post-Soviet Uzbekistan and the state-founder of Pakistan — before widening the lens to the broader Turkic world: the foundational Turkish scholarship of Köprülü, Arat and Yücel; the Kyrgyz memory of Babur on Sulaiman-Too in Osh; and the commemorative infrastructure of Turkic cultural institutions. It then considers how this layered heritage has been institutionalised in the diplomacy of the Organization of Turkic States era and in Pakistan’s deepening engagement with Central Asia. The article argues that Babur functions as a bridge in three registers at once — textual, geographical and institutional — and that his capacity to connect rests less on a single shared meaning than on the distributed, complementary character of the meanings the connected parties attach to him.

Keywords: Babur, Baburnama, Turkic world, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Chaghatay, shared heritage, cultural diplomacy, Organization of Turkic States.

АННОТАЦИЯ

В статье анализируется фигура Захир ад-Дина Мухаммада Бабура (1483–1530) как связующего звена — «моста» — между Пакистаном, Узбекистаном и широким тюркским миром. Жизнь Бабура охватила Ферганскую долину, Кабул и земли Южной Азии; его мемуары и поэзия, написанные на чагатайском языке, принадлежат к общему классическому наследию тюркских языков; а основанная им империя составляет каркас официального пакистанского нарратива мусульманской государственности в Южной Азии. В статье сначала реконструируется трансрегиональное «чагатайское содружество», в рамках которого творил Бабур; затем рассматриваются две главные национальные апроприации его памяти — поэт-предок постсоветского Узбекистана и основатель государства в Пакистане, — после чего оптика расширяется до более широкого тюркского мира: базовые турецкие исследования Кёпрюлю, Арата и Юджеля; кыргызская память о Бауре на горе Сулайман-Тоо в Оше; меморативная

инфраструктура тюркских культурных институтов. Далее анализируется институционализация этого многослойного наследия в дипломатии эпохи Организации тюркских государств и в углубляющемся взаимодействии Пакистана с Центральной Азией. Автор утверждает, что Бабур функционирует как мост одновременно в трёх регистрах — текстуальном, географическом и институциональном, — и что его способность соединять основана не столько на едином общем смысле, сколько на распределённом, взаимодополняющем характере тех значений, которые связываемые стороны ему придают.

Ключевые слова: Бабур, «Бабур-наме», тюркский мир, Пакистан, Узбекистан, чагатайский язык, общее наследие, культурная дипломатия, Организация тюркских государств.

INTRODUCTION

“Bridge” is among the most overworked metaphors of heritage politics, yet few historical figures earn it as literally as Zahīr al-Dīn Muḥammad Bābur. Born in Andijan in 1483, expelled from Transoxiana, master of Kabul for two decades, and from 1526 the founder of the Mughal Empire in the southern subcontinent, Babur lived a life whose stations — Fergana, Samarkand, Osh, Kabul, Lahore, Agra — are today distributed among Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and the lands beyond.¹ He wrote the greatest autobiography of the pre-modern Islamic world in Chaghatay Turkish, the common classical language of the eastern Turkic peoples, about the founding of a South Asian empire. A single corpus thus stands simultaneously in the literary genealogy of the Turkic world and in the political genealogy of Muslim South Asia.

This article asks how that double position works today: how Babur connects Pakistan, Uzbekistan and the wider Turkic world, and what kind of connection it is. The inquiry is deliberately three-tiered. The bilateral tier — Uzbekistan and Pakistan — has an obvious logic: birthplace and empire. But Babur’s heritage does not stop at these two claimants. Turkey produced the foundational modern scholarship on his works; Kyrgyzstan preserves his built traces and local memory in Osh; Afghanistan holds his grave; and the institutions of Turkic cultural cooperation have folded him into a canon of “common Turkic” classics. Any account of Babur as a bridge must therefore treat the bilateral Uzbek–Pakistani axis as embedded in a wider Turkic circuitry.

The argument, in brief, is that Babur bridges in three registers: textually, through the *Baburnama* and the poetry, which circulate across the Turkic languages and into Urdu and English; geographically, through a chain of memory-sites running from Andijan and Osh through Kabul to Lahore; and institutionally, through the commemorative and diplomatic machinery that states and multilateral bodies have

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

built upon the first two registers. The article further argues that the bridge holds not because everyone remembers the same Babur, but because the different Baburs — poet, ancestor, founder, saint of place — are complementary rather than competing. The sections that follow take up, in turn, the historical foundation (Section 2), the two principal national constructions (Section 3), the wider Turkic reception (Section 4), the institutionalisation of the bridge (Section 5) and the textual circulation that underpins it all (Section 6).

The Historical Foundation: Babur and the Chaghatay Commonwealth

The bridge has a real historical footing, and it is linguistic before it is political. Babur belonged to the last great generation of what may be called the Chaghatay commonwealth: the transregional literary culture, stretching from the Volga to Kashgar and from Herat to Delhi, whose shared written medium was the eastern Turkic *lingua franca* classicised by ‘Alī Shīr Nawā’ī. Babur’s pride in this medium is explicit: in the famous opening description of his homeland he notes that the speech of Andijan’s people accords with the literary language itself.² When he conquered his southern dominions he did not exchange this identity for another; he transplanted it. Dale has shown in detail how Babur’s southern enterprise was conceived as the recreation of a Timurid world — gardens, verse, sociability — on new ground.³ The Mughal Empire was, in its founding moment, a Central Asian polity in South Asia; the connective tissue between the two regions is not a later invention of diplomats but the constitutive fact of the dynasty.

Two features of this foundation matter for everything that follows. First, the Chaghatay medium was supranational: it belonged to no single people, and its later distribution among national canons — above all its Soviet-era renaming as “Old Uzbek” — was an act of twentieth-century politics, not of sixteenth-century fact.⁴ Babur is therefore structurally available to more than one heir. Second, Babur’s own self-narrative is a narrative of movement between the regions that now claim him. The *Baburnama* is organised by its three geographies — Fergana, Kabul and the southern realm — and its emotional axis is the tension between them: the conqueror of the south who mourns the melons of Transoxiana. The text, in other words, already contains the bridge; modern memory politics has only had to walk across it.

Two National Baburs: Poet-Ancestor and State-Founder

Post-Soviet Uzbekistan remembers Babur first as a man of letters. The groundwork was laid in the Soviet period, when the “Old Uzbek” classification annexed the Chaghatay canon to the republic’s heritage and Tashkent scholarship — exemplified by pioneering studies of his later *dīvān* — made Babur an object of

²Wheeler M. Thackston, trans., *The Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor* (Washington–New York: Freer Gallery of Art / Oxford University Press, 1996), 4–5.

³Dale, *Babur*, esp. chaps. 10–13, on the transplantation of Timurid culture to the new dominions.

⁴Edward A. Allworth, *The Modern Uzbeks: From the Fourteenth Century to the Present. A Cultural History* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1990), 229–240.

academic cultivation; it was consolidated in the popular imagination by Pirmqul Qodirov's novel *Yulduzli tunlar* (1978), which fixed the image of the tragic poet-king exiled from his valley.⁵ After 1991 the figure was institutionalised: within the spectacular heritage politics of the independent state, analysed by Laura Adams, Babur took his place beside Amir Timur in the pantheon of "great ancestors," with the International Babur Foundation in Andijan, the Bobur Park memorial complex, an eponymous university and recurrent state jubilees of the *Boburnoma*.⁶ The construction manages a well-known irony — it was the Shaybanid Uzbeks who expelled Babur — by territorial rather than ethnic logic, exactly as the national cult of Timur absorbs an analogous contradiction;⁷ as Khalid observes of the region's memory politics generally, the past is a repertoire from which the present selects.⁸

Pakistan remembers a different Babur. In the official narrative of Muslim statehood in South Asia — "history as official imagining," in Jalal's phrase — Babur is the founder of the greatest Muslim empire of the subcontinent and thus a pivotal link in the genealogy that runs from the first Arab conquests to 1947.⁹ The centrality (and the simplifications) of this dynastic chain in the national curriculum were documented in K. K. Aziz's critique of Pakistani textbooks.¹⁰ The Pakistani Babur is also materially present: the Mughal garden tradition that culminates at Lahore's Shalimar descends from the *chārbāgh* model Babur introduced to the subcontinent,¹¹ and the architectural idiom preserved at Lahore and Multan grew from the Timurid forms he carried south.¹² Where Uzbekistan names a literary foundation and a park after Babur, Pakistan has named, among much else, a cruise missile — an asymmetry that epitomises the two constructions: the poet-ancestor and the state-founder. As argued below, it is precisely this asymmetry that makes the shared figure diplomatically workable.

⁵Pirmqul Qodirov, *Yulduzli tunlar* [Starry Nights] (Tashkent: Adabiyot va san'at nashriyoti, 1978).

⁶Laura L. Adams, *The Spectacular State: Culture and National Identity in Uzbekistan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁷Ron Sela, *The Legendary Biographies of Tamerlane: Islam and Heroic Apocrypha in Central Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁸Adeeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 116–139.

⁹Ayesha Jalal, "Conjuring Pakistan: History as Official Imagining," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 27, no. 1 (1995): 73–89.

¹⁰K. K. Aziz, *The Murder of History: A Critique of History Textbooks Used in Pakistan* (Lahore: Vanguard, 1993).

¹¹James L. Wescoat, Jr. and Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn, eds., *Mughal Gardens: Sources, Places, Representations, and Prospects* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1996).

¹²Ebba Koch, *Mughal Architecture: An Outline of Its History and Development (1526–1858)* (Munich: Prestel, 1991).

The Wider Turkic World: Turkey, Kyrgyzstan and the Common Canon

The Uzbek–Pakistani axis does not exhaust Babur’s constituency. Republican Turkey, though geographically remote from any station of Babur’s life, produced the scholarship that made him legible to the modern Turkic world. Fuad Köprülü’s encyclopaedia article set the frame of Babur studies in Turkish;¹³ Reşit Rahmeti Arat — himself a Kazan-born émigré, a living link between the Turkic north and Anatolia — produced the monumental Turkish translation of the *Vaqāyi* for the Turkish Historical Society;¹⁴ and Bilâl Yücel’s critical edition of the *dīvān* gave the poetry a scholarly text.¹⁵ For Turkish readers Babur figures not as a national ancestor but as a classic of the common Turkic heritage — the “other great prose writer” of Chaghatay beside Nawā’ī — and Turkey’s cultural institutions have accordingly treated Baburiana as pan-Turkic patrimony, publishing, commemorating and teaching him within the frame of a shared classical age.

Kyrgyzstan holds a smaller but more intimate share. As a teenage ruler Babur built a pavilion on the Sulaiman mountain above Osh, in the eastern Fergana Valley — a structure remembered locally as the “House of Babur” (Babür’s *hujra*) and rebuilt in later centuries after destructions; the mountain itself, long a site of Muslim pilgrimage, was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2009 as Sulaiman-Too Sacred Mountain, with the Babur association forming part of its documented cultural value.¹⁶ Osh thus gives the Babur geography a fourth national address and gives Kyrgyzstan a stake in the commemorative economy — a stake exercised in local museology, tourism and the valley-wide sense, shared across the Uzbek–Kyrgyz border, that Babur is a son of Fergana as a whole rather than of one republic. Beyond these concrete claims, Babur circulates in the looser pan-Turkic imaginary — anthologised in “common Turkic literature” collections, taught in Turkology curricula from Baku to Almaty — as one of the canonical figures through which the post-Soviet Turkic states have narrated their family resemblance. The trajectory matches Landau’s account of pan-Turkism’s twentieth-century evolution from irredentist ideology to cultural cooperation: Babur is claimed today not for a Greater Turkestan but for a shared bookshelf.¹⁷

¹³M. Fuad Köprülü, “Bâbur,” in *İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, vol. 2 (Istanbul: Millî Eğitim Basımevi, 1949), 180–187.

¹⁴Reşit Rahmeti Arat, ed., *Gazi Zahirüddin Muhammed Babur, Vekayi: Babur’un Hâtıratı*, 2 vols. (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1943–1946).

¹⁵Bilâl Yücel, *Bâbü’r Dîvânı (Gramer–Metin–Sözlük–Tıpkıbasım)* (Ankara: Atatürk Kültür Merkezi, 1995).

¹⁶UNESCO, “Sulaiman-Too Sacred Mountain,” World Heritage List, inscription of 2009, whc.unesco.org/en/list/1230.

¹⁷Jacob M. Landau, *Pan-Turkism: From Irredentism to Cooperation*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

Institutionalising the Bridge: From Commemoration to Connectivity

Since the 1990s, and with new intensity since Uzbekistan's post-2016 opening, the layered heritage described above has been progressively institutionalised. Three concentric frames can be distinguished. The first is bilateral: Uzbek–Pakistani cultural agreements, exchanges of scholarly delegations between Andijan and Lahore, joint conferences on the *Baburnama*, and the consistent invocation of the Baburid–Mughal connection in high-level visits between Tashkent and Islamabad, where the projected trans-Afghan railway from Termez toward Peshawar is habitually narrated as the reopening of Babur's own road. The second frame is the Turkic multilateral: with Uzbekistan's accession to the Turkic cooperation structures in 2019 and the consolidation of the Organization of Turkic States in 2021, the commemorative machinery of the Turkic world — joint anniversaries, common-heritage publication programmes, coordinated Turkology — acquired a member state for whom Babur is a first-rank national classic, placing him on the agenda of the entire organisation. Pakistan is not a member of these structures, but its long-standing cultural intimacy with Turkey and its deepening Central Asian engagement position it as the natural South Asian interlocutor of precisely this Turkic frame — and Babur as the readiest symbol of the interlocution.

The third frame is trilateral in geography if not in form: the Afghan middle. Babur's tomb lies in the Bāgh-i Bābur in Kabul, the terraced garden to which his body was translated after 1530 and which was restored in the 2000s after decades of war;¹⁸ every corridor — infrastructural, commercial or symbolic — between Uzbekistan and Pakistan passes, like Babur himself, through Afghanistan. The heritage geography and the connectivity geography coincide point for point: birthplace in Uzbekistan, pavilion in Kyrgyzstan, grave in Afghanistan, empire in Pakistan, scholarship in Turkey. Institutionalisation has consisted, in essence, of drawing organisational lines along this pre-existing map.

The Textual Bridge: The Baburnama across Languages

Underneath the monuments and the ministries runs the text. The *Baburnama*'s modern circulation recapitulates, in print, the connective geography of its author's life. Beveridge's and Thackston's English translations made it a classic of world autobiography;¹⁹ Mano's critical edition secured the Chaghatay text;²⁰ Arat's translation carried it into Turkish; Tashkent editions in Cyrillic and Latin script placed the *Boburnoma* in every Uzbek school; Urdu renderings published in Lahore and Karachi domesticated it for Pakistani readers; and Soviet-era scholarship produced in Tashkent mediated it to a broader Eurasian readership. Each translation

¹⁸Dale, *Babur*, 493–500, on the burial in Kabul and the afterlife of the tomb-garden.

¹⁹Annette Susannah Beveridge, trans., *The Bābur-nāma in English (Memoirs of Bābur)*, 2 vols. (London: Luzac & Co., 1922).

²⁰Eiji Mano, ed., *Bābur-nāma (Vaqāyi'): Critical Edition Based on Four Chaghatay Texts* (Kyoto: Syokado, 1995).

community reads its own Babur: the Uzbek reader a founding classic of the national language, the Pakistani reader the founder's eyewitness account of the land that became Pakistan, the Turkish reader a monument of common Turkic prose, the Kyrgyz reader the young king of Osh. The book is one; the readerships are many; and it is exactly this one-to-many structure that constitutes a textual bridge rather than a shared possession over which to quarrel.

Discussion: What Kind of Bridge?

Three analytical points emerge. First, the Babur bridge is asymmetric by design. Uzbekistan's poet-ancestor, Pakistan's state-founder, Turkey's common classic, Kyrgyzstan's genius of place and Afghanistan's buried king are different figures cut from one biography; because each claimant's Babur occupies a different symbolic niche, the claims complement rather than collide. Shared heritage is often assumed to require shared meaning; the Babur case suggests the reverse — that distributed meaning is what keeps a shared figure serviceable. Second, the bridge is layered: the textual register (a corpus in a supranational language) grounds the geographical register (a chain of memory-sites), which in turn grounds the institutional register (commemoration and diplomacy). Remove the text and the sites lose their voice; remove the sites and the institutions lose their itinerary. Third, the bridge has load limits. It must bear the counter-memory beyond Pakistan's eastern border, where the demolition in 1992 of the mosque bearing Babur's name turned that name into the most contested word in the subcontinent's memory politics — and it depends, at its geographical keystone, on the fragile stability of Afghanistan. The joint commemorations accordingly favour a consistent aestheticisation: the gardener, memoirist and poet is celebrated; the conqueror is passed over in silence. A bridge, the case reminds us, is engineered as much by what is left out as by what is built in.

CONCLUSION

Babur connects Pakistan, Uzbekistan and the wider Turkic world because his life, his language and his book already connected the regions those polities now occupy. The modern bridge is thus a reactivation rather than an invention: the Chaghatay commonwealth in which he wrote supplies the textual span; the itinerary from Andijan and Osh through Kabul to Lahore supplies the physical piers; and the commemorative diplomacy of the past three decades — bilateral, Turkic-multilateral and trans-Afghan — supplies the traffic. What the case contributes to the study of heritage politics is a precise mechanism: a figure bridges best when his meanings are distributed complementarily among the claimants, so that each, in honouring its own Babur, tacitly honours the others'. Future research might test this mechanism comparatively — against the contested single-meaning cases of the Turco-Persian world — and track empirically how the fortunes of the trans-Afghan corridor, the Organization of Turkic States' cultural agenda and Pakistan's Central Asian opening feed back into the commemorative economy of which Babur is now the presiding figure.

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