THE GARDEN OF THE EIGHT PARADISES

Bābur and the Culture of Empire in Central Asia, Afghanistan and India (1483-1530)

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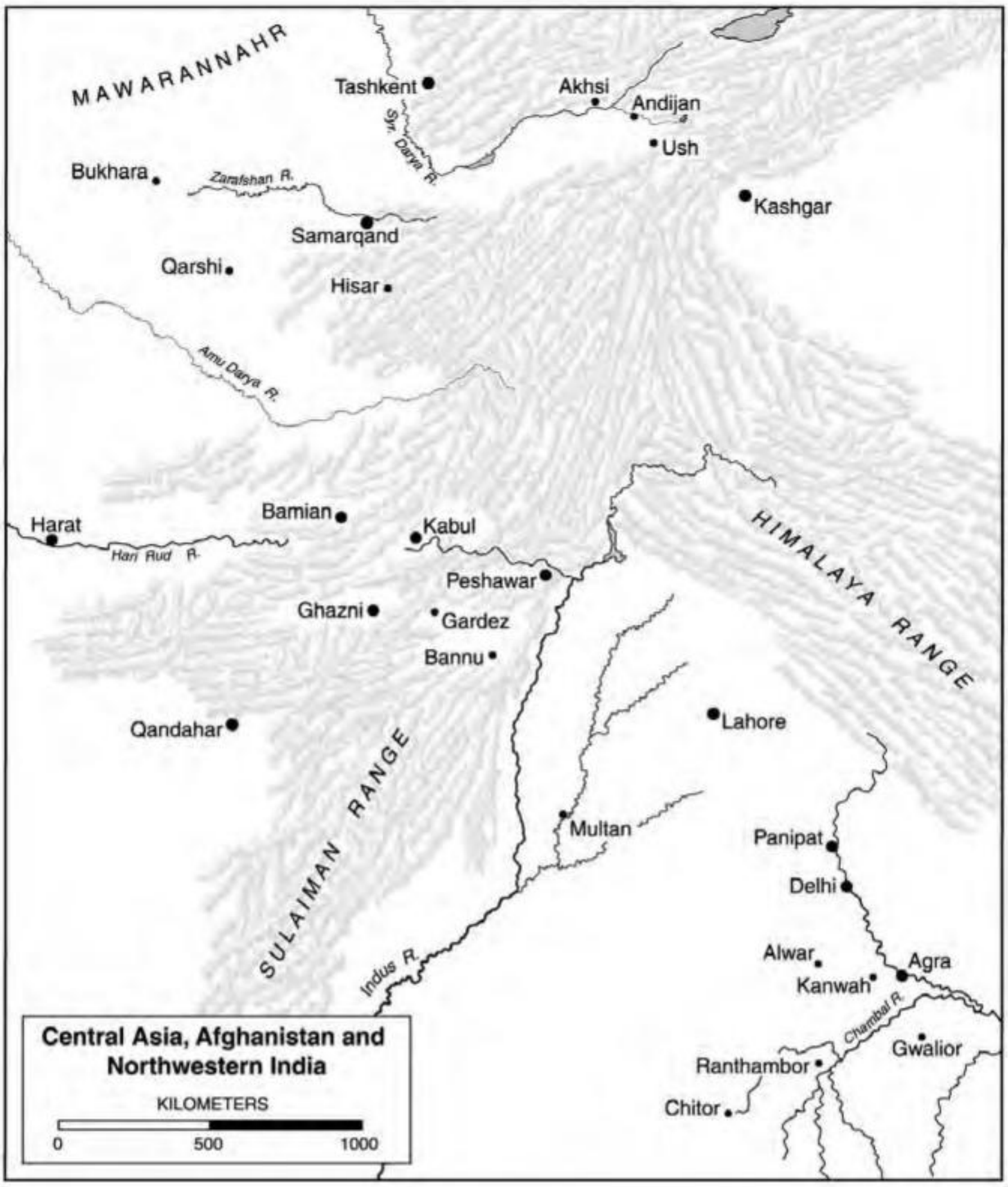
BRILL
LEIDEN · BOSTON
2004



Map no. 3. Mawarannahr, Afghanistan and Northwest India

cultural boundaries separating themselves from Hindu society to be virtually impassable. However, the views of Bābur and al-Bīrūnī should also be measured against those of the patrilineal Turk but Indian-born Muslim, Amīr Khusrau, the thirteenth and early fourteenth century Indo-Persian poet whose work Bābur knew well. Amīr Khusrau's view of India seems fundamentally at odds with their reactions, although his ecstatic praise of his homeland was not an unsolicited testimonial but was part of the larger body of panegyric poetry he produced for his patrons, the Turkic sultans of Delhi.

The Boundaries of Hindustan

In his Indian gazetteer and in other comments scattered throughout the *Vaqā'iʿ* Bābur describes the stunning transition anyone experienced who traveled from Kabul to India. Writing with his usual care, he reports that after leaving Kabul one first passed through a transition zone and then entered India proper after crossing the Indus River. He himself first crossed the boundary between the Afghān and Indian worlds in January 1505 when he and his men decided to raid the borderlands east of Kabul. In recounting the march of six stages from Kabul through the Jagdalik pass to the Ningnahar region, Bābur describes his impression of the transitional zone near Adinahpur, an account that will resonate with anyone who has made the journey.

> Warm countries (*vilāyatlar*) and the Hindustan borderland (navāhīlar) had never [before] been seen. Arriving in Ni[n]gnahar another world appeared—the grasses, trees, animals, birds, people's habits and customs [were] new. There was astonishment [and] really astonishment was justified.[3]

Later in the gazetteer Bābur makes it clear that the Ningnahar country was only a transition zone, sharing some characteristics of Kabul and some of India. There he emphasizes that however great the contrast between Kabul and this *garmsīr* or warm region east of Kabul, it paled in comparison with the difference between Mawarannahr, Kabul and the territory east of the Indus. The trans-Indus

[3] BN-M, fs. 145a-b.

Not surprisingly he begins his account of India's animals with the elephant, "this huge-bodied, quick-witted beast" that was a royal status symbol and heavy if cumbersome armored force of most Indian armies. He doesn't have to resort to the equivocation of reported speech in this case, as he had already begun using elephants in his own campaigns, and in the case of the elephant Bābur is primarily concerned with its practical use, rather than anatomical peculiarities. He does, though, briefly describe its trunk and tusks. After saying appreciatively "whatever is said, it understands; whatever is commanded, it does," he indicates that villagers who captured elephants had to offer them for sale to the state. He discusses their size and price, which varied directly with size, and their ability to work with their tusks. Finally, after observing how useful elephants were to the Indian people he summarizes their importance in campaigns, but ignores their combat role and describes them only as beasts of burden.

> In the [Indian] armies there are inevitably several elephants in every detachment. The elephant's good qualities are: it can easily pick up and carry large loads across broad and swift-running rivers, [and] three or four elephants can easily pull a mortar cart pulled by four to five hundred men. Yet, it has a huge appetite, equal to one [or two] strings of camels.[16]

At least there was no question of domesticating the rhinoceros, the nilgai and several varieties of deer that were common targets of the hunt, the perennial preoccupation of the Turco-Mongol military class. Bābur's description of these mammals as well as monkeys and rodents, is highlighted by his portrait of the rhinoceros, probably his finest zoological sketch, although he is nearly as evocative when discussing peacocks, parrots and dolphins in the Ganges. He tries to render the rhinoceros meaningful to his Central Asian audience through a combination of characteristically memorable detail and a comparison of its features to the horse. Alluding to his portrait of the elephant Bābur writes, "The rhinoceros is also a large animal, its bulk is perhaps that of three water buffaloes." Then citing "a well-known tale in the countries" of his readers that the rhinoceros could lift an elephant on its horn, Bābur says it is "probably false." Having dispensed with this story, he offers his own account of this

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[16] BN-M, f. 275a.

animal, now long-extinct in western India but surviving in small numbers in the Brahmaputra valley.[17]

> It has one horn on the upper part of the snout, more than one *qarïsh* [hand's width]. A [horn] of more than two *qarïsh* is never seen. From one large horn there was [made] a drinking vessel, a dice-box [and] with perhaps even three to four fingers [of horn] left. Its hide is very thick. With a fully drawn, strong bow, if a good hit and good penetration [an arrow] will enter [only] four fingers [deep beneath the skin]. [However] they say that an arrow will easily pierce its hide in some places. The skin hangs loosely around both its fore and hind legs. From a distance it seems to be wrapped up in a blanket. It resembles the horse more than any other animal. [Just] as a horse does not have a large belly, its belly is also not large. [Just] as there would be a bone in the horse's ankle, so does this [animal also have such a bone. [Just] as the horse has a tibia bone, so this [animal] also has this tibia bone.
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> [The rhinoceros] is much fiercer than the elephant, and it is not at all either obedient or submissive. There are many [of them] in the Parashawur and Hashnaghar jungles [and] there are many also in the jungles between the Indus river and Bherah district. In Hindustan there are also many along the banks of the Saru [Gogra] river. They were frequently killed during the Hindustan campaigns in the Parashawur and Hashnaghar jungles. Wielding [their] great horns they powerfully gored both men and horses during hunts. At one hunt [a rhino] with its horn threw the horse of a lad named Maqsūd a spear length. For this reason he was nicknamed Rhinoceros Maqsūd.[18]

Just as Bābur begins his account of mammals with the most interesting animal, the elephant, so he chooses the exotic peacock to introduce his account of local birds. That is his taste for symmetrical organization typified by the gazetteers is also found within this section. His portrait, unmatched in pre-colonial sources, is an exquisite description of color and physical traits of this bird, which as Bābur also notes, is even less capable of flight than the pheasant. The only thing he fails to mention is the peacock's grating call. He reasons speculatively that its inability to fly more than short distances explains why it is found primarily in the mountains and jungles. Yet this leads him to reflect that he cannot

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[17] Valmik Thapar, *Land of the Tiger* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 76, 95 & 101.

[18] BN-M, fs. 275b-276a.

in public as a *qalandar*, that is as an ascetic, wandering sūfī may be only a typical royal conceit, playing on the hoary theme of the worldly shāh as spiritual beggar—and it is very likely he knew of and approved this inscription. Nonetheless, it reminds readers of the *Vaqā'i'* that while Bābur repeatedly discusses gardens he has visited or constructed he never mentions commissioning mosques or any other religious architecture.

In both the Afghān and Indian sections he publicizes piety only in association with sūfīs. In the Afghān narrative he first alludes to his reverence for sufis when describes how he protected an unidentified sufi shrine at the mouth of the Sakhi Sarwar pass in March 1505. Then again in the course of describing his seemingly endless series of "gatherings" in 1519 he mentions circumambulating the tomb of one Khwājah Khwānd Sa'īd, almost certainly a sūfī, and very probably a Naqshbandī, in an area where Khwājah Ahrār and his descendants held considerable lands and buildings as *waqf* endowments.[81] Immediately after Panipat he also circumambulated the Chishtī shrine in Delhi. Earlier in this campaign of 1529 he took the time to visit the shrine of another Chishtī *pīr*, Shaykh Yahyā located at Manir, near the confluence of the Son, Ganges and Saru Rivers, just upriver from Patna. Here also he reports *tawāf* or circumambulating the shrine of this man whose son, Shaykh Sharaf al-Dīn (d.1380/81), wrote religious works later popular with Bābur's grandson Akbar.[82] Bābur's care in describing his reverence for sūfī shrines in India reprise his earlier expressions of respect and sometimes intensely felt spiritual connection with the deceased Naqshbandī *pīr*, the Tīmūrid "patron saint," Khwājah 'Ubaydullah Ahrār. This respect, as has been mentioned, was so great as to elevate Khwājah Ahrār's descendants to the status of an aristocratic religious lineage suitable for intermarriage with the Tīmūrid house in India.

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[80] Cited in BN-B, Appendix U.

[81] BN-M, f. 241 and Dale and Payind, "The Ahrārī Waqf in Kābul in the year 1546 and the Mughūl Naqshbandiyyah" 218-33.

[82] AN, III, 132-33. Akbar sent money to this shrine while campaigning in precisely the area Bābur traversed in 1529. It is Annette Beveridge who first called attention to this connection in one of her many informative notes. BN-B, p. 666, n. 3.