

# BABURNAMA

## Babur

(1494-1530)

### Reading

*Journal of Emperor Babur*, translated by Dilip Hiro, 2007

*Baburnama*, translated by Wheeler M. Thackston, 2002

### Cultural significance

The *Baburnama* has acquired a unique place in Indian literature, history and culture. It is the first autobiography to be written in the subcontinent, albeit by a Mongol in a Turkic language. It was followed by other first-person narratives among Mughal rulers and courtiers, and seemed to stimulate a new kind of historiography, as well. The reason that this early text was so influential is simply that Babur wrote in such an engaging and vivid manner. Battles are recounted with details and drama. Take, for example, this account of the encounter that led to the conquest of Delhi: 'During the seven or eight days we lay in Panipat, our men went close to Ibrahim's camp a few at a time, rained arrows down on the ranks of his troops, cut off and brought back their heads. Still he made no move, nor did his troops venture out. At length, we acted on the advice of some Hindustani well-wishers and sent four or five thousand men to deliver a night attack on his camp. It being dark, they were unable to act well together and, having dispersed, could achieve nothing on arrival. They stayed near Ibrahim's camp until dawn, when *nagarets* [kettle drums] sounded and his troops came forth in force with elephants...' Babur had a knack for using metaphor, too. For example, in describing a parrot so beloved of Indian rajas, he says its cry is as 'unpleasant and shrill as a piece of broken china dragged across a brass tray.' In addition, Babur had what seems like a photographic memory, able to recollect and record precise details of topography, buildings and clothing. As we read his memoirs, we are transported back to the early 16<sup>th</sup> century as completely as recent historical novels (by the multi-prize-winning novelist Hilary Mantel) recreated the contemporaneous Tudor court in England. Beyond these aesthetic and technical qualities, but also because of its precision and detail, the text is an invaluable source for anyone who wants to understand the history and society of the period. For instance, we can learn about the administrative structure of states, methods of irrigation, horticultural practices and, most of all, military tactics. All this has to be set against a realisation that, however objective the diarist is, there is bound to be individual prejudice in descriptions. A famous example is Babur's dislike of India and its people: 'Hindustan is a country of a few charms. Its people have no good looks, no good manners, no genius or capacity. There are no good horses, no good dogs, no grapes, muskmelons or good fruits, no ice or cold water, no bread or cooked food in the markets, no hot baths, no colleges, no candles, torches or candle sticks...' On and on. He does, however, have one good thing to say about the place he conquered: 'When the mango is good, it is really good [...] In fact, the mango is the best fruit in Hindustan.' But he then goes on to comment that the tree itself is ugly. Finally, the manuscript of the *Baburnama* that was translated into Persian (c. 1590) and lavishly illustrated has influenced both the process of bookmaking and the art of miniature painting in the subcontinent. This is no soldier's rough chronicle. It is a masterly piece of writing that has no counterpart in the rest of Indian literature.

### Overview

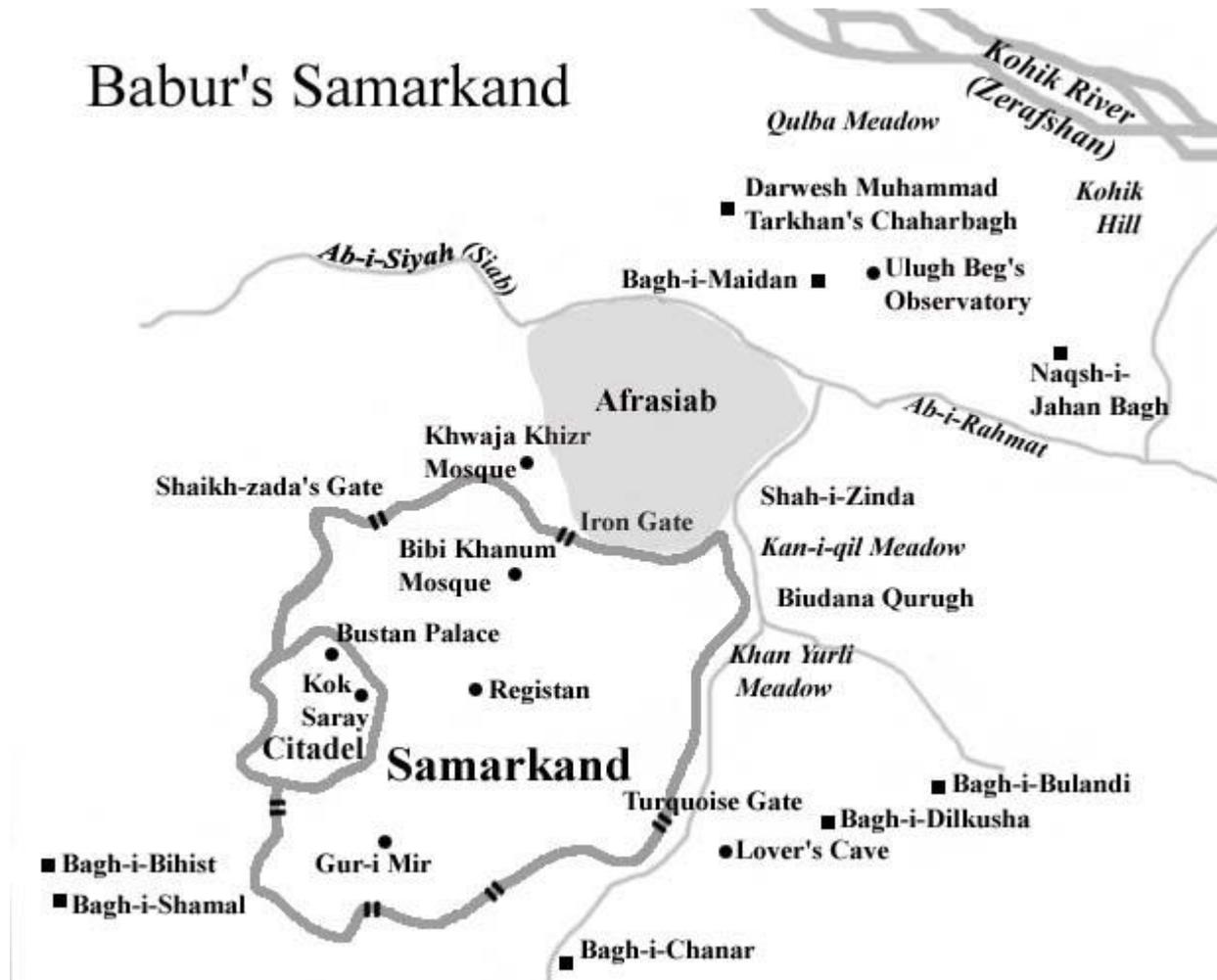
The *Baburnama* ('Book of Babur') is an autobiography written by the first Mughal Emperor Babur (1483-1530), who ruled the empire from Delhi during his final few years. It is written in Chagatai, Babur's native language from the Fergana region of present-day Uzbekistan, although it is Persianised in grammar and some vocabulary. Babur's memoir covers his life from 1493, in Fergana, through his conquest of Kabul and then Delhi, where it ends with his death in 1530. It seems that Babur began to compile his life-story in the form of a journal, which he began in 1494, when he succeeded his father as ruler of the small kingdom of Fergana, just north of the Hindu Kush

mountains. He wrote and revised the journal over the years, adding new material at various points. Although he intended to leave a complete of his life, there is a large gap of eleven years (1508-1519), which is particularly unfortunate because this was a tumultuous and decisive period in his career. The most likely explanation for this lacuna, according to scholars, is that Babur was writing about these years at the time of his death and simply died before he could finish them. The first complete English translation of his memoir, published in 1922, was largely based on a Persian translation made during the reign of Akbar (Babur's grandson) and on a copy of the text in the original Chagatai, with extra material gathered from various other manuscripts, mostly in Turkish.

## Story

After invoking the name of 'God, the merciful,' the story begins in *medias res* (a result of lost pages) with this statement: 'In the month of Ramadan, in the year 899 [1494], and in the twelfth year of my life, I became ruler in the country of Fergana.' Then follows a delightful description of the country, its topography, flora and fauna, people, much like a journal of a European explorer or traveller. Special attention is paid to local history and to the genealogies of his family and other major clans. We learn how his ancestors, the Timurids (such as Tamerlane and Genghis Khan), lost territory to the Uzbeks and how his clan of the Chagatai regained the kingdom. After Babur comes to the throne, at age 12, he continues to fight the Uzbeks and other Turkish peoples. His fortunes rise and fall, conquering and then losing Samarkand on two occasions. Despite receiving some help from Persian leaders, Babur was defeated by the invading Uzbeks, who gave their name to the region. Forced out of Samarkand the second time, in 1501, Babur and his soldiers lead a kind of 'guerrilla' existence in the harsh mountain climes of the region. Miraculously, three years later, with only a few hundred men, and the support of a local khan, Babur took Kabul. Now, we are given more details about Babur the ruler, statesman and leader of lightning quick military raids. Then comes the missing eleven years (1508-1519), during which time we know (from other sources) that Babur tried once again to conquer Samarkand and failed. When the journal resumes, we find Babur solidly established in Kabul and pushing south, toward the Indian subcontinent. In 1519, he makes his first raid into the Punjab, followed by several other attacks along the route to Hindustan (as he called it), securing the region of Kandahar (modern-day Afghanistan) and the province of Sind (modern-day Pakistan). In 1524, he finally launches the first of five assaults against Delhi. However, Babur is unable to break through the considerable defences, nor is he able to penetrate the complex network of alliances that make up the Delhi Sultanate, then ruled by the Lodi kings from Afghanistan. Finally, in 1526, in the first battle of Panipat, outside Delhi. With new kinds of artillery and military tactics, borrowed from the Ottomans, including wheeling and flanking by archers, Babur achieves a decisive victory. The Sultan is killed and Babur seizes Delhi. But he doesn't rest long, and three days later has conquered Agra. Over the final four years of his life, Babur establishes the Mughal (or Mongol) empire and consolidates its control with a string of victories over Rajput and Afghan rulers. It is a considerable achievement, the end of a career that had begun when he was 12 years old in an isolated mountain region. But, as Babur himself laments, the conquest of India is only a consolation prize. He found India inhospitable, the climate too hot and the people too uncivilised. Even the lush gardens he built could not compensate for the delights of his homeland. He wished he could have ended his years as the ruler of Samarkand.

# Babur's Samarkand



## Themes

Perseverance Amid the welter of details—historical, topographical, genealogical and military—that fill the 600 or so pages of Babur's memoir, one theme that stands out is the value of perseverance. Babur suffered many setbacks (he twice gained and lost Samarkand, his ultimate goal, and he was unsuccessful in his first five attempts to conquer Delhi). Still, he never lost heart; or if he did, it was only for a brief moment. Several times in his life-story, he persuades himself or others to 'keeping going.' This dogged determination was surely one of the reasons why Babur did finally succeed against all the odds (he was greatly outnumbered—10 to 1 or 4 to 1, depending on the source) in defeating the last Lodi Sultan of Delhi in 1526. For the first nine days of that battle on the plains of Panipat, Babur was patient: he sent out his cavalry to provoke an attack by masses soldiers of the enemy. The Sultan's army remained firmly in place. Then Babur tried a surprise attack at night, which failed. Finally, on the morning of the tenth day, the enemy came out to attack Babur, who put into action his carefully laid battle plan. It worked, the Sultan's army was defeated and the Mughal Empire began. While Babur was a man of patience, his perseverance was dynamic, also. We can see this combination in a letter he wrote to his son, Humayun, who was one of his most trusted commanders. Babur wants to make sure that his son understands the necessity of steadfast action: 'Through God's grace you will defeat your enemies and take their territory...this is your time to risk your life and wield your sword. Do not fail to make the most of an opportunity that presents itself. Indolence and luxury do not suit kingship. Conquest tolerates not inaction; the world is his who hastens most.' Humayun did indeed persevere in extending the boundaries of the Mughal Empire; even when he was ousted by an alliance of Afghans and Rajputs and spent fifteen years in exile, he returned to Delhi for his second reign that only ended with his death in 1556. It was the sort of zig-zag career that Babur would have recognised as his own and for which he would have been proud. His son did not give up, even after those long fifteen years in exile.

**Quest** The single most powerful theme motivating Babur and his memoir is the historical quest to claim back Samarkand from the invading Uzbeks. As Babur writes, 'For 140 years, the capital Samarkand had been in our family. Then came the Uzbeks, from god knows where, and took it over.' Strategically located on the Silk Route from China to the Mediterranean, Samarkand became one of the wealthiest cities in Asia. Built (probably) by the Persians in the 6<sup>th</sup> c. BCE, conquered by Alexander and then made magnificent by Genghis Khan in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and by Tamerlane in the 14<sup>th</sup>, Samarkand was considered by Babur as the capital of his Timurid ancestors. Many travellers noted the beauty of its mosques, the fertility of its orchards and the wonder of its observatory (built in the 1420s.). It is no surprise, then, that regaining the city was Babur's life-long quest. Twice he took the city and twice he lost it, which only deepened his obsession. Descriptions of the city reveal his love for its climate, architecture and people. 'Few towns in the whole habitable world are so pleasant as Samarkand,' he wrote. 'Excellent meadows lie round Samarkand...The Qara-su or Ab-i-rahmat river flows through it, a stream (with driving power) for perhaps seven or eight mills. It is an excellent meadow. The Samarkand sultans always made it their reserve, going out to camp in it each year for a month or two...Its fruits are many and good, its melons excellent...The Bukhara plum is famous; no other equals it. They skin it, dry it and export it from land to land with other rarities; it is an excellent laxative...Another fine building is an observatory, that is, a building with instruments for writing astronomical tables...Not more than seven or eight observatories seem to have been constructed in the world.' Then follows a detailed account of the various lush gardens in the city. And finally this: 'Samarkand is a wonderfully beautified town. One of its specialities, perhaps found in few other places, is that the different trades are not mixed up together in it. Each has its own *bazar*, which makes a lot of sense. Its bakers and its cooks are good. The best paper in the world is made there...' On and on, he goes, praising every possible aspect of a city that inspired many others to reach for superlatives in their appreciation of its wonders. For Babur, however, it wasn't just a glittering jewel in the high desert; it was also his birth right.

**Nostalgia** The quest for Samarkand is related to the strong streak of melancholy that runs through the *Baburnama* particularly its final sections. Babur has captured Delhi, but he is not happy. The prize of conquering this fabled capital of the subcontinent, the apogee of his military career, fails to satisfy the forty-two-year old Emperor. Instead, he constantly looks back to the landscapes of his youth and to the Kabul he ruled for two decades, to cooler climes and more civilised people. 'Our desire for going back there [Kabul] is endless and constant,' he writes to a friend. 'How can I ever forget the pleasures of that country?' For him, India is too hot, the food too unfamiliar and the people, including fellow Muslims, too uncouth for the cultured man from Fergana. In another letter, written to a friend in Kabul, just before his death, Babur yearns once more to return to that northern region. 'I trust in Almighty Allah that the time is near at hand when everything will be completely settled in this country [India]. As soon as matters are brought to that state, I shall, with the permission of Allah, set out for your quarters without a moment's delay. How is it possible to forget the delicious melons and grapes of that pleasant region? They very recently brought me a single melon from Kabul. While cutting it up, I felt myself affected with a strong feeling of loneliness and a sense of my exile from my native country, and I could not help shedding tears.' Then Babur gives detailed instructions to his friend about the ten gardens, including a plan for irrigation, that he wishes him to construct in the city. Those imagined gardens, which were built after his death, provided him with a strong visceral link to the city. What Babur could not know was that he would return to his beloved Kabul and to one of his gardens. In 1544, his widow had his tomb moved there, where it stands today, lovingly restored after years of neglect during the war years.

### **Characters** (select list)

**Babur** Babur is the author of these memoirs, a ruler of the small region of Fergana before conquering Delhi and becoming the first Mughal Emperor.

**Umar Shaykh Mirza** Umar Shaykh Mirza is Babur's father, who ruled Fergana but died at the young age of 38 when he the dovecote he was in on top of a building collapsed. This is why Babur came to the throne at such an early age.

**Khanim** Khanim is Babur's mother. She died in 1505, just after her son took Kabul but long before he became the first Mughal Emperor.

Humayun Humayun (1508-1556) was Babur's first and favourite son, who became the second Mughal Emperor when Babur died in 1530. They had a close relationship. He was reputed to be the kindest of the Mughal Emperors. He died, like his father, in an accident, this time slipping on the polished floor of his palace and falling down the stairs.

Ali Mirza Safavi Ali Mirza Safavi was a military leader of a religious group in Persia, who became a valuable ally of Babur in the fight against the Uzbeks.

Sultan Ibrahim Sultan Ibrahim was the Lodi king of Delhi (last ruler of the Delhi Sultanate), whom Babur defeated in 1526.

## **Babur (Determined)**

**Character** Even allowing for the distortions of self-representation, the *Baburnama* provides us with a sharp portrait of its author. Although born in a remote mountainous region of Central Asia into a society based on warfare and warrior ideals, Babur was far from a crude and ignorant soldier or even just a brilliant commander (like Napoleon). He was, in fact, a highly cultured man, due largely to his family's links to Persian and Turkish literature and culture. In particular, his maternal grandfather was a connoisseur of poetry, music and painting. Babur himself was an accomplished poet, as his memoirs demonstrate, and he was knowledgeable in the history, natural history, horticulture and geography of Central Asia and India. He took pains to create gardens in the hot regions that he conquered, as a way of reminding him of those he had loved in Central Asia. Babur also had an observant eye that recorded the details of what he saw and an inquiring mind that sought explanations for the differences he perceived. He was a kind, if strict, father and husband, married to eight women and the father of eighteen children. Although he was undoubtedly ambitious, he was a humble man and an observant Muslim. He was certainly a complex person, a poet who composed tender lines and then the next day described the massacre of an entire village. Ambitious, ruthless, disciplined and determined, he was a man with a rich inner life and refined feelings. His memoir is a remarkable text of self-discovery, written long before the 'self' was discovered. What was his motivation in writing it? Certainly, he felt an obligation to record 'true events,' as he himself put it, but there may also be a clue in a poem he wrote when only eighteen: 'Other than my own soul, I have never found a faithful friend; other than my own heart, I have never found a confidant.' Perhaps Babur's memoir was a way of befriending himself.

**Activities** Babur spends most of his days either planning a battle or fighting one, preparing to lay siege to a town or withstanding a siege by his enemy. He also clearly spent a lot of time observing the world around him and recording it in a journal. One of his favourite activities is to plan and create a garden or an orchard and then to walk in it, while thinking out a problem or composing a poem. His most famous garden is the Babur Garden created by him in Kabul in 1504. Another pastime was to read books, in Persian and Turkish. As a Sunni Muslim, Babur was regular in his prayers and always observed the strictures of Ramadan.

## **Illustrative Moments**

Ruthless Despite Babur's considerable cultural achievements, he was first and foremost the leader of a warrior-state that was born and bred in warfare. There were few rules or conventions governing the near-constant battles between small states in Central Asia at the time. The goal was to defeat the enemy by any means possible. This ethic was deeply rooted in Babur, as shown in his account of a battle fought in 1519 near Lahore (present-day Pakistan). His target was the fortified town of Bajaur, which was commanded by a man loyal to the Sultan in Delhi. Babur described the battle in these words: 'As the Bajauris were rebels and at enmity with the people of Islam, and as, by reason of the heathenish and hostile customs prevailing in their midst, the very name of Islam was rooted out from their tribe, they were put to general massacre and their wives and children were made captive. At a guess more than 3000 men went to their death; as the fight did not reach to the eastern side of the fort, a few got away there. The fort taken, we entered and inspected it. On the walls, in houses, streets and alleys, the dead lay, in what numbers!' This kind of massacre is what Babur hoped would terrorise other commanders and thus lead him to the prize at Delhi. It worked, and ever since Babur's name has been invoked when someone wants to link Islam and terrorism, from the 16<sup>th</sup> century until today.

Humble One of the complexities of Babur's character is the juxtaposition of apparent opposites. We know, for example, that he was a great warrior, but he was also a humble man (at least, as far as we can tell from his memoirs). He was ambitious and determined, but despite his many talents, he rarely boasts about himself in the text, either as a warrior or a poet. A good illustration of his humility occurs in the aftermath of a famous victory. Even a year after Delhi was conquered, Babur still had to contend with Rajput kings who opposed his rule in other parts of north India. He finally quashed that opposition in 1527 when he defeated a combined Rajput army under the command of Rana Sangha in the battle of Khanwa. The Mughal cannon fire, new to the Rajputs, did the damage, frightening the elephants, causing chaos and routing the soldiers, who died in large numbers. Despite this decisive victory, Babur did not claim it for himself, but praised the bravery of his soldiers and the grace of God. Babur's humility also comes from his self-appointed role as historian: 'I have simply written the truth. I do not intend by what I have written to compliment myself. I have simply set down exactly what happened. Since I have made it a point in this history to write the truth of every matter and to set down no more than the reality of every event, as a consequence I have reported every good and evil I have seen of father and brother and set down the actuality of every fault and virtue of relative and stranger. May the reader excuse me; may the listener take me not to task.' Babur was a ruthless warrior, but as a believer in God and an objective historian, he did not aggrandise himself.

Determined Another prominent element of Babur's personality is his determination to succeed. We have to remind ourselves that he began his illustrious career as a twelve-year-old ruling a minor principality and ended up establishing the Mughal Empire. His route to that final goal was difficult, and he often endured hardships of climate and loss of family and friends. He once rode 70 miles while suffering from a fever, and on another occasion rode for three days and nights on a lightning raid. Perhaps the most moving illustration of his determination in the face of suffering comes in the late winter of 1506. Babur set off from Kabul to put down a rebellion to the north, but when he tried to return, the snow on the mountains was very deep. He then describes the situation in his usual precise manner: 'For about a week we continued pressing down the snow without being able to advance more than two or three miles. I myself assisted in trampling down the snow. Every step we sank up to the middle or the breast, but we still went on, trampling it down. As the strength of the person who went first was generally exhausted after he had advanced a few paces, he stood still, while another took his place. The ten, fifteen, or twenty people who worked in trampling down the snow, next succeeded in dragging on a horse without a rider. Drawing this horse aside, we brought on another, and in this way ten, fifteen, or twenty of us contrived to bring forward the horses of all our number. The rest of the troops, even our best men, advanced along the road that had been beaten down for them, hanging their heads...Continuing to advance by a track which we beat in the snow in this manner, we reached a cave at the foot of the Zirin pass. That day the storm of wind was dreadful. The snow fell in such quantities that we all expected to meet death together. The cave seemed to be small. I took a hoe and made for myself at the mouth of the cave a resting-place about the size of a prayer-carpet. I dug down in the snow as deep as my breast, and yet did not reach the ground. This hole afforded me some shelter from the wind, and I sat down in it. Some desired me to go into the cavern, but I would not go. I felt that for me to be in a warm dwelling, while my men were in the midst of snow and drift—for me to be within, enjoying sleep and ease, while my followers were in trouble and distress—would be inconsistent with what I owed them, and a deviation from that society in suffering which was their due. I continued, therefore, to sit in the drift.' In the end, and due in no small part to Babur's personal resolve, the men survive and return to Kabul. Babur then concludes this section with one of his poems, 'Every good and evil that exists, if you mark it well, is for a blessing.'

Loving Babur was also a man of deep feelings. He was passionate about his cause—to recapture Samarkand from the invaders, the Uzbeks—and his religion, but he was also a loving father, at least to his sons. These paternal emotions are expressed largely toward his eldest son, Humayun, who would succeed him. Although Babur does not describe his son's growing up in any detail, we learn of their relationship through the letters Babur wrote to him. In one letter, Babur says that he shed tears because his son has not written back to him. However, the most tender expression of his love for his son comes at the end of his life, in 1530. (These events are taken not from the *Baburnama* itself, which ends in 1529, but from other, contemporaneous sources.) Humayun, then aged twenty-two, became deathly ill and was brought to Babur's court at Agra, near Delhi. The best physicians attend him but he grew steadily worse. In despair, Babur consults a holy man, who tells him that 'the remedy was to give in alms the most valuable thing one had.' When Babur declares that his own life is the

most valuable thing and he would give it to save his son, the counsellors try to persuade him that the holy man meant that he should give away gold, money or land. But Babur has made up his mind to sacrifice his life for that of his son. And from that moment on, Babur began to decline and died a few weeks later. Humayun recovered and became the second Mughal Emperor.

Brave Returning to Babur the fighter, we cannot fail to comment on his bravery. Even though he does not explicitly speak of his courage—he is too self-effacing for that—that quality emerges clearly from his documentary style description of events. At the age of thirteen, for example, he led an army in a battle at Samarkand, and many other instances could be cited. But the one that stands out (for me) is an incident that occurred in early 1503. Babur is still in the 'wilderness,' having not yet captured Kabul and having therefore to fight a guerrilla war against his enemies. He has a small band of men, not more than twenty or thirty. Babur is sleeping in his tent, when he is woken with shouts of 'Enemy! Enemy!' He rises and barely has time to strap on his sword before riding off to fight. Then he realises that the Sultan Ahmad Tambal has about 100 horsemen and that he, Babur, has only six or seven men with him. He is surrounded, some of his men are killed by arrows, and then he has only two men with him. Babur suffers a blow to the head and an arrow pierces his right leg, but he manages to shoot arrows himself, though he is still vastly outnumbered. Suddenly, reinforcements arrive, Babur routs the Sultan and takes his head. It is stirring stuff. Babur appears to have held off about a hundred men almost single-handedly. It must have been acts of bravery such as this that made his men so loyal, a loyalty that proved decisive when he fought the large, pitched battles that led to the conquest of Hindustan.

Pious A final characteristic that rounds off Babur's personality is his religious fervour. While it is sometimes suggested that he 'manufactured' his piety in order to justify his conquests, that is a serious misreading of the man and the text. While it is true that Babur, in later life, at least, became a lover of wine and that he enjoyed sexual pleasures, these activities were not understood as contrary to the teachings of Islam. He prayed five times a day, observed Ramadan and even transcribed the Qur'an in his own hand. One of his often-cited poems, composed after a famous victory in 1527, proclaims:

For Islam's sake, I wandered in the wilds,  
Prepared for war with pagans and Hindus,  
Resolved myself to meet the martyr's death,  
Thanks be to Allah! a *ghazi* [victor in Holy War] I became.

A good example of his 'holy war' is his description of a campaign against Hindu rulers undertaken only days after the conquest of Delhi in 1526. 'On this occasion I received a secret inspiration and heard an infallible voice say: 'Is not the time yet come unto those who believe, that their hearts should humbly submit to the admonition of Allah, and that truth which hath been revealed? Thereupon we set ourselves to extirpate the things of wickedness...the heretic, the unbelievers.' Babur explains that his victory was preordained because he and his men believed in the True Faith. 'When Fate arrives, the eye becomes blind, and the scripture says whoever strives to promote the true religion, strives for the good of his own soul.' When the battle is over, Babur reflects on the reasons his soldiers fought so well and suggests that they 'heard a secret voice' that urged them to fight 'for Allah', which caused them to fight 'with such delight that the plaudits of the saints of the Holy Assembly reached them.' Detractors might claim that these declarations of piety are politically motivated, but a close reading of the memoirs suggests that Babur was not so disingenuous. Of course, religion was a handy tool for him, as for others, but this does not mean that he himself was not a believer.