THE BUILDERS OF THE
MOGUL EMPIRE
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MICHAEL PRAWDIN
THE EMPEROR BABUR READING
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PART ONE

BABUR
THE KINGDOMS OF THE TIMURIDS

Scale of Miles

Herat
E.G.M.

Khorasan

Samarkand

Bokhara
Zanafshan

Turkestan

Ferghana

Andigan

Khojent

Kunduz

Balkh

Hissar

Badakhshan

Kabul

Jelalabad

Kandahar

Ab-i-Istada Lake

0

150
SAMARKAND GAINED AND LOST

Over two and a half centuries had passed since Jenghiz Khan, out of the vastness of East Asia, had irrupted into the lands of the Sir Darya and Amu Darya and smashed the Moslem Empire then stretching from the Pamir to beyond the Caspian Sea. Forty years later the Mongols, under Jenghiz Khan’s grandson Hulagu, had subjugated all the realms to the west of the Oxus, nearly as far as the Mediterranean, and were only stopped by the Egyptian Mamelukes from conquering the whole of Syria. Then, in the space of a few generations, the Empire of the Il-Khans, which Hulagu had founded, changed its character, as had happened so often in the history of western Asia, where the settled world of Persian civilization had absorbed wave after wave of invaders from the steppes. Hulagu’s descendants, and more and more of the Mongolian nobles, went over to Islam; the nomad rulers surrounded themselves with scholars and poets, building palaces and towns to their glory, and spending their time in festivities or wars against one another. Real power was wielded by the viceroy and amirs in the various provinces. As soon as one of them felt strong enough, he discovered some descendant of Jenghiz Khan, proclaimed him Khan, and in his name started wars against his neighbours in the hope of annexing their provinces.

It was about a century after the creation of Hulagu’s Empire that in the region of the Amu Darya (the Oxus) and the Sir Darya (the Jaxartes of old) a new power arose. This region, Jenghiz Khan’s original target, did not really belong to Hulagu’s Empire. The land beyond the Amu Darya had been allocated to the realm of Jagatai, Jenghiz Khan’s second son, whose central Asian empire was intended to form a bridge between China and Western Asia. But the eastern half of Jagatai’s realm, Turkistan, poor in cities and rich in steppes, remained a typical nomad land, while its western part,
Transoxiana, between the Amu Darya and Sir Darya, was populous, industrious, and culturally and economically much more akin to the empire of the Il-Khans which bordered it to the south-west.

In this frontier land between Iran and Turan a chieftain of the Barlas Turki-tribe, Timur, had himself proclaimed Grand Amir of Transoxiana in the year 1369, and with a Jenghizid as nominal Khan started on the superhuman task which he had set himself: that of re-establishing Jenghiz Khan’s empire. When he died thirty-six years later, he left what is known in Europe as Tamerlane’s Empire, reaching from the Aral Sea to the Arabian Sea and from the Mediterranean nearly to the Altai Mountains. But he had not, like Jenghiz Khan, created a warrior nation, since he made his conquests with an army of mercenaries held together in the main by his personality and the expectation of spoils. And in spite of the frightful destruction which accompanied his campaigns, it was the Iranian-Islamic civilization which not only survived but re-emerged from the slaughter strengthened and enhanced.

Timur’s descendants felt themselves heirs more to a culture which they wanted to enjoy and foster than to the ambition of world conquest. Fighting one another for the throne, for a province, for a fief they often sought help from the nomadic warriors of Turkistan or of the northern steppes against their immediate neighbours, only to discard their helpers at the moment of success in order to pursue a life of culture and pleasure as the previous rulers had done. Proud of their learning and their manners, they considered themselves not Mongols but Turks, superior to the rough Mongolian riders of the steppes. And the nomads, whether they came from outside the province or were wandering with their cattle in its hills or wastes, felt themselves in no way bound to the man by whom they had been engaged for a campaign. When the fortunes of battle turned against him, they simply plundered his camp before fleeing themselves.

This struggle for the succession started immediately after Timur’s death. Nevertheless, when after four years of strife his youngest son Shah Rokh established his supremacy, he managed to bring back a great part of the empire under his rule and to leave the throne, after a prosperous reign of nearly forty years, to his son Ulugh Beg, a great scholar, poet, theologian, and eminent mathematician, whose astronomical tables became world-famous. Yet, after a short reign Ulugh Beg was dethroned, and then murdered, by one of his sons.
A fratricidal war plunged the country again into chaos, until a great-grandson of Timur from another line, Abu Said, established himself on the throne of Samarkand with the help of the Uzbegs, the nomad Mongols from the northern steppes.

An able ruler and a keen warrior, Abu Said kept order in his realm, but before engaging on a campaign against Irak, where he was defeated and killed, he divided it amongst his sons. The lands of Samarkand and Bokhara he apportioned to his eldest son Sultan Ahmed, the Amu Darya basin with Hissar and Badakhshan to his son Sultan Mahmud; another son, Omar Sheikh, inherited the kingdom of Ferghana, lying eastwards on both sides of the upper Sir Darya; and still another son, Ulugh Beg, held the far-off mountainous kingdom of Kabul. The rich kingdom of Khorasan to the south and west of these realms, stretching from Afghanistan to the Amu Darya, was conquered by another great-grandson of Timur, Sultan Husain Baikara, who, an admirer of art and literature, made his capital Herat one of the greatest cultural centres of the Asian Mohammedan world.

The little kingdom of Ferghana, Omar Sheikh’s domain, was, as Babur later wrote in his memoirs, ‘situated on the extreme boundary of the habitable world’. It was surrounded on three sides by mountains and open only to the west, towards Samarkand. Beyond it, on the other side of the mountain passes, was the land of the Jagatai Mongols, but their Khan, Yunus, a descendant of Jenghiz Khan, had spent his youth as an exile at the courts of descendants of Shah Rokh and loved town life. Three of his daughters had married sons of Abu Said, and with one of them, his son-in-law Omar Sheikh, the King of Ferghana, he struck up a particular friendship and often spent the winter months in his kingdom. When Omar Sheikh’s wife, early in 1483, gave birth to a boy and he was named Zahir-ud-din Mohammed—Defender of the Faith—it is said that the Mongols, finding the name difficult to pronounce, called him Babur—Panther; and it was under this soon generally adopted name that the boy, the descendant of both Timur and Jenghiz Khan, made his entrance into history.

Ferghana was, as he described it, a beautiful country ‘abundantly supplied with running water and extremely pleasant in spring’. Its orchards and gardens were celebrated, full of tulips and roses. It abounded in corn and fruits, particularly peaches, apricots, melons, and pomegranates. The people liked to take the stones out of the
apricots and insert almonds in their place, (which is very pleasant). It had a rich soil and sheltered meadows of clover. It had good hunting grounds with plenty of game. 'Its pheasants were so fat that four persons could dine on one and not finish it'. In the hills there were delightful summer retreats to which the people retired to avoid the heat. There were 'mines of turquoise, and the people in the valley wove cloth of purple colour'. But the country was small and its revenue just sufficient to maintain 4,000 troops. Omar Sheikh, ambitious and adventurous, often set out for inroads into the neighbouring domain of Samarkand, and sometimes it needed the mediation of Yunus Khan and the menace of his Mongols to prevent Sultan Ahmed, the lord of Samarkand, from overrunning the kingdom of his unruly brother. However, when after the death of Yunus Khan the adventurous Omar Sheikh did not stop his pillaging invasions, Sultan Ahmed and his brother-in-law, Mahmud Khan of Tashkent, the elder son of Yunus Khan, decided to divide Ferghana between themselves and marched in the spring of 1494 from west and north into the country.

Omar Sheikh was at the time in the mountain fort of Akhsi, where his palace buildings were erected at the edge of a precipice, and while he was, perhaps on the look-out for the invaders, feeding his pigeons, the platform with the dovecote gave way under him and he was hurled to his death from the top of the rock.

When the news of the accident reached the capital, Andijan, his eleven-year-old son Babur was immediately proclaimed king, and the begs and amirs, knowing how precarious the position was and what pillage and murder usually accompanied the fall of a city, prepared for defence. In the meantime an embassy went in Babur's name to his uncle Sultan Ahmed, stating that he regarded himself as son and servant of the Sultan and would be happy to govern the country as the Sultan's regent. But the Sultan's ministers rejected the proposal and the army continued to advance. However, while it was crossing a muddy and slimy river the only bridge collapsed, many horses and camels fell into the swamp and perished. Then an epidemic of distemper broke out among the animals, and Sultan Ahmed called off the campaign. On the way back he himself was seized with fever and died. Babur's maternal uncle, Mahmud Khan, who was besieging the fortress of Akhsi, fell ill, too, and returned to his country. Babur notes in his memoirs: 'The Almighty God, by His perfect power, has in His own good time and season accom-
1. Young Babur dangerously ill in Samarkand. A physician sprinkling his face with water.
2. Babur and his uncle's armies saluting the Mongolian horse-tail standards by throwing Kumiss on them.
plished my designs in the best and most proper manner without the aid of mortal strength'; and it was probably in the desire to prove himself worthy of this divine mercy that the boy 'began to abstain from forbidden and dubious meats' and even refrained from alcohol—a most astonishing feat in his surroundings.

After Ahmed's death, his brother, Sultan Mahmud, mounted the throne of Samarkand, but being tyrannical and debauched he soon earned the hatred of the people of the capital. During the twenty-five years of Ahmed's reign they had lived in ease and tranquillity, now they feared to leave their houses 'from a dread lest their children be carried off for slaves'. However, after a few months Sultan Mahmud also fell ill and died within six days.

Now the begs of Samarkand called in Baisanghar, the eighteen-year-old son of Sultan Mahmud, but other Mirzas—as all princes of Timur's stock were called—also raised their claim to the throne of Samarkand and, accompanied by their begs and retainers, began incessant warfare. In reality they were only puppets in the hands of their begs, who eager for spoil and power readily changed one Mirza for another or even blinded or assassinated an uncomfortable one if he did not manage to escape in time to a domain or town in the power of another war-lord.

Babur's begs of Ferghana had used the general commotion, first to regain some towns and forts which had been lost after Omar Sheikh's death; then they set out, with the now thirteen-year-old Babur, towards Samarkand. However, the armies of the various pretenders had finally exhausted the resources of the country, 'great scarcity of provisions prevailed everywhere and as the winter season was fast approaching' the campaign was postponed to the next year.

When in 1497 Babur's army advanced again in the direction of Samarkand, it proved to be somewhat better disciplined and behaved than the others, and various towns and forts surrendered and were spared. A number of nomad bands joined him, and when these Mongols plundered a few peaceful villages, the leading beg 'ordered two or three of them to be cut to pieces as an example'. The result was that when Babur encamped before Samarkand 'so many townspeople and traders arrived that the camp was like a city and one could buy there whatever was procurable in the town'. One day the soldiers could not resist the temptation and raided the stalls, but on the order 'that everything should be restored without reserve before
the end of the first watch next day, there was not a thread or a
broken needle that was not restored to its owner’, writes Babur.

Nevertheless, the siege lasted seven months, deep into the winter,
before Baisanghar, ‘with two or three hundred hungry and naked
wretches’, fled from the city and Babur was welcomed by the begs
and chief townsmen of Samarkand. The capital of his great ancestor
Timur made an overwhelming impression on the fourteen-year-old
boy and it exercised a fascination on him which was to last through­
out his whole life, making him ready more than once to sacrifice all
he had won for a chance to regain possession of this city. Its palaces,
its mosques, its gardens, its baths, its halls, its colleges, everything
was incomparably magnificent. ‘In the whole inhabitable world
there are few cities so pleasantly situated as Samarkand . . . I
directed its wall to be paced round the ramparts, and found that it
was five miles in circumference.’

In his description of Samarkand he does not forget the observa­
tory, by means of which ‘Ulugh Beg composed the Astronomical
Tables which are followed at the present time, scarcely any other
being used. Before they were published, the 11-Khani Astronomical
Tables were in general use, constructed in the time of Hulagu, in
his observatory . . .

‘Samarkand is a wonderfully fine city. One of its distinguishing
peculiarities is that each trade has its own bazaar; so that different
trades are not mixed together in the same place. The established
customs and regulations are good. The bakers’ shops are excellent,
and the cooks are skilful. The best paper in the world comes from
Samarkand . . . Another product of Samarkand is crimson velvet,
which is exported to all quarters . . .’

But the town had been taken after severe resistance. It had been
pillaged according to custom, and as it soon proved so completely,
that instead of being taxed the inhabitants had to be given ‘seed­
corn and supplies to enable them to carry on till the harvest’. The
soldiers had acquired considerable booty when the city fell, but now
they could only expect hardship. There were no riches left to
plunder, Babur had nothing to give them, and so they began to
desert him. First the Mongol tribes went away, then the troops from
Ferghana, with even the most important begs, returned home, and
then the news arrived that these begs, considering Babur now to be
the lord of Samarkand, had proclaimed his younger brother Jahangir
as King of Ferghana. It was quite customary that each son of a ruler
should receive a separate appanage, but as Babur’s whole strength derived from Ferghana his governors refused to surrender the capital Andijan, and the rebels laid siege to the city.

Urgent letters from Babur’s mother called on him to hasten with his remaining troops to the relief of his old capital, but just at this moment the boy fell so seriously ill that he could neither speak nor take nourishment, and even the men who had loyally remained with him despaired of his life. However, he recovered and a hundred days after his entry into Samarkand he left the city with his little army to hurry to Ferghana. But when after a week he reached Khojent, less than half way to his capital Andijan, news came that, in the belief that he was dying, the garrison of Andijan had made terms with the enemy and surrendered the fortress, while immediately on his departure from Samarkand his cousin Ali Mirza had occupied the city. Babur had lost both his kingdoms, his own Ferghana and his beloved Samarkand. Now the begs, captains and soldiers who had wives and families in Andijan, about seven to eight hundred men, left him altogether. Not more than two to three hundred followers of all ranks stuck to him, ‘voluntarily choosing a life of exile and hardship’. To make matters worse, Khojent was such a small place that it could not maintain even two hundred men, and Babur confesses that he became ‘a prey to melancholy and vexation, and wept a great deal’.

Then his grandmother and mother arrived from Andijan. As the widow and the daughter of Yunus Khan, they had many connections. One of his mother’s brothers, Mahmud Khan of Tashkent, gave Babur a detachment of Mongols; a number of Babur’s officers and begs were sent out into the hills to gain the help of the mountain tribes; and slowly, as the news spread that Babur was gathering forces to fight for his heritage, the country, discontented with the arbitrary rule of the new masters, became restive. One after the other, forts and towns drove out the imposed governors and opened the gates to Babur’s envoys. Various engagements ended in his favour, and finally Andijan declared itself for him: ‘Thus by the grace of the Most High I recovered my paternal kingdom, of which I had been deprived for nearly two years’.

But fortunes changed quickly. A great part of his forces consisted of mercenary Mongol tribes who had first joined his adversaries and lately, seeing his success, changed over to his side, each time using the opportunity to plunder the losers. Now Babur’s retainers came
to him complaining that the Mongols 'are riding the horses which were ours, wearing our garments, and killing and eating our own sheep before our eyes. What patience can possibly endure all this? Babur found that their complaints were just and allowed them to 'resume possession of whatever part of their property they recognized'.

The Mongols were not the men to give back any of their spoils. There were about three to four thousand of them, and they immediately rose and departed to his enemies. Babur learned: 'In war and statecraft a thing may seem reasonable at first sight, but it should be weighed and considered in a hundred lights before it is finally decided. This ill-judged order of mine was in fact the ultimate cause of my second expulsion from Andijan.'

The begs of his brother Jahangir, reinforced by the Mongols, resumed the offensive, a series of skirmishes and battles followed without either side achieving a decisive victory, and finally, in the spring of 1500, an agreement was patched up by the begs that Ferghana should be divided and that both parties were jointly to proceed against Samarkand. Once the city was conquered and Babur became King of Samarkand, he would give the whole of Ferghana to his brother Jahangir.

Samarkand, which Babur’s cousin Ali Mirza had occupied immediately after Babur’s departure, was still in his hands, although he was only a figurehead for the leading nobles there, the Terkhans, in the same way as Babur and Jahangir were in the hands of their own war-lords. But the Terkhans had just fallen out with the prince and appear to have called in Babur, promising to deliver the city to him, for he suddenly set out with only a few hundred men he happened to have with him. He was still on his way when he received the information that he had been forestalled: Sheibani, Khan of the Uzbegs, had taken Samarkand.

Sheibani Khan was a much more formidable adversary than any of the Timurid Mirzas who were contending for power. The Uzbegs were Turko-Mongolian tribes from the steppes to the north of the Sir Darya. Long ago they had been crushed and dispersed by the Jagatai Mongols under Yunus Khan. Sheibani, the little grandson of the Uzbeg Khan, who was slain, had taken refuge in Samarkand and risen in the service of Sultan Ahmed, who was then the ruler of Samarkand. Fifteen years later Sultan Ahmed made war against Mahmud Khan of Tashkent, and Sheibani suddenly changed sides
SAMARKAND GAINED AND LOST

and saved Mahmud Khan from defeat. As reward he received from Mahmud Khan the city of Turkestan, situated at the edge of his ancestral steppes. There he began to rally about him the tribal warriors, and as his inroads into the crumbling remains of the Timurids’ empire to the south of the river were successful, more and more of the adventurous riders of the steppes joined him and his forces grew. Again ten years later, when Babur’s army besieged Samarkand, Baisanghar Mirza had called for help from the Uzbeg Khan. Sheibani came, observed both defenders and attackers, and withdrew without taking part in the contest. When now the quarrels between the new ruler, Ali Mirza, and the Terkhans started, he captured Bokhara, the second most important town in the kingdom of Samarkand, and it was here that he received the call for help from Ali Mirza’s mother, herself an Uzbeg. Some sources maintain that she even promised him the throne of Samarkand as her dowry if he would marry her and settle an appanage upon Ali. In any case, he moved in, put Ali to death and seized the town. Then, leaving a small garrison, he put up his own camp in the plains beyond the city and distributed the main bulk of his army in the neighbourhood.

Babur, once again in a desperate position, since immediately after his departure Jahangir’s begs had occupied Andijan and his other provinces, decided to make, with his few hundred men, a foolhardy dash for Samarkand. In a November night they rode to the walls, scaled them, and overwhelmed the sleeping garrison. When the townsfolk woke up and saw him and his soldiers, they fell upon the remaining Uzbegs and clubbed and stoned them. As soon as Sheibani got the news of what had happened, he galloped with the men at hand to the city, but he was too late. The gates were guarded, the walls manned. As soon as Babur’s success in Samarkand became known, many districts declared themselves for him, in forts and towns the people rose and expelled the Uzbeg garrisons, and the peasants in the villages started to resist their marauding soldiers. In the end, Sheibani collected his troops and drew away to Bokhara.

The seventeen year-old Babur was for the second time lord of Samarkand. He writes in his memoirs: ‘For nearly a hundred and forty years, Samarkand had been the capital of my family. A foreign robber, who knew not whence he came, had seized the kingdom, which dropped from our hands. Almighty God now restored it to me, and gave me back my plundered and pillaged country’. He now
sat enthroned in Timur's Garden Palace, was feted and congratulated by men of rank and consequence in the offices of the city, and listened with enjoyment to the laudatory verses of the local poets. He sent for his mother, grandmother and wife, who was a daughter of Sultan Ahmed, the previous King of Samarkand, and to whom he had been betrothed as a child; and later on while still in Samarkand she gave birth to a girl who, however, 'in a month or forty days went to share the mercy of God'.

In general, the first joy soon gave way to serious apprehensions. The territory which had been so rich and fertile had recently suffered too much from the continuous changes of government and from the ravages of both hostile and friendly armies. Its wealth was destroyed, its resources reduced, and the forces that it could put into the field were inadequate for its defence, for in Bokhara Sheibani was recruiting swarms of riders from the steppes. Babur repeatedly despatched ambassadors and messengers, 'one after the other, to all the Khans and Sultans, Amirs and Chiefs to request their aid and assistance. These messengers I kept going back and forward without intermission'. But none of the war-lords of Transoxiana thought it necessary to get involved on Babur's behalf. At best, some sent small detachments, and he had to depend on returning refugees, deserters, adventurers, levies which he raised in the towns and villages of the territory. Nevertheless, during the winter his force grew, and when in May Sheibani advanced, Babur was also able to take the field and marched along the river which flows from Samarkand to Bokhara until he came to Sar-i-pul (The Bridgehead) where he met Sheibani's army. Here Babur encamped and fortified his camp with a palisade and trenches. For a few days there was some undecisive skirmishing, one night Sheibani tried to take the fortified camp by surprise, but found Babur's troops on the alert and withdrew to his own camp. At last Babur decided to give battle and was met, for the first time in his life, with the age-old tactics of the riders of the steppes. His right wing was covered by the river; thus, while both centres met in head-on attack, Sheibani's best troops hurled themselves at the extreme end of his left wing and, turning his flank, attacked at a breakneck gallop from the rear, letting their deadly arrows fly. Babur's troops were surrounded and routed, and he himself with his nearest followers plunged, heavily armed as they were, into the river and succeeded in swimming across with their horses. Then they rode for their lives to Samarkand.

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The mighty walls of Samarkand provided sufficient protection even when manned only by the remnants of his troops, but as no supplies came into the beleaguered town, soon famine and distress prevailed. People ate donkey-meat and dogs, horses were fed on tree leaves and sawdust soaked in water. Help was not to be expected from any quarter, and soldiers and even men high in Babur's confidence 'began to let themselves down over the walls and make their escape'. After nearly five months of siege Sheibani agreed to a capitulation on terms: Babur, with his mother and two other ladies, and with the few men who still wanted to remain with him, should leave the city by night, while his sister was to remain behind and become Sheibani's wife. Babur, who in his memoirs has no good word to say of Sheibani, is ashamed of this agreement to the marriage and writes: 'My eldest sister Khanzada Begam was intercepted and fell into the hands of Sheibani Khan, as we left the city on this occasion'.

For the populace of Samarkand the change did not signify much; they would humble themselves before another lord, perhaps have to work a bit harder, but they would get enough to eat. For the eighteen-year-old Babur this capitulation meant the loss of the throne of Samarkand for the second time, a complete downfall from his grandeur, but his resilience had grown in the intervening years. On the flight, probably in fear that Sheibani might change his mind and pursue the fugitives, he undertook, just for amusement, a race with two of his followers, and when after two days and nights of riding they reached a village where they found 'nice fat flesh, bread of fine flour well baked, sweet melons, and excellent grapes in great abundance', he composed these lines:

From famine and distress we have escaped to repose;
We have gained fresh life and a fresh world.
The fear of death was removed from the heart;
The torments of hunger were taken away.

And he continues: 'In all my life I never enjoyed myself so much nor felt at any time so keenly the pleasures of peace and plenty. Enjoyment after suffering, abundance after want, come with increased relish and afford more exquisite delight.'

He is proud of his ability to write verses and to express himself in a refined manner, whether in Turki or in Persian. He knows the sayings of the wise men, and the verses of the great poets. The
pleasures of a cultured life are for him just as important as the art of
war, and when he describes his contemporaries he always appraises
them as fighters, as bowmen, and as writers of verses. The appro­
priate etiquette must be maintained under all conditions, for it is
a sign of cultured behaviour and the loss of face is worse than death.

And so Babur added to his fame as a soldier and conqueror that of
the writer of a book of memoirs which gives a unique picture not
only of his own personality, of his adventures and achievements but
equally of the habits and customs of his time and country. A keen
observer and lover of nature, who knew every animal and every bird
and flower, an indefatigable rider and hunter, of avid curiosity, he is
always in search of new experience and knowledge and knows how
to communicate his impressions and feelings to the reader. We do
not know when he started to write his famous memoirs, and although
they are undoubtedly written from memory, they have several gaps,
some for long periods, and the later parts are more sketchy, as if
they had not been worked out as the earlier ones had been. Never­
theless the work is an invaluable document showing the vicissitudes,
the character and the everyday moods of an outstanding personality,
and bringing to life a particular society at the beginning of the
sixteenth century with its mixture of culture, decadence and
savagery.
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