MANUSCRIPT PRODUCTION IN HERAT DURING THE REIGN OF ABU’L-QASIM BABUR: HISTORIOGRAPHICAL INTERPRETATIONS AND MANUSCRIPT EVIDENCE

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Abstract. *This article examines manuscript production in Herat during the reign of the Timurid ruler Abu’l-Qasim Babur (1450–1457) through surviving manuscripts and modern scholarship. Particular attention is given to Nizami’s* Khamsa*, Kamal Khujandi’s* Divan*, manuscripts preserved in the Austrian National Library, and Topkapı Palace manuscript H.762. The interpretations of Dorothea Duda, B. W. Robinson, Ivan Stchoukine, and Ilse Sturkenboom are comparatively analyzed. The study argues that Abu’l-Qasim Babur’s reign should be viewed not merely as a period of decline, but as a transitional phase characterized by continuity and transformation of earlier Timurid manuscript traditions.*

Keywords: *Abu’l-Qasim Babur, Timurids, Herat, manuscript production, court library, codicology, provenance, Nizami’s Khamsa.*

Introduction. The mid-fifteenth century represents one of the most complicated periods in the history of Timurid manuscript culture. The artistic achievements associated with Shahrukh and Baysunghur Mirza, as well as the later cultural flourishing under Sultan Husayn Bayqara, have been extensively studied. In contrast, the period between these two phases has often been interpreted as a time of political instability and cultural decline. One reason is the relatively small number of securely attributable illustrated manuscripts surviving from the middle decades of the fifteenth century. The death of Shahrukh in 1447 caused renewed dynastic struggles in Khurasan and weakened the stable system of court patronage that had developed in Herat. Nevertheless, between approximately 1449 and 1457 Abu’l-Qasim Babur succeeded in establishing a relatively stable political environment. Surviving manuscripts indicate that book production, collecting, and artistic activity continued during his reign.

A major methodological problem concerns the relationship between manuscripts bearing Abu’l-Qasim Babur’s name and his direct patronage. An ownership inscription

or a reference to his book treasury does not necessarily mean that a manuscript was originally commissioned by him. Some codices entered his library after having been produced for earlier patrons. Therefore, commission, production, ownership, and later provenance must be treated as separate historical categories. The purpose of this article is to analyze manuscripts associated with Abu’l-Qasim Babur and to reconsider the historiographical interpretation of his reign as a period of decline between the artistic achievements of Baysunghur Mirza and the later flourishing of Herat under Sultan Husayn Bayqara.

Materials and methods. The study examines manuscripts associated with Abu’l-Qasim Babur, including Nizami’s *Khamsa* H.781 and H.762, Kamal Khujandi’s *Divan* E.H.1637, and manuscripts N.F.140, N.F.141, and N.F.442 in the Austrian National Library. The analysis draws on the studies of Duda, Robinson, Stchoukine, Grube, Sims, Lentz, Balafrej, Tanındı, and Sturkenboom. Historical-comparative, historiographical, codicological, and provenance methods are applied to examine manuscripts’ material features, attribution, ownership, and circulation, and to distinguish their original production from later stages of their history.

Results. The surviving evidence demonstrates that manuscript culture continued under Abu’l-Qasim Babur. His court library included both manuscripts inherited or acquired from earlier contexts and books directly associated with his own period of rule. An important example is Nizami’s *Khamsa*, completed in Herat in 849/1445–1446. The manuscript was originally prepared for Ismat al-Dunya, the wife of Muhammad Juki ibn Shahrukh. Following Muhammad Juki’s death, she married Abu’l-Qasim Babur, and the manuscript subsequently entered his collection. Abu’l-Qasim Babur’s name appears on its binding.

This example demonstrates that ownership should not automatically be equated with patronage. Although the manuscript later belonged to Abu’l-Qasim Babur, it was not originally commissioned by him. Consequently, the presence of a ruler’s name on a binding may document provenance rather than the circumstances of production. A more direct connection with his court is provided by Kamal Khujandi’s *Divan*, copied in Herat in 856/1452. An inscription on the binding identifies it as belonging to Abu’l-Qasim Babur’s book treasury. A comparable inscription is found on manuscript N.F.140 in the Austrian National Library.

These examples indicate that his *kitabkhana* was not merely a repository of books inherited from earlier Timurid rulers. Manuscripts continued to be produced, collected, and associated with the court during his reign. The Vienna manuscripts are particularly important for understanding the material organization of manuscript production.

Dorothea Duda studied an anthology copied by Muhammad Jami at Balkh in 859/1455 and a manuscript of Hafiz’s *Divan*. She identified similarities in paper, ink, calligraphy, and decorative treatment, suggesting a close connection between their production.

The fact that one of these manuscripts was copied at Balkh is significant. It shows that manuscript production connected with Abu’l-Qasim Babur’s patronage was not necessarily restricted to Herat itself. The court could rely on a wider network of scribes and workshops operating across Timurid territories. The most important example of this mobility is Nizami’s *Khamsa* H.762. This manuscript was initiated under Abu’l-Qasim Babur and later passed through Qara Qoyunlu, Aq Qoyunlu, and Safavid cultural environments. The manuscript was associated with the calligrapher Azhar, who belonged to the calligraphic tradition of Ja‘far Tabrizi. Abu’l-Qasim Babur’s death in 1457 left the project unfinished. Political changes subsequently removed the codex from its original Timurid setting, and work on it continued under later patrons and artists.

H.762 therefore provides evidence not only for manuscript patronage under Abu’l-Qasim Babur but also for the mobility of books and artistic practices. Its history demonstrates that manuscript production could survive the death of a patron and continue across dynastic and geographical boundaries.

Discussion. The central historiographical question is whether Abu’l-Qasim Babur’s reign should be understood as a period of decline or as a phase of continuity within Timurid manuscript culture. Earlier scholarship often emphasized the contrast between the highly organized artistic environment associated with Baysunghur Mirza and the later flourishing of Herat under Sultan Husayn Bayqara. Because relatively few illustrated manuscripts survive from the intervening period, the mid-fifteenth century was sometimes treated as an artistic gap. However, the number of surviving manuscripts cannot be directly equated with the scale of historical production. Dynastic conflict, the dispersal of libraries, manuscript circulation, rebinding, and later losses inevitably affected the corpus available today.

B. W. Robinson attempted to reconstruct this period by identifying manuscripts produced after Baysunghur and before the rise of the artistic environment associated with Kamal al-Din Behzad. Among the manuscripts he discussed were a *Shahnama* dated 1450, Farid al-Din Attar’s *Mantiq al-Tayr* of 860/1456, and several works dating from the 1460s. These manuscripts were interpreted as evidence that artistic production in and around Herat had not completely ceased. Later research, however, demonstrated that some stylistic attributions required revision. The 1456 *Mantiq al-Tayr* is a significant example. Earlier studies connected it with Herat, whereas Ilse Sturkenboom

reassessed its stylistic, paleographical, and codicological features and proposed a stronger connection with Shiraz. She interpreted the manuscript as a work reflecting the transition between Timurid and Turkmen artistic traditions.

Duda’s analysis of the Vienna manuscripts illustrates the advantages of this approach. Her comparison of paper, ink, script, and ornament provides evidence for production relationships that cannot be established by stylistic analysis alone.

The manuscripts connected with Abu’l-Qasim Babur also illustrate different patterns of mobility. The 1445–1446 *Khamsa* entered his library after being produced for an earlier patron, while H.762 began under his patronage and subsequently moved into other political and artistic environments.

For this reason, the concepts of “Abu’l-Qasim Babur’s library” and “manuscripts commissioned by Abu’l-Qasim Babur” must be clearly distinguished. A court collection could contain inherited manuscripts, gifts, books acquired through dynastic relations, and works directly commissioned by the ruler. The evidence also suggests that the concept of the “Herat school” should not be understood only in strictly geographical terms. Manuscripts associated with a Herat-based patron could be produced elsewhere, while manuscripts created in Herat could later become part of other artistic traditions. It is therefore more useful to understand Herat manuscript culture as a network involving patrons, calligraphers, artists, workshops, and circulating books.

Conclusion. The analysis shows that manuscript production in Herat continued under Abu’l-Qasim Babur despite political instability. Manuscripts associated with his name reflect both direct patronage and later ownership, making it necessary to distinguish commission from provenance. Codicological evidence, including paper, script, bindings, colophons, and ownership marks, provides a more reliable basis for attribution than stylistic analysis alone. The history of H.762 further demonstrates the mobility of manuscripts across Timurid, Qara Qoyunlu, and Aq Qoyunlu contexts. Overall, Abu’l-Qasim Babur’s reign should be viewed as a period of **continuity and transformation** rather than decline.

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