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The Vilâyet-nâme of Demir Baba as a Source on the History of Unorthodox Islam in North-Eastern Bulgaria

As Islam marched westward through the Balkans after the 14th Century, unorthodox Islam — enjoying strong positions in Anatolia — found fertile ground in the newly conquered Bulgarian lands. It arrived there through the proselytising of *dervişes* and *şeyhs* from mystical Sufi sects, considered by the orthodox *ulema* as incompatible with Islam.¹ Such teachings included that of *Kalenders* and *Abdals* (essentially indistinguishable), *Haydars* and *Hurufs*. One may also include here the *Yesevi*, *Babayı* and *Bektaşî*, who shared some beliefs and worship practices with the aforementioned sects. Subsequently all these mystical tendencies were to interfuse and become part of the *Bektaşî* amalgam. The process involved the migration of Turkic individuals, families and clans of unorthodox Muslim persuasions. Some yearned for booty from the frontlines of Islamic-Christian wars, others hoped for better land, yet others were forcibly interned no longer to pose a nonconformist threat in the Asiatic heartland of the Ottoman Empire, or as prisoners of war. A number of official Ottoman sources testify to the fact that the Bulgarian lands in second half of the 16th Century already had a sig-

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1 [Staynova, M.]: "Islam and Islamic Religious Propaganda in Bulgaria", [The Ottoman Empire: Governance, Social and Ethnic/Religious Problems], 1986;

2 [Dimitrov, S.; Jegev, N.; Tonev, V.]: . 3 [A History of the Dobrudja, Volume 3], . 34-36, 1988; Barkan, Ö. L.: XV ve XVI-nci asırlarda Osmanlı İmparatorluğunda zirai ekonominin hukuki ve mali esasları. I. Kanunlar. İstanbul 1943: 272-277

. [Stoykov, R.], " ["Settlement and demographic patterns in North-Eastern Bulgaria and the Dobrudja in the Second Half of the 16th Century"], " [Notices of the Varna Archaeological Society] 1964, . 15, 1964; . [Dimitrov, S.]: [New Data on Demographic Relations in the Southern Dobrudja in the First Half of the 16th Century], [Istoriä] 1997: '8, '9, , E; . [Radusev, E, Kovaqev, R.]: [An Inventory of Registers in the Istanbul Ottoman Archive at the General Administration of the National Archives of the Turkish Republic] .19, . 21, - 1996.

nificant unorthodox Muslim presence, resulting from forced settlement under Selim I and Süleyman I.³ Some of these people's modern ancestors claim even earlier arrival. However, the Author has no access to sufficiently early Ottoman documents to prove or disprove these claims. The aforesaid shows that the genesis and spread of the *Demir Baba Sultan* cult enjoyed fertile soil in the 16th and 17th Centuries.

The unorthodox Muslims who settled in the Bulgarian lands created their own particular culture, intrinsically linked with Islam. Aspects of it are the architecture and scriptural heritage which furnish valuable information on Islamic trends in the Balkans. Their creators saw these buildings and manuscripts as hallowed: sacred works intended to preserve their religious, philosophical, and moral/ethical beliefs for posterity. Such a manuscript is the *vilâyet-nâme* of *Demir Baba*. It is the work of unorthodox Muslims from North-Eastern Bulgaria, and is proof that a written tradition existed among them. This tradition did not boast a great diversity of *genre* and style, its products being correctly viewed as 'folklore.' However, it does represent a source in the study of unorthodox Muslim worship in Bulgaria.

Demir Baba is part of the local folklore of the Kızılbaş Alevi villages of Sevar, Ostrovo, Mwdrevo, Biserici, Svexari, and Lwvino near Razgrad, and Preslavci, Qernik, Bradvari, and Vodno near Silistra. The manuscript, *Haza kitab Vilâyet-nâme-i Timur Baba Sultanin beyan* (A Book Which Reveals the Wonders of Timur Baba Sultan) compiles some of the legends current among the Kızılbaş. The Author has traced three transcripts of this manuscript: one photographic and two xerographic copies, both the latter of the same original. So far it has proved impossible to determine whether the photographic copy was made from an original or a transcript. Externally, the manuscript concerned is similar to other *vilâyet-nâmes*, such as that of *Hacı Bektaş Veli*.³ The possibility of the latter manuscript serving as stylistic and visual prototype of the former cannot be ruled out.

The photographic copy comprises 186 pages, each (apart from the front and last pages) with fifteen lines. The text is in Ottoman Turkish with vowel marks. There is no precise dating information, but page 5 carries the date *Muharrem, 1129* After *Hegira* (16 December 1716 to 15 January 1717). The date follows due eulogies to Allah from the author or transcriber, and a listing of *Timur Baba's* lineage. All would seem to indicate that this date does indeed note the time when the manuscript was created. It is possible that the year may not be 1129 AH: this part of the date is unclear, possibly due to poor photographic technique. The year may equally well be 1029 AH. The latter year (1029 AH) features in the xerographic copy of the same manuscript, with the rest of the text being identical in content with the photographic copy. Thus the manuscript may have been created in December 1619. Since the Author has no other manuscripts, she can speculate no further on dating.

A legend among the Kızılbaş has *Demir Baba* being born in 1530 and dying in

3 Gölpinarlı, A. (Haz.): *Manakıb-i Hacı Bektaş-i Veli @Vilâyet-nameĐ*. İstanbul 1990: XXIX.

1650. His Arab father, Turanoğlu *Hacı Ali Dede*, had come from the Hejaz' after completing his *hacılık*.^{*} *Demir Baba's* 120 year lifespan is typical of those ascribed by legend to other Muslim mystic-saints, including ones in the *Bektaşî* pantheon.

The manuscript describes events during the reign of Süleyman I the Magnificent (1520-1566). The subject saint is variously named *Timur Baba*, *Demir Baba*, *Kara Demir*, *Demir Pehlivan*, *Timur Ata*, and *Demir Ata*. The titles of *Baba* and *Ata* are commonly given to travelling Turkic preachers. The leaders of Kızılbaş religious communes are also called *Baba* or *Dede*. Apart from being a religious leader, the *Baba* or *Dede* is also an elder in secular life. The Kızılbaş have retained many practices from patriarchal and clan times, and these appellations — as well as the worship of *Demir Baba* and other Muslim Turkic saints — show traces of the resilient Turkic ancestor cult.³ By the time of the aforementioned events, the cult to saints had finally merged with the Sufi movement in Sufism. God's Chosen Ones (*evliya*) were adopted by mystical Sufi orders.⁴ The text of *Demir Baba's* life does not indicate which order he belonged to. An addendum to the photographically copied manuscript indicates that he had belonged to the *Babayı* *tariqa*.⁵ This may be confirmed by the *Babayı* affiliation of local people in villages where worship to *Demir Baba* is most firmly entrenched. The text makes clear that *Demir Baba* was a follower of the Sufi tradition of *Otman Baba*, whose name was Hüsam Şah *Gani*.⁶ Indeed, *Otman Baba* and *Demir Baba* are the 'premier saints' of the Bulgarian Kızılbaş.

On the other hand, the 17th Century saw the merging of the *Bektaşî* and *Babayı* pantheons in the Bulgarian lands. Until then, despite their shared religious doctrine, the two *tariqas* had shown various degrees of deference to some saints. The quashing of differences made *Demir Baba* as much a *Babayı* as a *Bektaşî* saint, as the manuscript proves. The anonymous authors of legends included in the life link *Demir Baba* with other patron saints of *tekkes*, *Akyazılı Baba*, *Kıdemli Baba*, *Tay Hızır*, *Kızana Sultan*, *Otman Baba*, *Kızıl Deli Sultan*, and *Dursun Baba*, *inter alia*.⁷ These *tekkes* were linked with *Bektaşîsm* in terms of worship and organisation. However, it is also clear that the division between *Babayı* and *Bektaşî*, perceptible even today, was alive then: the Sufi hats (*tac*) of *Otman Baba* and *Demir Baba* were made of seven pieces of cloth; a *Bektaşî* leader and saint would wear a *tac* made from a dozen pieces of cloth. Some researchers claim that *Demir Baba's*

* Today's Saudi Arabia. *Translator*

^{*} Pilgrimage to the Muslim Holy Cities (Turkish). *Translator*

³ [Basilov, V. N.]: [*The Cult to Saints in Islam*], 69, 1970.

⁴ [Trimmingham, J. S.]: [*Islamic Sufi Orders*], . 33, 1989.

⁵ Haza kitab vilâyetname Timur Baba Sultanın, manuscript in the Author's archives.

⁶ Gölpinarlı, A.: *in memoriam*, Hatıra sayisi. Otman Baba vilâyet-namesi, The Journal of Turkish Studies, Vol. 9b: LIX.

⁷ Evliya Çelebi: *Seyahatname*. 1314-1318, III, V, İstanbul; [Dimitrov, S., Translator, Compiler and Editor]: [*Evliya Çelebi: a Travelogue*], . 289-296, 1972; . [Gadjanov, D. G.]: ["A Journey by Evliya Celebi through the Bulgarian Lands in the Middle of the 17th Century"], [*The Periodical Journal of the Bulgarian Learned Society in Sofia*], . 9-10, . 639-724.

tac was also 12-sided. In fact, his seven-sided hat was exchanged for a 12-sided one later, the new hat being brought by *Bektaşî dervîşes* from Rusçuk.⁸

According to the manuscript, *Demir Baba* is a descendant of Ali bin *Abu Talib* and his son Hussayin. His direct lineage stems from the fourth *Shi'a Imam* Ali Al Asghar, known as *Zeyn Al Abidin* (the Pure and Honourable One who Beautifies the Lord's Servants). The preamble to the lineage reads, "He is the son of those who coalesced, and also the son of the infidels of fire!" The text does not make it clear whether this applies specifically to *Timur Baba*. However, in Muslim parlance "infidels of fire" meant Zoroastrians. This could be an allusion to the legend — whose veracity researchers doubt — that the mother of the fourth *Imam*, *Zeyn Al Abidin*, was a Persian princess and daughter of the last Sasanid king Yazdigerd III.⁹

The manuscript states that *Akyazılı Baba* divined the impending birth of a brave man who would grow to assume the global importance of a Pole (a *Qutb*), and be a source of hope of the mystical road to God. The text places *Demir Baba's* birth at 1521-2AD, after Süleyman I's accession. Sultan Süleyman I is presented as close to *Akyazılı Baba*, who was then Pole of Poles (*Qutb Al Aqtab*): one who had attained supreme spiritual development. In the Sufi concept the *Qutb* is the pole which supports the world. The *Qutb Al Aqtab* heads the invisible hierarchy of saints. The true substance of Islam (*Al Hakiqat Al Muhamadiyya*) was incarnated into the one known as the Pole of His Time (*Qutb Az Zamanihi*). This true substance was the light or Muhammad's shining (*An Noor Al Muhammidi*) and personified the image of the divine in its entirety, and the divine awareness of light, of which all else was created.¹⁰ The text makes it clear that the *Qutb Az Zamanihi* *Akyazılı Baba* and his adherents were Roumelian *Abdals* (*Abdalan-ı Rum*). They played a significant role in 13th-16th Century Anatolian religious life." Their beliefs and rites tended to *Shi'a* and extreme pantheistic Sufi practice, while simultaneously admixing with many non-Islamic beliefs. *Akyazılı Baba* belonged to the celibate *Abdal dervîş* branch. He was a saint of a rank which could communicate with God. As such, he knew he needed a successor who would inherit his spiritual might and rank. At his insistence, that saint — who would free people of their distress — was to be fathered by his closest *Abdal dervîş*, *Hacı Dede*.

Many of the traditions, rites, and prayers written in the text are performed today at Kızılbaş religious gatherings in North-Eastern Bulgaria. This may mean that the author of the *Timur Baba vilâyet-nâme* was a local man from this confessional community. A religious song (*nefes*) in the manuscript is still sung by older

⁸ Today's city of Ruse in Bulgaria. *Translator*.

⁹ According to field study data from Kızılbaş community elders, Governors of the *Demir Baba Tekke*, and older Kızılbaş people

¹⁰ [Petrushevskiy, I. P.]: [*Islam in Iran in the 7th to the 15th Centuries*], ..., 1966, 244.

¹¹ [Trimmingham, J. S]: *op. cit.*, . 135.

¹² Barkan, Ö. L.: "Osmanlı imparatorluğunda Bir iskan ve kolonizasyon metodu olarak Vakıflar ve temlikler. İstila devirlerinin kolonizatör Türk dervişleri ve zaviyeler" *Vakıflar Dergisi* 2 (1942): 279-383; Köprülü, M. F.: *Türk Edebiyatında İlk Mutasavvıflar*. Ankara 1984: 53, 351.

Kızılbaz.¹² Its author was 'Hatai.' This was the literary pseudonym of the Safavid Kızılbaz ruler *Shah* Ismail. However, he Author cannot be certain whether authorship is indeed his, or that of Hata'i, a 17th Century *Bektaşî* poet. The song itself is such that those who sing it would have to have fairly extreme *Shi'a* views. It describes the importance of the *Kırklar*¹³ festival in religious life, and prescribes how it should be celebrated. The number forty features often. This number is sacred in *Alevi/Bektaşî* doctrine. It symbolises the forty adherents of Ali who are worshipped in the *Shi'a* confession and *Bektaşîsm*. Their names are kept secret, but it is known that Selman-ı Farisi is among them.¹³

Legends dealing directly with Timur *Baba* start on page 29. After Timur's lengthy religious tuition, Akyazılı *Baba* blessed him as spiritually knowledgeable, and introduced the basis of doctrine to him. This marked the passage of Timur through all stages of preparation and enlightenment in the *Babayî* order (and by analogy the *Bektaşî* order). This meant he had attained the calling of righteous (*vilâya*). Henceforth he had to prove this righteousness by performing a multitude of miracles (*keramet*). Timur reached this stage at age 22-23. If one takes his year of birth as 1521-'2, this would mean the event took place around 1543-'5; if one takes 1530 as the year of his birth, then the event took place around 1552-'3.

Before bestowal of higher spiritual power, Timur *Baba* accompanied Akyazılı *Baba* on a tour of famous *tekkes* frequented by the *Babayî* and *Bektaşî* among the Kızılbaz: those of Otman *Baba*, Mustafa *Baba*, Yolukulu *Baba*, Hıfız *Baba*, Kızana *Sultan*, *Dikkeli* Hüseyin *Baba*, Musa *Baba*, and Ali Bey Tay Hızır.¹⁴ *Ziyar* or *ziyaret*, the ritual visit to the tomb of a deceased saint (or the habitation of a living one), aimed at spiritual communion between mystic and saint in which the latter would extend his grace onto the former.¹⁵ Through *ziyar*, the visiting mystic could also obtain the saint's sacred spiritual virtue (*baraka*). The spiritual significance of *ziyar* is similar to that of *hacc*.

Legends describing the miracles of Timur *Baba* bestow a mythological aura to their *derviş* subject. His supernatural powers enabled him to level forests; the power of his voice rent sea and mountain aquiver. Muslims see the ability to perform miracles as a manifestation of the divine grace invested in a saint.

A number of prayers sent to Allah and his beloved Muhammad and Ali show that Timur *Baba* was member of the *Shi'a* confession in Islam. They display the cult to the characteristic Islamic 'trinity' of Allah, Muhammad and Ali. This cult (*Teslis*) is a central *Shi'a* and *Bektaşî* tenet.¹⁶

Vanquishing the Serpent in Tartary and Muscovy, victory over the infidel army

¹² Vilâyetname-i Timur Baba, v. 10.

¹³ 'Forty' (Turkish). *Translator*.

¹³ [*The Bulgarian Alevi: a Collection of Ethnographical Materials*] . 74-75, 145-146; Noyan, B.: *Bektaşîlik Alevilik Nedir?* İstanbul 1995: 65.

¹⁴ Vilâyetname-i Timur Baba, v. 67-8.

¹⁵ [Trimmingham, J. S]: *op. cit.*, . 33, 96, 149

¹⁶ Eyuboğlu, İ. Z.: *Bütün Yönleriyle Bektaşîlik-Alevilik*. İstanbul 1980: 141-4.

in the battle of Budim, the gift of water, and the ability to grant and deny life are just some of Timur *Baba's* miracles, seen by believers as proof of God's disposition towards him. His *kilim* and towel — attributes in worship — became intermediaries in transmitting his power and holiness to lay believers. He passed gifts of gratitude for his feats on to religious institutions in M'kkah and M'dinah, and ones of the road followed by him.¹⁷ In Islam, such acts raise one closer to God.

The Author's grounds for attributing the manuscript to Sufi literature are the mentions of the apparent and covert (*zahir* and *batın*) ways of Allah. It was the covert way that was the *kismet*, fate and enigma of Chosen Ones. It was the way of those who had attained divine truth (*gerçek erenler*). Timur *Baba Sultan* was such a man, and the *Alevi Kızılbaş* in the Bulgarian lands also perceive themselves as such.

The *vilâyet-nâme* of *Demir Baba* genuinely contains rich and valuable information about unorthodox Muslims' religious cults in the Bulgarian lands during the 16th and 17th Centuries. That is indeed why this manuscript and others like it had a significant place in these Muslims' lives. They were sources of knowledge and a device for preserving their cultural and religious traditions. Evidence of this is a note on page 4: "I beseech thou, Oh ones of the gathering of men who have attained Divine Revelation, to safeguard this creation that I too may peruse this *vilâyet-nâme* from beginning to end!" Despite living within the confines of their religious community, the *Alevi* Muslims¹⁸ recognised that their books were a mirror of themselves, and a window to the outside world.

17 *Vilâyetname-i Timur Baba*, v. 67-8.

18 The designation *Alevi* is officially accepted and used in the Bulgarian literature (*Alian*, plural *Aliani* in Bulgarian)