

The Jahangirnama: Memoirs of Jahangir Emperor of India

Wheeler M. Thackston

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The Mughal dynasty that ruled in India from 1526 to 1707 is surely unique in its members' intelligence, curiosity, artistic sensibilities and literary interests. Fortunately, the emperors recorded their achievements and public and private interests (including wine, women and song) in huge chronicles termed *namas*. Babur (1487-1530), founder of the dynasty, set the style in one of the most engaging autobiographies ever compiled. Thanks to Wheeler M. Thackston, professor of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization at Harvard, the Smithsonian and Oxford University Press, a magnificent new *Baburnama* was issued in 1996. The same team has now made the *Jahangirnama* available in matching, generously illustrated format.

Jahangir ruled India from 1605 until his death in 1627. Thanks to his father Akbar's great military and political achievements, Jahangir's realm was immensely prosperous and largely peaceful. As his *nama* abundantly illustrates, Jahangir spent his reign enjoying it as an irresistibly curious traveler, huntsman, naturalist and connoisseur of poetry, gems and architecture. Despite his predilection for wine and opium, he generally ruled with insight and tolerance, particularly in religious matters, always willing to hear opinions expressed. As he noted, "On Friday evenings, I converse with the learned, the dervishes, and with hermits." He legislated against the castration of boys, prohibited much bureaucratic fee- and gift-gouging and outlawed tobacco and beer (*bhang* and *buza*). Jahangir was a genuine expert on painting, and the *nama's* many illustrations confirm the delicacy, detail and distinction that Mughal portraiture achieved. Similarly, his zodiac-imaged gold coinage is superb.

As a comprehensive chronicle of the reign, the *Jahangirnama* contains extensive detail on government, provincial affairs, revenues and rewards and punishments, all of value to the specialist. But throughout, Jahangir's insightful analyses of natural phenomena and people, places and events engage the nonspecialist, as do his comments on home and harem and his many citations from Firdawsi, Sa'di and other poets. The freshness of the text's Persian language and the immediacy of idiomatic usages are striking. Who will not be moved by "mountainous, lightning-paced elephants," "an order for non-existence," "the Divine Effector," or "Be awake, for there is a wonderful sleep ahead."

In serving scholarship, Thackston also benefits a wider public. May the Supreme Physician pronounce him fit to tackle the mighty *Akbarnama*, giving us (as he does with the *Jahangirnama*) a much-needed new edition with a full range of appendixes, genealogies, glossaries, maps and illustrations.

PETER SKINNER (January / February 2000)

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