



BĀBĀ SHAH ESFAHĀNĪ

BĀBĀ SHAH ESFAHĀNĪ, calligrapher and poet who lived in Isfahan and Baghdad where he died in 996/1587-88. He was famous as a writer of the *nasta'liq* script. Said to have had an ascetic temperament, he also wrote poetry under the *takalloṣ* "Ḥālī." Virtually nothing is known about his personal life or professional training. Statements by Taqī-al-Dīn Moḥammad Kāšānī and Moṣṭafā-'Alī (apud Bayānī, *Ḳošnevīsān*, pp. 85-86) that he studied in Mašhad with Sayyed Aḥmad Mašhadī are disproved by Qāzī Aḥmad's silence on this matter. He associates Bābā Shah exclusively with Isfahan and Baghdad. Since Qāzī Aḥmad himself lived in Mašhad and studied with Sayyed Aḥmad Mašhadī he would certainly have mentioned it if Bābā Shah had done likewise.

Bābā Shah does not appear to have been connected with any royal or princely patrons. According to both Qāzī Aḥmad and Eskandar Beg he first went to Iraq to visit its shrines. Eskandar Beg Monšī mentions that Bābā Shah supported himself by his calligraphy during his residence in Iraq. The commercial value of his calligraphy is confirmed by Eskandar Beg's remark that his writing sold at a high price and had become difficult to obtain. An indirect confirmation of the wide dispersal of Bābā Shah's calligraphy is given by M. Bayānī who was only able to identify three specimens by Bābā Shah's hand.

Another facet of Bābā Shah's activity is his composition of a treatise on calligraphy entitled *Ādāb al-mašq*. Some copies of this text ascribe its composition to the later calligrapher Mīr 'Emād but an early copy now preserved in the library of Punjab University in Lahore confirms that Bābā Shah is indeed its author. In his preface Bābā Shah praises the writing of



Soltān-‘Alī Mašhadī. The few published examples of Bābā Shah’s calligraphy suggest that he may have modeled his own style on that of Soltān-‘Alī. Both calligraphers stress balance and harmony in both the formation of letter shapes and overall composition of a page.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bayānī, *Košnevīsān*, pp. 84-91.

Eskandar Beg Monšī, *Tārīk-e ‘ālamārā-ye ‘abbāsī*, p. 121.

Qāzī Aḥmad, *Golestān-e honar*, p. 119; tr. Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, pp. 165-66.