



WĀŞEFI, ZAYN-AL-DIN MAḤMUD

WĀŞEFI, ZAYN-AL-DIN MAḤMUD (وزیرالدین شاهزاده محمود، b. Herat, 890/1485; d. between 1551 and 1566), Persian memoirist, historian, and poet.

Wāṣefi was born into an urban middle-class family, all of whose members were, by his own account, well educated. His father was probably a high state functionary, who seems to have intended his son for a similar career. In any case, Wāṣefi's home environment encouraged learning, and at an early age he taught himself to read and write and began to study Persian and Arabic grammar, history, Islamic jurisprudence (*feqh*), and mathematics. He seems also to have learned by heart the Qor'ān and thousands of verses of classical and contemporary poets. Then at the age of sixteen, he continued his studies in the more formal setting of the *madrasa*. From this time on, he became known for his recitations of poetry, his skill at improvising poetic riddles (*mo'ammā*), and his preaching of sermons. It was his extraordinary ability at solving the poetic riddles, a popular literary form in Herat of that day, that brought him to the attention of Mir 'Ali-Šīr Navā'i (1441-1501), the eminent Chaghatay poet, and his literary circle (Wāṣefi, 1970-71, I, pp. 372-90). Wāṣefi prospered in the intellectual and literary environment of Herat, then the capital of the Timurid dominion and at the height of its prominence as the center of the eastern Iranian cultural world. At the same time, he was earning a living in a variety of occupations, among them as private secretary to the son of Solṭān-Ḥosayn Bāyqarā, the Timurid ruler of Khorasan (r.



875-912/1470-1506), and a tutor for the families of several high officials.

Wāṣefī's tranquil way of life came to an end with the expulsion of the Timurids from Herat in 1507, when Moḥammad Khan Šaybāni (Šibak Khan), leader of the Uzbek tribal confederation in Transoxiana (1500-10), occupied the city. Wāṣefī remained in Herat and seems to have adapted adequately to his new circumstances, despite the loss of his patrons. However, when the [Safavid Shah Esmā'il I](#) (r. 1501-24) seized Herat from the Šibāk Khan in 1510, living there, as stated by Wāṣefī himself (‘Ayni, 1977, pp. 58-85), became very difficult for him. As a devout Sunni, he felt neither comfortable nor safe when the Safavids went about imposing an extreme form of Shiism on the inhabitants of the city. Therefore, in early 1512, he left Herat for Transoxiana, where he would spend the rest of his life (Wāṣefī, 1970-71, I, pp. 5-30). His life became, in a sense, that of an itinerant, as he moved from place to place as circumstances required. He lived among the Uzbek elite, serving several rulers and noble families as secretary, teacher, judge, imam, and court poet. He stayed a year in Samarqand (1512-13), where the educated classes received him warmly and organized literary salons in his honor (‘Ayni, 1977, pp. 166-200).

The years he spent among the literary circles of the court of Bukhara had a lasting influence on his creative work. In 1513 he went to Bukhara, and it was here in 1517-18 that he began to write his memoirs. Then in 1518, he moved to the court of Geldi-Moḥammad, the ruler of the province of Šāhrokiya, where he became one of the court poets and a little later *emāmi solṭān* and *qāzī ‘askar* (preacher to the ruler and judge of the army). When Geldi-Moḥammad became Khan of Tashkent in 1525 and moved his court there, Wāṣefī went to Tashkent. His association with Geldi-Moḥammad and the Uzbek elite left a strong influence on his work (‘Ayni, 1977, pp. 245-63). Geldi-Moḥammad, who was a patron of literature and arts, gave him time to work on his memoirs, and it was at his literary salons that Wāṣefī heard many of the stories and legends that give his work a special charm. He engaged in numerous poetic contests in which his skill in various forms, especially the *qaṣida*, was tested and greatly admired. But after this sojourn in Tashkent, little is known about his later years, and the date of his death is uncertain.

Wāṣefī is the author of *Badāye‘ al-waqāye‘*, an extensive work of diverse contents, which may well be described as memoirs, since it is an assemblage of recollections of the places he lived, the people he met, and the events he witnessed in the early decades of the 16th century. It could also be called an



autobiography, because his life and his ideas and opinions form the central element of the text and give the whole a distinctly personal perspective. What he produced was, in effect, an impressionistic story of his life, which seems to have been fashioned to suit the multiple stylistic and social purposes behind his undertakings. He does not, for example, begin with his birth and childhood but rather with his departure from Herat to Samarqand in 1512, and he has little to say about his family and his education and even about many of the stages of his career.

Wāṣeḥī's memoir may also be classified as history, since he focuses on important political and social events in Khorasan, Transoxiana, and part of Turkestan between 1497 and 1551. Like *Zāhir-al-Din Bābor*, the author of the *Bābor-nāma*, he describes the passage from Timurid to Uzbek to Safavid rule in Khorasan; he does so, not from the standpoint of the ruling elite, but from his own perspective as a member of the middle class, an inhabitant of Herat, and a Muslim intellectual concerned with justice and honest political administration. He is not a professional historian; his knowledge of men and events is extensive, but chronology does not seem crucial to him, and his arrangement of subject matter does not always follow a coherent pattern, perhaps a consequence of the numerous interruptions in writing that he experienced. The objection may also be made that many of the sources he used, particularly the stories circulating among the urban artisans and merchant classes as well as the legends and traditions he heard at the courts he served, were not scholarly in the modern sense of the term.

Although such questions may be raised about the rigorousness of his method, he was clearly careful about what he wrote, and a comparison with other sources suggests the general reliability of his judgments of men and accounts of events. In any case, he was not engaged in writing a scientific history. Rather, he conformed to the taste of the time, which required the historical narrative to be an aesthetically pleasing literary piece. He drew widely from many sources, many of them oral, and conveyed much of his information through stories, some of which he had heard at the courts of the rulers he served, while others, which circulated widely among the common people, came to him through other channels, thereby raising the intriguing question about the extent of his contacts with the general population. It is evident, nonetheless, from *Badāye' al-waqāye'* that he had long-standing associations with the artisan and merchant communities and participated creatively in their poetic gatherings (e.g., Wāṣeḥī, 1970-71, I, pp. 45-61, 73-95, 138-62).



Badāye' al-waqāye' may also be reasonably called partly a literary anthology, on the basis of the numerous stories of various kinds that form much of its content. Besides prose, Wāşefi inserted throughout the text some 1,600 *bayts* of his own poetry, mainly *qaşidas*, *ġazals*, and *qeṭ'as* (fragments). These poems often do not fit the subject matter of the text to which they are attached, but seem to be there to demonstrate the author's creative abilities, of which he was proud (Hodizoda et al., pp. 99-105). Taken together, these poems serve as the *divan* that he never assembled.

Wāşefi was not solely a recorder of what he saw and heard. In numerous stories and poems and historical narratives, he revealed himself to be a keen observer and critic of social mores and the lifestyle and behavior of governing elites. He speaks out against corrupt and ignorant officials and clergy, using satire to great effect (e.g., Wāşefi, 1970-71, I, pp. 48-49, 156-58; II, pp. 141-42, 354-56). In contrast, he held up as worthy of emulation such rulers as Uluġ Beg, governor of Transoxiana (1411-47) and the Timurid ruler (khan) of Samarkand (1447-49), and Geldi-Moġammad, both of whom strove to make justice prevail in their realms. He precisely chose the stories that would promote the cause of justice and his own humanist ideals (see the selected stories, in Wāşefi, 1984 and 2006).

The real value of Wāşefi's work lies in the enormous range of the information that he provides about Khorasan and Transoxiana, the kind that is not available in other writings of the time. For many events it is the sole source of information. His place in society provided him with a point of view that writers from within the ruling establishment, who were concerned especially with court rivalries and military campaigns, could not have. He had a broad social view from the perspective of his own and more modest urban classes to that of the ruling elites, and since his memoir was not commissioned by a ruler or a high dignitary, he could allow his own interests and curiosity to dictate, to a certain degree, his subject matter and even his style. His association with writers and educated people of all kinds and his regular attendance at literary gatherings in Herat, Samarqand, Bukhara, Tashkent, and other places acquainted him thoroughly with the intellectual and cultural atmosphere of his time and enabled him to make an invaluable contribution to an understanding of the history and culture of the whole region where he was active. It is also a unique source for the history of Tajik society and literature, a quality that scholars, led by Şadr-al-Din 'Ayni in 1926 in his *Namuna-ye adabiyāt-e tājik*, began fully to recognize.



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