

Notes About Saz Poets 1. A Kızılbaş Poet: Pir Sultan Abdal

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Originally published in Ottoman script in *Hayat Mecmuası* (1928), 3 (64): 223-224. The Latin script transliteration used for this English translation is by Ömer Örtlek under the title ‘Saz Şairleri Hakkında Notalar. 1. Bir Kızılbaş Sairi: Pir Sultan Abdal’, published in: Ömer Uluçay *Kalemlerde Pir Sultan Abdal* (Adana: Gözde Yayınevi, 1997), 7-12.¹

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In old Bektashi manuscripts, ‘Pir Sultan’ or ‘Pir Sultan Abdal’ is encountered in several *nefesler*². Pir Sultan Abdal’s *nefesleri* are recorded in *Bektaşî Nefesleri*³ published by Derviş Ruhullahⁱ and then in Besim Atalay’s book⁴ *Bektaşîlik ve Edebiyatı*ⁱⁱ. It appears that in order to modify some *mahlas*⁵ copied in manuscripts of this type, the same poem is attributed to a different poet in another manuscript. There is another reason for this, among the Bektashi these works, passing by word of mouth for the most part, are recorded in manuscripts from oral transmission; and because of this, generally a great many differences are introduced among the texts of the poems that appear in various manuscripts. For example, a poem recorded in Derviş Ruhullah’s workⁱⁱⁱ is recorded with the name ‘Hatayi’⁶ in Besim Atalay’s book^{iv7}. In

¹ In the transliterated text used for the translation the author’s original references are included in brackets within the text. These have been included in this translation as endnotes indicated by Roman numerals. All footnotes are additions by the translator.

² *Nefes* (pl. *nefesler*) are the Bektashi-Kızılbaş (Alevi) lyric poems in syllabic form on a range of subjects from the mystical and ritual to social and political. They usually include internal attribution to the assumed author of the lyric.

³ Originally published in 1924 in Ottoman script bearing the Rumi date 1340. A version transliterated into Latin script was published as: Derviş Ruhullah, *Bektaşî Nefesleri*, ed. Fahri Meden (Istanbul: Roza Yayınevi, 2014).

⁴ Originally published in 1924 in Ottoman script bearing the Rumi date 1340. A version transliterated and translated from the Ottoman was later published as: Besim Atalay, *Bektaşîlik ve Edebiyatı*, trans. Vedat Atila (Istanbul: Ant Yayınları, 1991).

⁵ The *mahlas* refers to inclusion of the poet’s name usually in the final verse of the poem. The *mahlas* is a poetic persona and of course may be subsequently applied to a lyric by others than the eponymous poet in order to assert attribution.

⁶ The text of the transliteration reads ‘Hitaya’, however I have used the more common Turkish transcription for Shah Ismail’s *mahlas*, ‘Hatayi’, throughout the translation.

⁷ The poem referred to is that beginning *Hu diyelim gerçeklerim demine*. In modern editions the poem can be found in Ruhullah, *Bektaşî Nefesleri*, 43, and Atalay, *Bektaşîlik ve Edebiyatı*, 99-100. An English translation by and comment on the poem in the context of the attribution to Pir Sultan Abdal by Paul Koerbin can be found online at “Pir Sultan Abdal and me”, published 18 January 2012 (accessed 3 March 2021), <https://pirsultanabdal.me/2012/01/18/pir-sultan-abdal-hu-diyelim-gerceklerin-demine/>.

addition, on page 110 of Besim Atalay's book the poem attributed to the name 'Abdal Musa' is again recorded on page 120 with the name 'Pir Sultan'⁸.

Just as there is a larger group of 'Pir Sultan' poems encountered in Bektashi manuscripts written in later times, his works are occasionally found in manuscripts belonging to earlier periods. In the work known as the 'Menakib-ıl Esrar, Behçet-ül Ahrar'⁹, being the codification of the rules and rites of the tenth century (hicri) Kızılbaş⁹ and attributed to Hatayi, the famous Shah Ismail, there are three of Pir Sultan's poems¹⁰ among the works of Kızılbaş poets like Kul Himmet, Kul Adil and Kul Mazlum¹¹. Nevertheless, I consider that the copy in my hands was made in the eleventh century¹² and some of the poems were introduced and added to the text of the original work at that time. Coming to the original work, it is clearly understood that it was in all probability put in order at the time of Shah Tahmasp, that is in the tenth century (hicri)¹³.

I am transcribing poems of Pir Sultan, exactly as recorded in some old manuscripts, that will in fact be able to give us a sense of his time and his views.

¹⁴Before Hızır Pasha takes to hanging us

Let the gates be opened that we should go to the Shah

Before the days of punishment come to pass

⁸ For versions in Latin script of this poem beginning 'Muhammet Ali'nin kıldığı dava' with its variant attributions, see Atalay, *Bektaşilik ve Edebiyatı*, 170, 188.

⁹ Also known as the 'Şeyh Şafî Buyruğu'. For a modern published version (though not the specific version or copy referred to by Köprülü), see Bisâtî, *Şeyh Sâfi Buyruğu*, ed. Ahmet Taşğın, (Ankara: Piramit Yayıncılık, 2003). This version of the 'Menakib' as prepared by Taşğın includes seven lyrics, two of which are attributed to Pir Sultan although they are not the same lyrics derived from a different copy of the 'Menakib' and published by Gölpınarlı (see the following footnote).

¹⁰ These three poems may be the same three lyrics for which the 'Menakib-ıl Esrar, Behçet-ül Ahrar' is identified as the source and which are included in Abdülbâkî Gölpınarlı and Pertev Nailî Boratav, *Pir Sultan Abdal* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1943). The texts of these three lyrics begin respectively, *Serseri girme meydana / Âşıktan ahval isterler*, *Gelsin ikrarına beli diyenler / İniltim derdim Muhammed Ali'dir*, and *Gönül gel karadan aşma / Sözüm sana meveddettir*. It is probable that Gölpınarlı, the source of these texts, was using the same manuscript or copy referred to by Köprülü (see the following footnote). Translations of the first two can be found in Paul Koerbin, "I am Pir Sultan Abdal: a hermeneutical study of the self-naming tradition (mahlas) in Turkish Alevi lyric song (deyiş)," PhD diss. (University of Western Sydney, 2011).

¹¹ The transliteration is self-evidently in error here and reads "kavl-i himmet, kavl-i adil, kavl-i maslum". *Kavl-i* is clearly an incorrect reading of قول as *kavil* instead of *kul*. The appearance of these poets in this manuscript is confirmed by Gölpınarlı (a student of Köprülü) possibly referring to the exact same copy of the manuscript. See Abdülbâkî (sic) Gölpınarlı, *Tarih Boyunca İslam Mezhepleri ve Şiirlik* (Istanbul: Der Yayınları, 2007), 178.

¹² Hicri. That is, after 1591 CE.

¹³ That is, before 1591 CE.

¹⁴ This lyric begins: *Hızır Paşa bizi berdar etmeden / Açılın kapılar şaha gidelim*.

Let the gates be opened that we should go to the Shah

The heart wishes to appear at the pavilion of the Shah

The soul wishes anointment in the sweet scent of Ali

For the love of the twelve imams my pir is Ali

Let the gates be opened that we should go to the Shah

Wherever I go my way is hazy dim

He made a promise to pardon my sin

The chain tightened on my neck – my dire condition

Let the gates be opened that we should go to the Shah

Like the summer torrent I will flow and sound

I will take up the dagger and make my wound

I remained estranged weeping the while alone

Let the gates be opened that we should go to the Shah

Pir Sultan speaks of my munificent Shah

My wound is old and my heart moans

My lament was straight to the blessed throne

Let the gates be opened that we should go to the Shah

¹⁵I shall be subject to the hand holding the pen

Scribe, write thus of my condition to the Shah

I would crumble sugar onto his sweet tongue

Scribe, write thus of my condition to the Shah

Scribe, write of me thus, if you love Allah

Day and night, I make entreaty to that Shah

I yearn for the collapse of bloody Sivas

Scribe, write thus of my condition to the Shah

¹⁵ This lyric begins: *Kul olayım kalem tutan eline / Katip ahvalimi Şah'a böyle yaz.*

Within the lands of Sivas my knell is rung
 The pine covered passes are parted asunder
 Separated from my friend my heart will rend
 Scribe, write thus of my condition to the Shah

All is happening as the hypocrite says
 My rose-coloured face turns pale and wan
 The pimp, the bastard, rejoices and laughs
 Scribe, write thus of my condition to the Shah

You there Hızır Pasha, I am Pir Sultan Abdal
 See what things befall a righteous soul
 It has left us longing for our kith and kin
 Scribe, write thus of my condition to the Shah

Understanding that they are connected with the same event, these two poems give us two clues to understanding the time and place in which Pir Sultan lived. Hızır Pasha separates our poet (who sings of his affliction) from his kith and kin and the tribe he belongs to. This occurred in the vicinity of Sivas. Consequently, the poet gives the attribute ‘bloody’ to Sivas and wishes that it be brought to ruin. It is understood from the first poem that the poet writes – or as is in some respects generally more customary, that it is ascribed to his name¹⁶ – that some people are detained, bound and chained. The poet corroborates this with the refrain of the first poem – “let the gates be opened that we should go to the Shah” – and requests the scribe to make known to the Iranian Shah that they wish to flee into his presence in the event of any opportunity. That is, it explains the connection of the poet, or the tribe to which he belongs, to the Iranian Shah; and that they had no hope other than taking refuge with him in order to be saved from the persecution by the Ottoman administration. Meaning that Pir Sultan Abdal, living in the vicinity of Sivas, was a

¹⁶ That is to say that whoever wrote the poem, whether the eponymous Pir Sultan or a later follower, it is attributed to the persona (the public identity) of Pir Sultan Abdal by the inclusion of the poet’s *mahlas* (pen name). On the issues relating to attribution by means of the *mahlas*, see Koerbin, “I am Pir Sultan Abdal”.

member of the ‘Twelver’ Kızılbaş tribe connected to the Shahs of Iran, and so with the religion of the Safavid dynasty.

If we understand the times and who Hızır Pasha was and the nature of the historical events that occurred in the region of Sivas, we can determine the period in which Pir Sultan Abdal lived. From among the viziers of the tenth and eleventh century we know of some men with this name; however, we have no information about whom of these were in the vicinity of Sivas and thus carried out the act of punishment. It is known that an official, Hızır Pasha, being alarmed at activity in the region of Bursa at the time of the Kalenderoğlu event¹⁷, departed for Üsküdar as a precautionary plan^{vi}. I wonder if the above poems were written upon news of this. We cannot really speculate. Anyway, Hızır Pasha in the region of Sivas must have acted to repress a revolt. This is much more likely to have been in the early years of the eleventh century (hicri)¹⁸. With close investigation of the sources belonging to the period, perhaps it will be possible to be more clear about the time of this event. The letter that the famous Sufi Mahmud Hüdai Efendi wrote to Sultan Ahmet I in order to recommend the containment of the Kızılbaş in the vicinity of Dobrici Zağra¹⁹ and the Hızır Pasha revealed as knowing about these events is the Hızır Pasha that we mentioned above; anyway, he must be the Hızır Pasha²⁰ that Pir Sultan Abdal mentions^{vii}.

¹⁷ This is a reference to the Jelali (Celali) revolt led by Kalenderoğlu Mehmet and the siege of Bursa in December 1607 CE. See William J. Griswold, *The Great Anatolian Rebellion: 1000-1020 / 1591-1611* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1983), 179ff.

¹⁸ That is, after 1591 CE.

¹⁹ Dobrudja or Dobrich (Добрич) in North-East Bulgaria to the north of Varna. The region is associated with the revolt led by Sheik Bedreddin in the early 15th century CE. Inalcik notes the continued influence of Bedreddin throughout the 16th century CE and the conflation by the Ottomans and Mahmud Hüdai Efendi of Bedreddin’s adherents with the Kızılbaş. See Halil Inalcik, *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age 1300-1600*, trans. Norman Itzkowitz and Colin Imber (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973), 186-202.

²⁰ Köprülü sets the agenda for many later scholars and researchers with his focus on the identity of Hızır Paşa as the key in locating the historical identity of Pir Sultan Abdal. His focus on documents situating Hızır Paşa in the early 17th century during the reign of Sultan Ahmet I was pursued by his student Sadettin Nüzhet in his monograph and collection of Pir Sultan Abdal poems published a year later in 1929. However, later researchers have revealed documents that identify further candidates for the Hızır Paşa who was to be Pir Sultan’s nemesis. The earliest candidate being a governor in Sivas for some period during the time of Sultan Süleyman Kanuni (the Magnificent) between 1548 and 1554 and again around 1560 (or perhaps this was another Hızır Paşa). Another candidate is known as Deli Hızır Paşa active as a governor in Sivas between 1588 and 1590 during the reign of Sultan Murat III. While there is no consensus, the more compelling arguments point towards the earlier period, particularly around 1560 as a feasible date for Pir Sultan’s execution. But the documentation is extremely limited and offers no actual evidence of the connection between Pir Sultan and the Sivas governor. That connection remains the provenance of the lyric poems and legends attributed to Pir Sultan. For a good succinct summary of the various Hızır Paşa identities see Ali Yıldırım, *Pir Sultan Abdal: Deyiş ve Direniş* (Ankara: İtalik, 2013).

The real importance of the poem is that it shows that among the Turkish Alevi in the tenth and eleventh centuries, who we call Kızılbaş, there was a powerful politico-religious propaganda organisation for the Shahs of Iran. This propaganda of the Iranian Shahs existed, since Shah Ismail, not only in Anatolia but also among the Alevi Turkish groups in Rumelia²¹. On this subject, the letter of Hüdai Efendi is very significant^{viii}. Hüdai Efendi says explicitly that these groups had connections with the Safavid rulers, and in the Kızılbaş campaigns that they even abandoned fiefs [*timar*] so as not to go into battle with soldiers [*sipahi*] connected to these groups' own religious sects. Likewise, in 1018²² Çeşmi Efendi in Istanbul, doing official work investigating suspect groups like this, reported to Osman II that these groups recognised Shah Abbas as their guide [*mürşid*] and it was even explicit that they were found in material support of the Safavid rulers^{ix}. It should be noted that Pir Sultan Abdal is a very important poet of these groups; and his works have lived among the Kızılbaş for centuries. Another poem of his published by Besim Atalay in *Bektaşilik ve Edebiyatı*, page 100, mentions the advancing companies of warriors [*gazi*] coming to avenge the religious leaders of the Safavid armies; their red caps, that is the red conical hat of the Safavid Turkmen²³, covering the face of the earth; and in the vehement language of the propagandist speaks of the shaking down of the throne of state [*tac-ı devlet*] and replacing the Sunni Sultan, that is the Ottoman Padishah, with the Safavid ruler²⁴. From this point of view, Pir Sultan and his poems that we published, are exceedingly important, not only in the literary history of Anatolia, but also with regard to political and religious history. Among the Alevi groups in Turkey these poems have been played with the *saz* for a long time, and they became a powerful agent to fracture the spiritual and national unity of the country.

ⁱ Kütüphane-i Sevda 1340, pp. 7-25-27-33-39-63-68-69-79.

ⁱⁱ İstanbul Matbaa-ı Amire 1340, pp. 61-62-63-72-96-99-102-103-105-106-110-120.

ⁱⁱⁱ p. 32. [Actually p. 33-34. PK]

^{iv} p. 64. [Actually p. 64-65. PK]

^v Unique manuscript in our personal library.

^{vi} 1016-da Naima, 2 p. 23.

^{vii} Tercümei hali: sicil-i osmani, 2 p. 279.

^{viii} Referenced in Muhammed Şerefuddin Bey's *Şeyh Bedreddin* named work, pp. 73-74.

^{ix} Reference to the text published in Danun's journal *Azyatık* 1921 Nisan-Haziran, s. 290-293.

²¹ Referring to the European-Balkan regions of the Ottoman Empire.

²² 1609-1610 CE.

²³ The 12-gored red or crimson headgear is responsible for the designation *kızılbaş* (literally 'redhead').

²⁴ Köprülü here closely paraphrases the poem he refers to. For the full poem beginning *Hazret-i Ali'nin devri yürüye*, together with English translation, see Koerbin, "I am Pir Sultan Abdal", 350-351.