ISLAM AND THE MILLENNIUM: SACRED KINGSHIP AND POPULAR IMAGINATION IN EARLY MODERN INDIA AND IRAN

by

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DEDICATION

To my parents

Fazil and Shaheen Moin

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION AND CONVENTIONS

Words from Persian, Arabic, Turkish, Urdu, and Hindi have been rendered using a simplified transliteration system without diacritical marks. For the first three languages, this system follows, for the most part, the conventions of the International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES). Arabic origin words are rendered according the language of the source in which they appear. For example, Arabic words such as *qāḍī*, *madhmūm*, and *niẓām*, simply lose their diacritical marks if cited from Arabic sources and, if cited from Persian works, they appear as *qazi*, *mazmum*, and *nizam*. Commonly used names and expressions such as Zulfiqar (*Dhu al-Fiqar*) are generally not transliterated, except for first time they appear in the text. The Persian letter "vav" is rendered using "v" for Persian origin words, such as *javan*, but the letter "w" is used in the case of Arabic origin words, such as *amwal*, even when they appear in Persian sources.

Transliterated words from secondary works and translations of primary sources are cited without modification, except that diacritical marks are dropped. For example, if a secondary source has the word *ḳiran* (an alternative rendering of *qiran*), it is cited as *kiran*. Similarly, the name Badayuni also appears as Bada'uni and Badauni according the secondary source being cited. Secondary sources also diverge in their transliteration of special cases of the Persian *izafa* or "Possession." Thus *Shahnama-yi Shah Isma'il* also appears as *Shahnama-i Shah Isma'il*. None of these variations affect meaning, however, and hopefully will not get in the way of reading the text.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation focuses on the institution of sacred kingship in the Timurid, Safavid, and Mughal empires of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It examines how a particular style of sovereignty came to be practiced by Muslim dynasts in early modern India and Iran. This was a style that can aptly be described as "saintly" and "messianic." In a widespread phenomenon, Muslim monarchs came to embody their sacrality in the manner of Sufi saints and holy saviors. The messianic nature of sovereigns was evidenced by miraculous lore and astrological calculations, embodied in inventive court rituals and dress, visualized in new forms of art, and institutionalized in cults of devotion and submission to the monarch as both spiritual guide and material lord.

In order to account for this historical development, this study emphasizes the performative aspect of Muslim kingship. Using methods of cultural history and anthropology, it argues that the social personality of Muslim sovereigns developed in a dialectic with the collective ideals and imagination of their diverse subject populations. Rulers drew inspiration less from scriptural sources of Islam than from broader processes of social memory, devotional practice, and popular myth. Notions of sovereignty were shaped by the master symbols and narratives of a shrine-centered Sufism, organized around the hereditary cult of the saint, which had come to dominate the religious and social life of this milieu. Thus, claims of political power became inseparable from claims of saintly status, giving rise to a long enduring pattern of messianic kingship.

In short, this study challenges the dominant narrative of the rise of Muslim empires in this period, and questions the legalism and doctrinal basis of Islamic institutions of rule. Instead, in a revisionist vein, it reveals the symbolic and corporeal practices of sacred kingship and shows its adaptability to the diverse social and religious contexts across early modern India and Iran.

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation focuses on the institution of sacred kingship in the Timurid, Safavid, and Mughal empires of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.[1] It offers an account of how a particular style of sacred sovereignty came to be practiced by Muslim dynasts in early modern India and Iran. This was a style that can aptly be described as "saintly" and "messianic." In a widespread phenomenon particular to this historical milieu, Muslim monarchs came to embody their sacrality in the manner of Sufi saints and holy saviors. Using methods of anthropology and cultural history, this study argues that this style of sacred kingship drew sustenance less from scriptural sources of Islam than from broader processes of social memory, devotional practice, and popular myths. Such an approach challenges the dominant narrative of the rise of Muslim empires in this period, and questions the legalism and doctrinal basis of Islamic institutions of rule. Instead, in a revisionist vein, it reveals the symbolic and corporeal practices of sacred kingship and shows its adaptability to the diverse social and religious contexts across early modern India and Iran.

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[1] The label "Timurid" is used in this study to refer to the descendents of Timur (d. 1405) who ruled in early modern Central Asia, Iran, and India. The term "Mughal" refers to the subset of the Timurids who established a dynasty in India. However, it is important to note that the Mughals were given this name because of their Mongol heritage by others. They continued to identify themselves as heirs of Timur.

Scope and Context of the Study

The greatest example – perhaps the epitome – of this pattern of sacred kingship was the powerful Mughal emperor Akbar (r. 1556-1605). He not only laid the foundations of a lasting empire in South Asia but also fashioned himself as the spiritual guide of all his subjects regardless of caste or creed (see chapter 4). In fact, it was an investigation into the nature of this Mughal emperor's spiritual claims that launched this research effort.

It is well-known that at the height of his reign, Akbar was accused of declaring the end of Islam and the beginning of his own sacred dispensation. There was perhaps some substance to these accusations. Akbar had indeed unveiled a devotional cult in which his nobility and officers of all religious and ethnic stripes were encouraged to enroll as disciples. Although not given an official name, this institution of imperial discipleship (*muridi*) became known as the Divine Religion (*Din-i Ilahi*). It generated an immense controversy – a controversy, it can be said, of global proportions. Reports and rumors of how a great Muslim emperor had turned against Islam were followed with interest in Shi'i Iran, Sunni Transoxania, and Catholic Portugal and Spain. Akbar was accused of heresy, schism, and apostasy from Islam. He was charged with claiming to be a new prophet and even divinity descended to earth. Despite the outcry and criticism, however, Akbar's rule flourished in India and his circle of devotees thrived. Discipleship became a Mughal imperial institution under Akbar and was continued by his successors.

Unsurprisingly, Akbar's spiritual pursuits became the focus of numerous studies in modern times. All manner of explanations – political, psychological, and spiritual – were used to make sense of the Mughal emperor's religious experiments. Although these

studies differed in method and conclusion, they had one trait in common. They all utilized a framework of analysis that was synchronic and limited to India. Whether these studies examined this episode as an eccentricity of the emperor's personality or treated it as a Muslim ruler's radically liberal and precociously secular attempt at a tolerant religious policy, they generally agreed that it was a phenomenon particular to Akbar's reign and dominion. In other words, the manner in which Akbar's sacrality was enunciated and institutionalized was assumed to have no history or comparison.

This assumption becomes untenable, however, when we examine the form and timing of the Mughal emperor's sacred assertions. Akbar had claimed to be the world's greatest sovereign and spiritual guide at the turn of the Islamic millennium. He had claimed, in effect, to be the awaited messiah. In doing so, he had embraced a powerful and pervasive myth of sovereignty. It was widely expected that the millennial moment heralded a large scale change in the religious and political affairs of the world. A holy savior would manifest himself, it was thought, to usher in a new earthly order and cycle of time – perhaps the last historical era before the end of the world. As this study shows, Akbar was neither the first nor the only one to pour his sovereign self into such a messianic mold. He had competed for the millennial prize with many others. Indeed, the emperor's critics considered his spiritual pretensions to be far from original. On the contrary, they accused him of trying to mimic the messianic success of the founder of the Safavid empire in Iran, Shah Isma'il I (r. 1501-1524, hereafter referred to as Shah Isma'il).

While not yet in his teens, Shah Isma'il had become the hereditary leader of the Safavid Sufi order in northwestern Iran. With the aid of armed and fanatically loyal

Turkmen devotees, he had conquered and reunited Iran after more than a century of fragmentary politics. Shah Isma'il's soldier-disciples charged into battle, it was said, without armor because they expected their saint-king's presence to provide sufficient protection. The young Shah was for them the promised messiah – the mahdi of Islamic traditions. That Akbar's millennial project in India evoked comparisons with Shah Isma'il's militant messianism in Iran is indicative of a strong similarity between the two enduring Muslim empires of sixteenth century Iran and India. It brings into focus the startling fact that both imperial polities, in their formative phases, had seriously engaged with messianic and saintly forms of sovereignty. This similarity, importantly, was not a coincidence but the result of a shared history.

Specifically, the imperial projects of the Mughals and the Safavids in the first half of the sixteenth century had competed for the same set of material resources, patronage and kinship networks, and cultural symbols. Akbar's Timurid father and grandfather, Humayun and Babur, had both sought refuge and military assistance from the Safavids at low points in their royal careers and had witnessed the workings of the Safavid court and Sufi organization up close. The Safavids, in turn, had adopted the highly stylized forms and fashions of late-Timurid courts as they evolved from a Sufi order into an imperial dynasty. The two nascent sixteenth century empires had in effect drawn upon a shared cultural context and learned from one another's modes and methods. It was no accident that in both these polities a similar style of monarchy developed in which claims of political power became inseparable from claims of saintly status.

This conjuncture of kingship and sainthood, which shaped Mughal and Safavid self-fashioning, had itself been a product of recent historical development. It first took

root in and spread from the geographical territories of Iran and Central Asia that had been ravaged by the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century. These invasions had severely disrupted established urban centers, political cultures, and religious associations across much of Asia. In their wake, a new socio-political order took shape in which the growing networks of Sufi orders and Sufi shrines played a significant and constitutive role. There was hardly an aspect of public or private life in the eastern Islamic lands that remained untouched or unshaped by these institutions of "mysticism" and networks of "devotion." The lives of kings were no exception. Thus, in the post-Mongol centuries, the institution of kingship became locked in a mimetic embrace with the institution of sainthood.

Unsurprisingly, then, the greatest of Muslim monarchs of the time began to enjoy the miraculous reputations of the greatest of saints. Some, like the famous conqueror Timur (or Tamerlane, d. 1405), may not have made such claims openly but were, nevertheless, venerated as spiritual guides by their followers and given miraculous genealogies by their descendents. Others, like the above mentioned Shah Isma'il, already belonged to acclaimed Sufi families. Indeed, Shah Isma'il had been born a saint – in the sense that he had inherited the devotion of his father's large circle of disciples. It would be wrong to suggest, however, that these Muslim sovereigns assumed the trappings of saintly piety and renounced the world and its sinful ways. More accurately, they adopted the trappings of saintly power and embraced the world as heaven-sent saviors. As this study demonstrates, the "messianic" and "saintly" nature of their sovereignty was adduced by astrological calculations and mystical lore, embodied in court rituals and dress, visualized in painting and architecture, and institutionalized in cults of devotion and bodily submission to the monarch as both spiritual guide and material lord.

It must be said, however, that modern scholarship has had difficulty seeing the coherency and durability of this pattern of sacred kingship. This difficulty is understandable given that the phenomenon of Muslim kings transmuting into saints and messiahs, venerated by courtiers and worshipped by soldiers, defies conventional notions of Islam. Indeed, conventional wisdom would have Muslim sovereigns consistently supporting orthodox Islam or some doctrinally stable version of it to legitimize their rule. While the texts and traditions of doctrinal Islam continued to be patronized in this milieu in a routine enough manner, they did not serve as the fount of charismatic inspiration. Inspiration came from a source that was surprisingly different and, on the face of it, paradoxical: "heretical" conceptions of sacred authority attracted Muslim monarchs more than "orthodox" notions of Islam. A substantial part of this study is dedicated to resolving this paradox. It does so by advocating the perspective that what appears as "heresy" from a doctrinal point of view was in fact a ritual engagement with popular forms of saintliness and embodied forms of sacrality that were broadly and intuitively accepted by much of the population as morally legitimate. To make way for this perspective, however, we must set aside many common assumptions and timeless truths about Islam. Instead, we must examine from first principles the social process which transmuted kings into saints and saints into kings. In order to appreciate how such phenomena could occur in "Islam," we must first grasp the significance of the "millennium."

Islam and the Millennium

In studies of Muslim milieus, group identities of sect, doctrine and devotional loyalty are often assumed to be more fixed and hegemonic than they historically were.

For example, the Mughals of India are treated as Sunni Muslims much like their Central Asian Timurid ancestors.[2] When the Safavids are compared with the Mughals, the former are assumed to be Shi'i Muslims.[3] If an element of commonality is assumed between these two dynasties, it is ascribed to the "mystical" practices of Sufism. This intellectualist view of Islam neatly divided into Sunnism and Shi'ism, overlapped with Sufism, treats Muslim cultures as rigid wholes to be understood on the basis of scriptural sources, great men and their respectable writings. This view, although easy to grasp and work with, is innocent of the actual workings of culture and historical change.

The early modern period of Iran and India was a period of immense historical change and cultural innovation as far as Islam was concerned. A new type of mass-based Sufism centered on popular cults of the saint and hereditary forms of spiritual leadership had taken shape only a century or so before the rise of the Mughals and the Safavids. The practices and symbols of this emergent form of religiosity were far more significant in shaping Muslim worldviews than the texts and traditions of doctrinal Islam. Take, for example, the case of Shi'ism in early modern Iran. Although Iran is thought to have been converted to Shi'ism by royal edict under the Safavids beginning in the sixteenth century, this process was gradual – even desultory – and took more than a century to gather momentum. Further, much as the population of Iran eventually had to accept Shi'i doctrinal tenets, this "conversion" also necessitated juridical Shi'ism to modify and recreate itself institutionally according to the dictates of local Sufi practices and popular

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[2] Examples of this view are too many to list. See, however, Annemarie Schimmel and Burzine K. Waghmar, *The Empire of the Great Mughals: History, Art and Culture*, trans., Corinne Attwood (London: Reaktion Books, 2004). Sri Ram Sharma, *The Religious Policy of the Mughal Emperors* ([London, New York, Bombay, etc.]: H. Milford Oxford university press, 1940). Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, 2 vols. (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1978).
[3] Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *A Socio-Intellectual History of the Isna Ashari Shi'is in India*, 2 vols. (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1986).

saintly lore.[4] At the end of this process, Shi ism itself had undergone substantial cultural transformation. A thirteenth century Shi'i jurist, for example, would have been unable to recognize many of the Shi'i rituals, narratives and public ceremonies of eighteenth century Iran.[5] This is because in the intervening five centuries, much of the social and religious life of Iran – and, indeed, of most Muslim communities in Asia – had been shaped by the rise of highly institutionalized, networked, and hereditary cults of Sufi saints.[6]

A result of this historical development was that Islam came to be experienced by most people in early modern Iran and India – Muslim and non-Muslim alike – through the mediation of holy men and their bodies. In phenomenological terms, Islam existed in the lives of most people primarily in the form of sacred and saintly presences, whether alive in physical form, active in enshrined graves, apparent in dreams, or resurrected in blood descendents and anointed successors. In effect, the dominant experience of sacred authority for most people – elite and commoner alike – was concrete and embodied rather than abstract and textual. The language for making sense of and articulating this experience, moreover, came from the Sufi traditions of "mysticism" and "sainthood." This is a point worth emphasizing because modern scholarship tends to resolve questions of sovereign authority in Islam in favor of enduring scriptural texts and legalistic

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[4] Kathryn Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs: Cultural Landscapes of Early Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002). Rula Jurdi Abisaab, *Converting Persia: Religion and Power in the Safavid Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004). Said Amir Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam: Religion, Political Order, and Societal Change in Shi'ite Iran from the Beginning to 1890* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).
[5] For a description Shi'i rituals in Safavid Iran, see Jean Calmard, "Shi'i Rituals and Power II: The Consolidation of Safavid Shi'ism: Folklore and Popular Religion," in *Safavid Persia: The History and Politics of an Islamic Society*, ed. Charles P. Melville (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996).
[6] The classic account of this historical development is that of J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). For an updated view see Nile Green, *Sufism: A Brief History* (Oxford: Blackwell forthcoming).

doctrine. Such models based on abstract concepts and theoretical debates, however, need to be adjusted in order to study a milieu in which sacred authority was primarily perceived via corporeal forms and tactile means.

Accordingly, the theoretical position taken in this study is that the nature of sacred authority must be understood by paying close attention to its social dimension. It gives priority, in other words, to the assumption that styles of sacrality are shaped by their social environments. Such a socially-inflected perspective complements existing approaches to the study of sovereignty in Islam that emphasize, instead, the role of scriptural traditions or the intellectual efforts of religious leaders. It also enables a more context-sensitive model of sacred authority embodied by Muslim sovereigns, rooted not in classical texts of Islamic law and doctrine but in inhabitable cosmologies and performative narratives of sovereignty.

Recourse to such a "sociology of knowledge" approach enables us to see the significance of one of the most pervasive cosmology and narrative of sovereignty in early modern Iran and India: that of the millennium and the messiah. The religious history of this era is marked by Sufi movements led by men who claimed to be heaven-ordained saviors and earthly embodiments of divinity. These saints and holy men often made a bid for both political power and spiritual supremacy. Indeed, Timurid Iran has been called a "messianic age," full of activist Sufis.[7] While these movements will be mentioned in later chapters, here it will suffice to discuss two key aspects of the millennium-messiah myth; namely, its corporeal and temporal dimensions.

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[7] See Shahzad Bashir, *Messianic Hopes and Mystical Visions: The Nurbakhshiya between Medieval and Modern Islam* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 31.

The discourse of messianism was in a fundamental sense about embodied forms of sacred authority. It prophesied the coming of a savior who would set right the unbearable order of things. This correction was expected to take place, moreover, not primarily by doctrinal intervention or revival of religious law – although this was often claimed in messianic apologia – but rather by the sheer physical presence, the thaumaturgical body, of the messianic being. Further, this myth was not limited to the sphere of "religion," but rather was sustained by a number of popular and elite knowledges about authority, power, and historical change. To put it another way, in a literal and "thin" sense the messianic myth was a prophecy about the coming of the messiah or the millennial being, but in a descriptive and "thick" sense, it simultaneously invoked of a series of inter-related cultural meanings.

For example, the scriptural notions of the messiah (*mahdi*) and the renewer (*mujaddid*), the mystical concepts of the pole or *axis mundi* (*qutb*) and the perfect individual (*insan-i kamil*), the kingly notions of divine-effulgence (*farr-i izadi*) and the lord of conjunction (*sahib qiran*) all referred to human agents who could usher in and maintain the just religio-political order of a particular historical era. As this study will argue, these linkages and connections were both felt and acknowledged at the time, explicitly in elite philosophical metaphysics that sought to explain the role of human actors in maintaining the rhythm and balance of the cosmos, and implicitly in popular tales and stories about prophets, saints, kings, and other savior heroes. In other words, many concepts of embodied sovereignty that may at first glance appear to be discretely contained in separate spheres of literary writings and oral traditions were in fact practically intertwined and symbolically condensed in the myth of the holy savior.

Accordingly, seen from the inside the cultural world of early modern India and Iran, metaphysical traditions about the nature of the soul, cosmological ideas about time, historical eras and the age of the world, and astrological techniques for predicting changes of religions and dynasties appear knitted together in a complex science of the millennium.

The inner workings and principles of classification of this science, however, are barely within our mental grasp. This form of knowledge belongs, in other words, to a forgotten episteme. The burden of this study is to recover this millenarian epistemology and to show how it constituted both elite and popular worldviews in early modern Iran and India. Accordingly, it evaluates afresh beliefs and practices that were widespread at the time but tend to get ignored in modern scholarship as marginal and heretical. For example, an idea that was central to explaining the reincarnation of the messianic being from one era of time to another was the transmigration of the soul from body to body. This concept is usually thought to be part of Indic religions and anathema to Islam.[8] Nevertheless, many early modern Muslims thought that it was through transmigration that the messianic soul appeared as a reincarnation of a past savior in the present or the future. Not only deviant Sufi groups espoused this idea but metaphysicians and philosophers did so as well. Transmigration of the soul was certainly a dangerous idea in many Islamic learned circles and could draw condemnation from religious authorities. It could be explicated in writing only with extensive apologia and qualifications. Yet, it still persisted in elite texts with different degrees of explicitness, and held wide sway in the popular imagination of this period.

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[8] See A. Azfar Moin, "Challenging the Mughal Emperor: The Islamic Millennium according to 'Abd al-Qadir Badayuni," in *Islam in South Asia in Practice* ed. Barbara Metcalf (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). This issue is also dealt with in detail in chapter 4.

Rather than follow Muslim heresiographers in dismissing transmigration as against the tenets of Islam, this study pursues the conundrum of its continued significance in early modern Muslim cultures. The answer seems to be that transmigration was an important component of millenarian theories of kingship and widely-made and widely-believed messianic claims of Sufi saints. Indeed, transmigration was much more than just an idea. Rather, it was a social fact experienced by far too many people to simply vanish under the onslaught of a few critical texts. Much like claims of divination, magic, and prophecy, this concept too enjoyed a social reality among elite and commoner alike. To understand why this was so, we have to examine learned metaphysical explanations of how saints could physically embody the divine soul side by side with miraculous stories of Sufis being able to be project themselves to many places at once. This means, in terms of method, grounding intellectual history firmly in the earth of social reality and paying close attention to the relationship between social structure and the persistence of particular types of cosmologies.[9]

This brings us to the second key aspect of the messianic myth – its temporal component. In the simplest terms, the messianic myth was related to the concept of the millennium by the notion that the savior was expected to appear at the end of a thousand year cycle or the beginning of another one. This new cycle of time could be, moreover, the last one before the end of the world, giving the millennial scheme an eschatological coloring. Nevertheless, the primary view of time undergirding the idea of the millennium

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[9] An anthropological work that I have found to be helpful in thinking through the relationship between cosmologies and social structure is Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (London: Routledge, 2003).

was cyclical.[10] This cyclical view of time, moreover, was informed by the sciences of astronomy and astrology based on the regular rotation of the heavenly bodies. These sciences also allowed for a malleable interpretation of the temporal span of the millennium. Even though the thousand year era was of prime importance, its beginning and end could be suitably adjusted. Moreover, many auspicious subsets and fortunate fractions of the important "thousand" were readily available to fine tune the myth as needed. The millennium, thus, could be put into practice with differing degrees of temporal intensity. The messiah could appear imminently or in the distant future. He could have been a figure in the past or one manifest in the present. Also, there were many ways to invoke the power of this myth, using an array of divinatory knowledge such as scriptural interpretation, apocalyptic lore, dream visions, numerology and astrological predictions. Such flexible techniques were not the result of mere superstition, however. Rather, their coherency and salience was related to contemporary knowledges and practices of "Time."

For Timurid, Mughal, and Safavid sovereigns, the future was as important as the past, divination was as important as genealogy, and astrology as valuable as history. Indeed, as far as practices of sacred kingship were concerned, history and astrology were sister disciplines. Astrologers worked as annalists and historians served as oracles. The intermeshed practices of courtly record keeping and time keeping were a testament to this linkage. Moreover, astrology was as "political" a science as history. Kings and their enemies used astrology to ascertain the health of the realm and the lifespan of the present

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[10] A good exposition of cyclical theories of time as they persisted in messianic Sufi cults in early modern Iran is found in Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*. The ancientness of such views of time and eschatology are explored in Norman Rufus Colin Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos, and the World to Come: the Ancient Roots of Apocalyptic Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

dispensation. It is no accident that sovereigns often issued new calendars coinciding with their ascension. Besides being a public announcement of their sovereignty much like issuing new coins, such an act was also an attempt to reset the cosmological clock. Similarly, Sufis and their mystical competitors also made recourse to astrology to prove their sanctity and place in the spiritual hierarchy of the cosmos. In short, as a powerful form of knowledge concerned with the time of spiritual and dynastic dispensations and the health of body politics, astrology sustained temporal myths like the coming of the millennium, presided over by a righteous sovereign in the form of a savior, a saint, or a conqueror.

An astrological-cyclical view of time, then, is critical for understanding the institution of sacred kinship in this milieu. It brings to light a "millennial" sovereignty that was not bound by a single religious tradition but universally extended to all the communal constituencies – Muslims, Christians, Jews, Mongols, Hindus, and others – of early modern Islamic empires. Moreover, it points to an important continuity that Islamic traditions of sovereignty enjoyed with cosmological knowledge from pre-Islamic traditions of India, Iran, and Greece, and even more ancient ones of Sumeria and Akkadia. Modern historians of science have pointed out these continuities but these studies, even though invaluable, are of a technical nature.[11] They focus on the

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[11] E. S. Kennedy, "Comets in Islamic Astronomy and Astrology," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 16, no. 1 (1957); E. S. Kennedy, "Ramifications of the World-Year Concept in Islamic Astrology," *Actes, International Congress on the History of Sciences* 10 (1962); E. S. Kennedy, "The Exact Sciences in Timurid Iran," in *The Cambridge History of Iran: The Timurid and Safavid Periods*, ed. Peter Jackson and Laurence Lockhart (Cambridge: University Press, 1986); E. S. Kennedy, David Edwin Pingree, and Masha'allah, *The Astrological History of Masha'allah* (Cambridge, Massachussets: Harvard University Press, 1971); D. Pingree, "Kiran," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, CD-ROM* (Leiden: Brill, 1999); David Pingree, "Historical Horoscopes," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 82, no. 4 (1962); David Pingree, "Astronomy and Astrology in India and Iran," *Isis* 54, no. 2 (1963); David Pingree, *The Thousands of Abu Mashar* (London: Warburg Institute, 1968); David Pingree and C. J. Brunner, "Astrology and

development in mathematical techniques and diffusion of precise cosmological theories among elite practitioners, rather than on the place and function of the "science" of astrology in different social settings. Nevertheless, it is evident from the vast number of "Islamic" astrological and astronomical manuscripts from Iran and India that the impact of these knowledges was broad, substantial, and enduring. Indeed, astrology was practiced with greater consistency and sophistication in Muslim courts and societies than in those of early medieval Christian ones. In Christendom, astrological knowledge was crude and court astrologers comparatively rare until the twelfth century when translations of Arabic treatises and astronomical tables became more widely available.[12] It is ironical then that there are many more comprehensive and sophisticated studies of "Christian" astrology than there are of the "Islamic" variety.[13]

One reason for the general neglect of astrology, moreover, is the less than respectable status it enjoys today. If the subject of astrology and politics is brought up in polite conversation, it inevitably leads to anecdotes about Nancy Reagan's fondness for the divinatory arts. Indeed, when this research was presented at academic conferences, many well-intentioned scholars cautioned that a strong emphasis on astrology might end up presenting pre-modern Muslims in an "irrational" light and revive many Orientalist stereotypes of the overly "mystical" east. This, needless to say, is far from the intended goal. Most Orientalist stereotypes about Islam or India, it is worth pointing out, were the

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Astronomy in Iran," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online* (December 15, 1987), available at www.iranicaonline.org.
[12] For a survey of the attitudes and debates on astrology in western Christendom, see Laura Ackerman Smoller, *History, Prophecy, and the Stars: The Christian Astrology of Pierre d'Ailly, 1350-1420* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 25-42.
[13] There are many studies of Astrology in Europe. For example, Ibid. Eugenio Garin, *Astrology in the Renaissance: the Zodiac of Life* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983). Anthony Grafton, *Cardano's Cosmos: The Worlds and Works of a Renaissance Astrologer* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

product of post-enlightenment thought in which "Asiatic" civilizations were generally considered to have been left behind by the West and in need of scientific and social progress. In fifteenth and sixteenth century Europe, however, few such "enlightened" concerns were expressed about the Orient. By contrast, the idiom of saintliness and messianism was itself quite predominant in western Christendom.[14] In early modern Europe, for example, millennial and apocalyptic narratives were often used to describe developments in Muslim empires, such as those of the Ottomans, that threatened western Christianity.[15] In short, by underscoring the salience of astrology as popular practice and elite science, the goal of this study is not to pass judgment on the irrationality of past Muslim societies but rather to highlight the way their rationality was constructed differently than that of us "moderns," whether eastern or western.

Accordingly, this study makes an effort to not impose present day standards of respectability and taste in evaluating the knowledges, norms and practices of a very different past. Such an approach is necessary in order to recover and reinstate a large number of sources that have otherwise been neglected as being of marginal value. For example, in two book length studies of the religious developments at the court of the Mughal emperor Akbar, there is rarely a reference to the use of astrology of either Persian or Indian varieties.[16] In comparison, the chronicles of Akbar dedicate a substantial amount of space to the technical discussion of the emperor's horoscope,

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[14] The classic study is that of Norman Rufus Colin Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, Rev. and expanded ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

[15] Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Turning the Stones Over: Sixteenth Century Millenarianism from the Tagus to the Ganges," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 40, no. 2 (2003).

[16] Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, *Akbar & Religion* (Delhi, India: Idarah-i-Adabiyat-i-Delli, 1989); Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History of the Muslims in Akbar's Reign, with Special Reference to Abul Fazl, 1556-1605* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1975).

running to about fifty pages in the printed English translation even after leaving out many charts found in the original Persian manuscript.[17]

Furthermore, there existed in early modern India and Iran a number of "bizarre" bodily practices, magical techniques, votive rituals, and popular spectacles involving animals and humans that have been treated with a similar manner of neglect in modern scholarship. To ignore them as distasteful, however, is to misconstrue the semiotic world that structured the thoughts and actions of people living in it. This was a world in which the king, sacred though he may have been, was not distant physically and culturally from the people. Rather, Muslim sovereigns lived very mobile lives, performing their sacrality in public and participating in the same religious and popular spectacles that enthralled and entertained the populace. Unsurprisingly, then, sacred kingship bore a strong stamp of popular imagination.

Sacred Kingship and Popular Imagination

While there are numerous descriptive histories of pre-modern Muslim sovereigns – caliphs, sultans, khans, and padishahs – the institution of Muslim kingship itself has received little analytical attention.[18] There exists an extensive and useful literature on Islamic political thought but it mainly treats the topic of kingship in the mold of

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[17] Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak and Henry Beveridge, *The Akbar Nama of Abu-l-Fazl: History of the Reign of Akbar Including an Account of his Predecessors*, 3 vols. (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2005), 1, 2: 68-116. For a review of Akbar's horoscopes, see Eva Orthmann, "Circular Motions: Private Pleasure and Public Prognostication in the Nativities of the Mughal Emperor Akbar," in *Horoscopes and Public Spheres: Essays on the History of Astrology*, ed. Günther Oestmann, H. Darrel Rutkin, and Kocku von Stuckrad (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005).

[18] In general, there is a dearth of comparative and theoretical scholarship on the institution of kingship in Islam. However, for the early medieval period, see Aziz al-Azmeh, *Muslim Kingship: Power and the Sacred in Muslim, Christian and Pagan Polities* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1997). There is also a useful collection of essays on kingship in South Asia, including some on the Mughal empire. See, John F. Richards, ed. *Kingship and Authority in South Asia* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

intellectual history.[19] This mode of scholarship is concerned more with continuities in textual traditions than with developments in actual social institutions and practices. How – or indeed if – prescriptive and philosophical texts animated Muslim rulers is a question that remains unsettled. Given the highly itinerant nature of kingship in this period, it is unlikely that Muslim princes were groomed in isolated palaces, poring over books under the gaze of wise ministers. It is more plausible that the social personality of kings developed via constant circulation through the realm in an ongoing dialectic with the social ideals and popular myths of their diverse subject populations. Pre-modern kingship, in other words, had a strong performative element to it which cannot be recovered from prescriptive texts.

Interpretive studies of kingship in other pre-modern settings have underlined its performative aspects. This scholarship, much of it pioneered by anthropologists, shows that it was the ability of monarchs to perform a script – sometimes multiple, conflicting ones – that drew towards their person the collective desires of the various groups in their dominion.[20] Such anthropological approaches serve as a model for this study. It assumes

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[19] In this view, it is assumed that scriptural conception of politics predominated, and was upheld by the keepers of Islamic tradition, the 'ulama, who provided a check against the excesses of kings. Antony Black, *The History of Islamic Political Thought: From the Prophet to the Present* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Patricia Crone, *Medieval Islamic Political Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004); Ann K. S. Lambton, *State and Government in Medieval Islam: An Introduction to the Study of Islamic Political Theory: The Jurists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981); W. Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Political Thought: The Basic Concepts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1968). Alternatively, those who believe that Muslim rulers had a more catholic and liberal outlook, point to the universal and pragmatic norms preserved in the Persian royal advice literature. These texts relate the stories of ancient, pre-Islamic, Iranian kings, and make only vague references to Islam or Allah. For a bibliography of Iranian royal advice literature, see, Z. Safa, "Andarz," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online* (December 15, 1985), available at www.iranicaonline.org. For an argument regarding a "secular" *shari'a* in Mughal times based on the political writings of Nasir al-Din Tusi, see Muzaffar Alam, *The Languages of Political Islam: India, 1200-1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
[20] For a comparative perspective on how monarchs in different cultures publicly performed a "script" of sacred kingship, see Clifford Geertz, "Centers, Kings, and Charisma: Reflections on the Symbolics of Power," in *Local knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983). More generally, studies of kingship that use cultural history, anthropology and semiotics to understand the performative role of kings include Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali*

that kingship cannot be understood from abstract arguments preserved in elite texts but rather from concrete practices of sovereigns, often in a public competition for popular admiration and awe. We need, in other words, an ethnography of sacred kingship to recover the social processes of Timurid, Safavid, and Mughal times by which the charisma of the sovereign was produced, institutionalized, remembered and transmitted to posterity.

Importantly, this study uses "sacred kingship" as an analytical category rather than a phenomenological one. In other words, it makes no assertion that there was a sixteenth century Persian term in Iran or India that precisely translates this phrase. But it does maintain that this expression aptly describes a culturally coherent and historically stable set of symbols and practices that shaped the behavior and attitudes of sovereigns. Further, these symbols and practices were sustained more by everyday actions and transactions than by canonical texts of doctrine or philosophy. That is to say, the primary site where the "sacred" resided was popular imagination, not elite writings.

Elite texts, however, constitute most of our sources. To recover popular practice from these works is an uphill task. These sources must be read against the grain. Texts from different genres must be read alongside and against one another. Rumors, slurs, and innuendo must be given due weight, while confessional statements treated with caution. It is only with close reading, and a good deal of speculation, that we can get behind the conventions of genre and styles of rhetoric to uncover the collective attitudes and internalized biases of cultural actors. To lend some structure to these speculations, however, this study turns to a tradition of sociology and anthropology that has long

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(Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980). Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). Paul Kléber Monod, *The Power of Kings: Monarchy and Religion in Europe, 1589-1715* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

theorized about the collective nature of the sacred. This strand of social science draws

upon Durkheim's notion that the sacred is nurtured in an ensemble of social practices,

which, invisible to social actors, does its work of shaping the collective imagination and

providing the shared classifications of thought.[21]

Take for example, Michael Taussig's insight that the way to discover the sacred is

to uncover the public secret, "that which is generally known but cannot be articulated."[22]

In a similar discussion on the ineffable nature of the sacred, Maurice Godelier states, "the

sacred is a certain type of relationship that humans entertain with the origin of things,

such that, in this relationship, the real humans disappear and in their stead appear

duplicates of themselves, imaginary humans...accompanied by an alteration, by an

occultation of reality and an inversion of the relationship between cause and effect."[23]

According to these theorists, the workings of the "sacred" in society are not rules-driven

and not obvious to cultural actors. Rather, the sacred is embedded in a complex social

process that shapes worldviews and ethos, informs concepts of time and space, provides

categories of thought, defines taboos, channels desires, and reproduces social and

economic structures in a way that cannot be encapsulated by or derived from a set of

normative texts and institutions. This view is opposed to the commonsense approach of

trying to find the sacred center of a civilization in its formal religious institutions.

Specifically, in terms of Muslim milieus, it is not sufficient to locate the "sacred" in the

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[21] Durkheim's classic text is Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans., Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995). For a concise exposition of how Durkheim dealt with the "sacred" in his writings see Mary Douglas, *How Institutions Think* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1986).
[22] Michael T. Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).
[23] Maurice Godelier, *The Enigma of the Gift* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

Quran, the sayings of the Prophet, the traditions of Islamic law derived from these sources.

Indeed, the way early modern Muslim sovereigns transgressed the norms of doctrinal Islam reveals that their engagement with the sacred lay in some other sphere of culture. Their antics, shocking as they may seem from a modern Muslim perspective, were much more than ignoble heresy or popular superstition. Even if these rulers had little regard for the legal norms of Islam, it does not follow that they had complete disregard for religion, as if they did not feel the threat of the sacred or the pull of its desire. Their "magical" actions such as consulting astrologers and soothsayers or visiting shrines of holy men cannot be explained away as political ploys or discarded as magical superstition. If these actions had been socially marginal or transparently political in the eyes of the people then the "charade" of kingship would not have worked; that is to say, the sacrality of kings would not have appeared to be part of the natural order of things.

In asserting the primacy of collective practices and public symbols for understanding the nature of the sacred, this study enters into a larger debate on the history of Islamicate societies on the place and function of popular culture. It takes a position with a small but growing number of studies on pre-modern Muslim milieus that do not take for granted either the rigidity of Islamic traditions or the all-encompassing nature of Islamic law. These studies have underlined, instead, the frequent presence and sometimes predominance of deviancy in pre-modern Muslim settings.[24] Such evidence raises the

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[24] To follow a historian of medieval Islamic popular culture, "Much of what Western historians have written about the societies of the medieval Near East has rested upon the deceptively firm foundations of a particular textual tradition – that of chronicles, biographical dictionaries compiled by religious scholars, rarefied works of legal and religious scholarship, the literary legacy of accomplished poets and belletrists. But the story of medieval Islamic culture is…cluttered with a bewildering variety of texts, including stories of saints' lives, accounts of the splendors of one city or region or another, personalized recounting of dream visions, rhapsodies on the qualities and even the supernatural powers of popular texts.…[which serve to]

question of which phenomenon is the more historically significant one, the preservation of received tradition by the elite or the process of adapting it and making it one's own by the populace?[25] Indeed, one may ask, what actually constitutes the anthropology of Islam, the universal "discursive tradition" preserved by learned men[26] or the more malleable and transient meanings created by local and popular traditions?[27] For the period under study, a focus on the continuity of a set of literary traditions closely adhering to the conventions of genre draws attention away from the way most people – literate or not – made sense of their experience of heterogeneity, change, suffering, and the marvelous that could not be explained by recourse to a scholastic tradition. In short, to privilege certain textual traditions as socially significant and treat the content of genre-bound texts as history erases the lived experience of the time.

Accordingly, this study focuses less on textual traditions and more on social processes. In concrete terms, it investigates the ritual process by which ordinary humans became sacred sovereigns. It demonstrates how kings and saints socially produced their sacrality through specific symbolic techniques and by undergoing stages of ritual development. As ritual theorists have argued, becoming sacred – i.e., dramatically changing one's social position – requires engaging with a potentially "dangerous" sphere of culture. It is dangerous because it transgresses the institutionalized relationships of

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undermine, or at least to mute and to make contingent, the authority of that Islam that has been as much a construct of medieval 'ulama as of modern historians." Jonathan Porter Berkey, *Popular Preaching and Religious Authority in the Medieval Islamic Near East* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 10.
[25] While most writing on Islamic history tends to privilege the view from the center -- the view of the keepers of tradition --, it is the view from the edge, that is to say, the perspective of the consumer of the tradition and the new convert that does more to explain how the "center" actually forms. See, Richard W. Bulliet, *Islam: The View from the Edge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).
[26] See Talal Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," *Occasional Papers, Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University* (1986).
[27] Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1968).

social structure. Moreover, the process does not guarantee an advance in social status but, in fact, carries a strong possibility of social condemnation and ridicule.[28] Major attempts to access temporal or spiritual power, however, have to pass through these ritual stages and court their dangers. This is a crucial insight because it suggests, for our purposes, that accusations of "heresy" and "deviance" may profitably be read as reports of ritual engagement with the sacred. Indeed, in following this insight, this study shows the ritual role millennial heresies played in the making of kings and saints in early modern India and Iran.

Early Modern India and Iran

In historical terms, the primary focus of this dissertation is on the first century of the Mughal dynasty in South Asia, roughly coeval with the sixteenth century. However, it breaks from traditional approaches to Mughal studies by integrating a substantial amount of primary and secondary sources from Safavid Iran and Timurid Central Asia. This is necessary if we are to overcome the national boundaries and "area studies" groupings that have partitioned the histories of this milieu according to present minded concerns. For example, in the case of South Asia, major themes of historical research are often driven by the region's modern encounter with western colonialism and imperialism, and the ensuing rise of communal "Hindu" and "Muslim" nationalisms.[29] In this context, the early modern period is often studied to determine the degree to which seeds of religious

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[28] See Victor Witter Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co., 1969).

[29] Generally, on the place of "Islam" in the study of South Asian history, see Barbara D. Metcalf, "Presidential Address: Too Little and Too Much: Reflections on Muslims in the History of India," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 54, no. 4 (1995). For an overview of the scholarly debates on the rise of modern religious communalism in South Asia, see, Peter Van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). Also, see C. A. Bayly, "The Pre-History of 'Communalism'? Religious Conflict in India, 1700-1860," *Modern Asian Studies* 19, no. 2 (1985).

violence that plague modern South Asia were sown in the era before colonialism, that is, the era of Islamic rule. In the case of Iranian history, on the other hand, it is the distinctive Shi'i religio-political identity of modern Iran, brought into sharp relief with the Islamic revolution of 1979, which provides the dominant framework for inquiry. In this case, the sixteenth century process by which the Sunni-Sufi population of Iran was converted to Shi'i-Jurist Islam gains primary importance for understanding the roots of Iran's distinctive religious nationalism.[30]

These national and regional concerns are valid ones. However, they posit collective subjects of history in pairs of opposites that betray our categories of thought more than they help uncover a past in which these dichotomies had yet to take definite shape or become the central concern of public life and political praxis. A consequence of this compartmentalization of historical thought is that Mughal India and Safavid Iran seem to belong not just to two different historical narratives but, as it were, to two clashing phenomenological worlds:

Mughal Empire	**:**	**Safavid Empire**
South Asia	:	Middle East
India	:	Iran
Hinduism	:	Islam
Sunnis	:	Shi'is
Sufis	:	Jurists

In order to break out of the groove that these present day categories have laid out, it is worth reminding ourselves that the histories of the Mughals and the Safavids were intertwined, and deeply so in their first century. Beginning in the early sixteenth century,

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[30] See, for example, Nikki R. Keddie and Yann Richard, *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).

both empires developed in close interaction and competition with each other. The two polities were also equal participants in the global transformations that were reshaping the political geography of the early modern world. A vast quantity of New World gold, for example, ended up in the Mughal empire in payment for the cotton textiles and spices that the region exported to Europe. The Safavids created in late sixteenth-century a royal monopoly in Iranian silk in order to take advantage of the growing trade with the west. Portuguese missionaries and English ambassadors tried to gain influence at both these courts and competed for trading monopolies on the coasts of India and Iran. For the purposes of this study, however, the key advantage in bringing together Safavid and Mughal narratives is the light it sheds on the role of Islam in South Asia.

It has been noted that in the recounting of South Asian history Islam plays a role that is at the same time "too much and too little."[31] Too much, because it provides a facile view of history where a thousand years of "foreign" Muslim rule in India is notable only for its religious violence. Too little, because India is seen as being distant from the center of Islam – the Middle East and its Semitic civilization – to be of much use in understanding Islam in its historical forms. This contradiction of an overstated Islam in South Asian history and an understated India in Islamic history can be overcome by exposing the common roots of Safavid and Mughal sacred kingship, and the "heretical" competition for messianic and saintly status between the two dynasties. To put it another way, the Mughals of India were as much part of "Islam" as the Safavids of Iran because they were just as interested in the "millennium." At the same time, India suffered much less "Islam" under the Mughals, who did not impose it upon the local population, than Iran did under the Safavids who enacted a policy of forced conversion to Shi'ism.

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[31]Metcalf, "Presidential Address."

Overall, the shared history of sacred kingship in Iran and India should make us rethink the "coming of Islam" narrative in South Asian history. Mughal kingship, far from arriving in India in a pristine Islamic form and then becoming muddled with local "un-Islamic" practices, was already a complex and flexible mélange at its advent. The cultural institutions that the Mughals used in South Asia to deal with a diversity of religious practice and belief were not invented wholesale in the "syncretistic" religious environment of India but largely brought over from the heterogeneous conditions of Timurid and Safavid Iran. The Mughals did not arrive in India to be shocked that many there believed in the transmigration of the soul. They had already witnessed social import of this "heretical" phenomenon in Safavid Iran. The Mughal practice of establishing close connections with networks of devotional brotherhood and "heretical" mendicant orders was based on similar traditions of rule in Timurid Iran and Central Asia. The Mughal devotional cult for imperial officers and courtiers had an immediate and living precedent in Safavid practice. Mughal dependence on Indian astrologers did not reduce their dependence on Iranian ones. On a negative note, the Mughals did not learn to tear down local holy sites only on arriving in "Hindu" India. They and the Safavids were already well-versed in the destruction and desecration of sacred sites – often Sufi shrines – to punish enemies and rebellious localities. These strategies of warfare were common across India and Iran, and Hinduism and Islam.

For good or for worse, there was little "clash of civilizations" between Islam and Hinduism in the Mughal empire because Mughal sacred kingship styled the monarch to be above religious and sectarian divisions. Indeed, when in the late sixteenth century the Safavids began to abandon their millennial heritage, extirpate messianic cults in Iran and

forcibly convert their subjects to doctrinal Shi'ism, the Mughals welcomed the Iranian

"heretics" with open arms. As an embittered critic of the emperor Akbar noted: India "is

a wide place, where there is an open field for all licentiousness, and no one interferes

with another's business."[32]

Organization

This work is organized chronologically. It primarily focuses on the reigns of the

first four Mughal dynasts, Babur, Humayun, Akbar, and Jahangir – covering more than a

century. In these hundred years the nascent Timurid conquest state in north India evolved

into the enduring Mughal empire of South Asia. At the end of this era, India lay

transformed, economically, politically and culturally – and so did the Mughals. If Babur

had come to India speaking and writing in Turkish and hunting on horseback, his great

grandson Jahangir was most comfortable speaking in Hindi and shooting tigers perched

on an elephant. Indeed, if Jahangir had met Babur, the only language the two men would

have been able to converse in was Persian. Persian became the language of administration

and culture in the Mughal empire and remained so until early nineteenth century. By one

estimate, under the Mughals, there were more Persian literate people in India than there

were in Iran.[33] A great number of Iranian soldiers, administrators, merchants, men of

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[32] Abd al-Qadir ibn Muluk Shah Bada'uni, *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh*, 1st ed., 3 vols. (Delhi: Idarah-i-Adabiyat-i-Delli, 1973), 2:246; Abd al-Qadir ibn Muluk Shah Bada'uni, *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh: by 'Abdul Qadir bin-Muluk Shah Known as al-Badaoni*, trans., George S. A. Ranking and Wolseley H. Lowe, 1st in Pakistan ed., 3 vols. (Karachi: Karimsons, 1976), 2:253.

[33] Juan R. Cole, "Iranian Culture and South Asia, 1500-1900," in *Iran and the Surrounding World: Interactions in Culture and Cultural Politics*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie and Rudolph P. Matthee (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002).

religion and learning came to Mughal India to seek their fortune, leaving an indelible print on the languages, cities, buildings, and religions of India.[34]

But if the story of the Mughals ends in India, it begins in Iran and Central Asia. The Mughals of India were proud descendents of two famous Mongol world conquerors, the Muslim Timur (d. 1405) and the pagan Chinggis Khan (d. 1227). They traced their dynastic origins from the former and practiced the norms of comportment of the latter, even as they became an inseparable part of the Indian cultural landscape.[35] Accordingly, this study also pays a significant amount of attention to the Mughal dynasty's Central Asian legacy and Iranian experience.

Chapter 1 focuses on the sacred legacy of Timur. It explores the process by which the Turko-Mongol conqueror Timur (d. 1405) became a model of sacred kingship for later Muslim sovereigns. It argues that Timur's sacred image evolved in a dialectic with Sufi and millenarian movements of the time, and thus came to be articulated in a saintly and messianic idiom. Chapter 2 focuses on the social environment and religious climate of early sixteenth century Iran. It does so by tracing and comparing the careers of two contemporary princes, the Safavid Isma'il (r. 1501-1524) and the Timurid Babur (r. 1494-1530), who laid the foundations of the Safavid and Mughal dynastic realms, in Iran and India respectively. Specifically, it examines the ritual processes and cosmological constraints that forged the social personality of these two sovereigns. Chapter 3 examines the nascent Mughal (Timurid) court in South Asia under emperor Humayun (r. 1530-

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[34] Aziz Ahmad, "Safawid Poets and India," *Iran* xiv (1976); Abolghasem Dadvar, *Iranians in Mughal Politics and Society, 1606-1658* (New Delhi: Gyan Pub. House, 1999); Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Iranians Abroad: Intra-Asian Elite Migration and Early Modern State Formation," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 51, no. 2 (1992); S. Nayyar Wasti, "Iranian Phycisians in the Indian sub-continent," *Studies in History of Medicine and Science* 2, no. iv (1978).

[35] Lisa Balabanlilar, "Lords of the Auspicious Conjunction: Turco-Mongol Imperial Identity on the Subcontinent," *The Journal of World History* 18, no. 1 (2007).

1555), son of Babur. It argues that the new symbolic representations of Humayun's kingship were deeply informed both by popular religious formations in north India and by the messianic style of kingship in Safavid Iran. Chapter 4 examines how, at the end of the first Islamic millennium, the Mughal emperor Akbar (r. 1556-1605), son of Humayun, celebrated his imperial achievements. He enacted a great messianic claim and instituted a grand order of imperial discipleship in open competition with the Safavids of Iran. As such, Akbar represents the culmination of a two century long evolution of the institution of sacred kingship, rooted in the memory of Timur and shaped by popular notions of sacrality in early modern Iran and India. Chapter 5 explores the inner, mystical dimension of sacred kingship from the prism of a new visual culture that had proliferated in the form of painting in early modern Iran and India. By exploring the innovative paintings from the atelier of the Mughal emperor Jahangir (r. 1605-1627), son of Akbar, it shows that the illustrative arts were a means to enunciate royal sacredness, imagine a sanctified dynastic past, and prophecy an auspicious future.

The study ends its historical narrative with the reign of Jahangir because he was the first Mughal sovereign to inherit a stable and fully functioning institution of sacred kinship adapted to the Indian environment. The Mughals dominated South Asia for another century and their institution of kingship continued to evolve. But that story will have to be told in another place. The dissertation's epilogue instead focuses on Mughal kingship's final moment of dissolution at the hands of the English East India Company in the wake of the vast Indian uprising in 1857 against the English. This was a time that saw a last heroic attempt to resurrect the "millennial" sovereignty of the Mughal monarch.

CHAPTER 1

The Lord of Conjunction: Sacrality and Sovereignty in the Age of Timur

Introduction

The style of Muslim kingship that evolved in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was deeply rooted in the memory of Timur (or Tamerlane, r. 1370-1405). A Barlas Turko-Mongol of common birth, he rose from Central Asia to conquer territories in Anatolia, Syria, Iraq, Iran, India, and Russia, and was on his way to subjugate China when he died. The awe that Timur inspired at the time is difficult to imagine today. Thus, modern scholarship tends to treat Timur as his enemies did: Timur the Lame (*Timur-i Lang)*, or Tamerlane, an unspeakably cruel conqueror who wrought destruction on a continent not yet recovered from the ravages of the Mongol invasion led by Chinggis Khan (or Genghis Khan, d. 1227).[36] However, this image ignores an important strand of social memory that revered Timur as the charismatic "Lord of Conjunction" (*Sahib Qiran*), and made him a central object of admiration and imitation for later Muslim sovereigns.

The way Timur was idolized more than two centuries later can be seen vividly in the actions of his famous descendent, the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan (r. 1628-1658) of Taj Mahal fame (See Figure 1-1 for a genealogy).

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[36] Western interest and scholarship in Timur has a long history. The most updated scholarly account of his political and military career is by Beatrice Forbes Manz, *The Rise and Rule of Tamerlane* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

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Timur (d. 1405)

Miran Shah (d. 1408)

Muhammad

Abu Said (d. 1469)

Umar Shaikh II (d. 1494)

Babur (d. 1530)

Humayun (d. 1556)

Akbar (d. 1605)

Jahangir (d. 1627)

Shah Jahan (d. 1666)

Aurangzeb (d. 1707)
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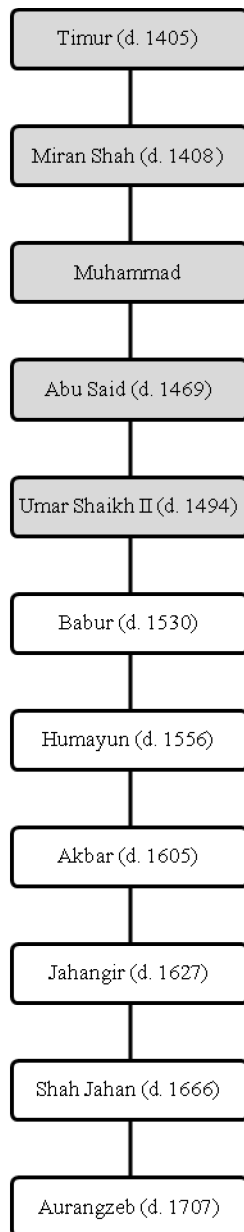
Figure 1-1: The Mughal Dynasty of South Asia with Central Asian Timurid Ancestors (shaded)

In a direct reference to Timur, Shah Jahan called himself the Second Lord of Conjunction (*Sahib Qiran-i Thani*).[37] But this was more than a mere reference. It was an attempt at mimesis. We can see this in the exquisitely illustrated chronicles of Shah Jahan's reign, the opening folios show the two Lords of Conjunction, sitting on thrones facing one another, as if one signifying the other.[38] In a massive work on astronomy commissioned by Shah Jahan, entitled "The Grand Accomplishment of the Second Lord of Conjunction" (*Karnama-yi Sahib Qiran-i Thani*), the preface also suggests a deep ontological equivalence between the two men.[39] The mimetic medium here was not visual but "literal," i.e., involving the hidden properties of letters. Using a table that broke down the numerological value of the Persian letters of the words "Lord of Conjunction," (*sahib qiran*) "Timur," and "Shah Jahan," the Mughal astronomer showed how these names were intimately linked in a series of resemblances with one another and with the number 365, the number of days in the annual cycle of the Sun, the "King of the Heavenly Spheres" and the planet of kings.[40]

Shah Jahan and Timur were fused together alchemically by the artist's brush, the letters of the Persian alphabet, and the cycles of the Sun. This fusion, in other words, was not just metaphorical, a matter of image and text. It was also metonymical, a matter of

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[37] Most of Shah Jahan's predecessors in India had used Lord of Conjunction among their royal titles but he alone made it part of his name.

[38] Milo C. Beach, Ebba Koch, and W. M. Thackston, *King of the World: The Padshahnama: An Imperial Mughal Manuscript from the Royal Library, Windsor Castle* (London: Azimuth Editions, 1997), 26-27.

[39] Farid Ibrahim Dihlavi, "Karnama-yi Sahib Qiran-i Thani Zij-i Shah Jahani," British Museum, London, MS. Or 372, f. 4b. For a description of this work, see Charles Rieu, *Catalogue of the Persian Manuscripts in the British Museum*, 3 vols. (London: British Museum, 1883), 2:459.

[40] These cabbalistic numerical calculations implied an ontological connection between the two men. This type of "mystical" knowledge was widely used at the time and part of a complex, inter-related set of divinatory sciences. See Gernot Windfuhr, "Jafr," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online* (December 15, 2008), available at www.iranicaonline.org. By "resemblance" it is implied that at work here was an episteme akin to the one outlined by Michel Foucault for sixteenth century Europe, when divination was part of erudition. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 17-45.

ritual and mythical enactment. In 1646, Shah Jahan launched from India an audacious campaign to regain the Central Asian territories of Timur, an endeavor that was without any visible economic reward.[41] The campaign is better understood as a pursuit of sacred memory. Indeed, a few years earlier, an artifact of Timur had come to light. A man presented himself at Shah Jahan's court claiming to have the Persian translation of the original Turkish memoirs of Timur, which he had "discovered" in the library of the governor of Yemen.[42] Despite the fantastic narrative of the newly found memoir and its discrepancies with the official fifteenth century Timurid chronicle, Shah Jahan accepted the text as the sacred words of Timur. It was preserved and passed down the Mughal dynastic line in India, beautifully copied out and illustrated, into the nineteenth century.[43]

Not just the Mughals of India but also the Safavids of Iran and the Ottomans further west were in awe of the memory of Timur.[44] He was more than a memory in the common sense of the word, however. His exploits and achievements sparked royal imaginations and spurred kings into action. He was, in other words, a mythical figure of kingship and a dominant symbol of sovereignty. In order to appreciate the historical development and inner workings of the institution of sacred kingship that Timur

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[41] John Richards says that Shah Jahan "spent forty million rupees in an attempt to conquer kingdoms whose total annual revenues were no more than several million rupees." John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 133.

[42] These "spurious" memoirs of Timur are discussed in Irfan Habib, "Timur in the Political Tradition and Historiography of Mughal India," in *L'Héritage Timouride : Iran, Asie Centrale, Inde XVe-XVIIIe Siècles*, ed. Maria Szuppe (Tachkent; Aix-en-Provence: [IFÉAC]; Édisud, 1997), 305-309. For an English translation see Abu Talib Husaini, *The Mulfuzat Timury or Autobiographical Memoirs of the Moghul Emperor Timur*, trans., Charles Stewart (London: Oriental Translation Committee, 1830).

[43] The early nineteenth century manuscript, with four illustrations, one depicting *firangi* (Frankish) ambassadors in Timur's court dressed like contemporary Englishmen, is Abu Talib Husaini, "Malfuzat-i Amir Timur," British Museum, London, MS. Or 158. For a description see Rieu, *British Museum*, 1:177-178.

[44] See Beatrice Forbes Manz, "Tamerlane's Career and its Uses," *Journal of World History* 13, no. 1 (2002). Also, Sholeh Quinn, "Notes on Timurid Legitimacy in Three Safavid Chronicles," *Iranian Studies* 31, no. 2 (1998). And, Cornell H. Fleischer, *Bureaucrat and Intellectual in the Ottoman Empire: The Historian Mustafa Ali (1541-1600)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 281.

engendered, we must first understand the manner in which he came to have such a grip on the cultural imagination of the time. Specifically, we must ask how the myth of Timurid sovereignty – the myth of being a Lord of Conjunction – developed in the first place, and how it was elaborated and passed on as a model of sacred kingship.[45]

These questions require an approach that goes beyond the existing scholarship on Timur's reign, the organization of his army, the alliances he made, the battles he fought, and the cities he built. What is needed, instead, is a serious investigation into the lore surrounding the conqueror and the social conditions that gave these legends the force of truth. The guiding issue, in other words, is not a finer understanding of Timur as an individual but an appreciation of his social persona as a charismatic monarch. The charisma of a public figure, however, has a transient, ephemeral quality to it and survives only if it manages to congeal in social memory.[46] Thus, tracing the process by which Timur's sacred persona developed and became institutionalized means paying close attention both to Timur's actions and intentions as well as to broader processes of narrative and memory-making that gave his image shape. In short, it requires an ethnographic study of how Timur performed his sovereignty, both as a person and as a memory. It is only then that we can make sense of a man who enacted such a multilayered drama of sovereignty that it led a modern scholar to describe him as "one of

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[45] My goal is not, however, to provide a history of Timurid politics and administration, or even a description of Timurid court culture. That topic is well-treated in existing scholarship. See Manz, *Tamerlane*; Beatrice Forbes Manz, *Power, Politics and Religion in Timurid Iran* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007). For the refinements of the Timurid court see Thomas W. Lentz and Glenn D. Lowry, *Timur and the Princely Vision: Persian Art and Culture in the Fifteenth Century* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1989).

[46] According to social theorists, the charisma of a leader draws its power from the collective desires of the group. This point, supported by both Weberian and Durkheimian sociology, goes against the common sense notion of charisma being inherent in an individual "flashing out" to touch everyone around him or her. See Max Weber, *On Charisma and Institution Building*, trans., S. N. Eisenstadt (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 3-42. For a Durkheimian position, see Douglas, *How Institutions Think*, 97-99.

the most complex, puzzling and unattractive figures in the history of Persia and Central Asia."[47]

Timur's Mongol Legacy

Even when he had become the undisputed master of much of Asia, Timur refused to publicly call himself a king. Instead, he continued to rule in the name of the descendents of the Chinggis Khan, the undefeated Mongol conqueror of humble origins, whose sudden rise to power in Asia in the thirteenth century could only be described as miraculous.[48] The miracle of Chinggis was not in Islam's favor, however. He was not Muslim and for almost a century most of his Mongol descendents did not adopt Islam. Thus, in the thirteenth and early fourteenth century a large number of Muslim societies were ruled by non-Muslims. At this time, Islam lost its position as the foremost public idiom of justice and legitimacy. The Chinggisid code *yasa* gained supremacy and Shamanism, Buddhism, and Christianity competed with Islam at the Mongol courts. Nevertheless, by the turn of the fourteenth century, the Mongol aristocracy had begun to adopt a pattern of semi-nomadic, Persian, and Muslim life. This process was not free from tension, however. In Timur's time, for example, the sophisticated Persianized Mongols were called half-breeds (*qara'unas*) by their more nomadic cousins from the

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[47]David Morgan, *Medieval Persia, 1040-1797* (London: Longman, 1988), 93.
[48] The classic scholarly treatment of the Mongols is by David Morgan, *The Mongols* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990). A concise and up-to-date introduction to the Mongol conqueror can be found in Michal Biran, *Chinggis Khan* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007). For a study of court culture, see Linda Komaroff and Stefano Carboni, eds., *The Legacy of Genghis Khan: Courtly Art and Culture in Western Asia, 1256-1353* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2002). For an eminently readable and highly imaginative account by an anthropologist, albeit one written for a general audience, see J. McIver Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* (New York: Crown, 2004).

steppe. The latter were in turn labeled as robbers or raiders (*jete*) for their rough and ready demeanor and disdain for urban life.[49]

Timur rose to power in this cultural ferment and became the emblem of this new style of aristocratic existence; of building grand cities but living in luxurious tents pitched in suburban pleasure gardens; of patronizing classical traditions of Islam but practicing norms of comportment that drew sustenance from other semiotic realms, namely the traditions of ancient Iran and the norms (*tuzuk*) of Chinggis Khan. Accordingly, his sacred persona drew less upon scriptural sources of Islam and more upon broader processes of social memory, devotional practice, and popular myths. This is not to say that the intellectual traditions of Islam had lost their vitality but to argue that such scholastic writings did not structure the symbolic terrain on which the competition for sovereignty took place. Indeed, this is evidenced by the fact that Timur's famous title, Lord of Conjunction, has no basis in Islamic scriptural traditions. Rather, it derives from the science of astrology. Yet, as will be argued below, it was a deeply sacred category of sovereignty for Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Why did Timur adopt this title or why was he remembered for centuries by it are questions that remain unanswered.[50] Despite its fame in Timur's time, Lord of

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[49] See H. R. Roemer, "Timur in Iran," in *The Cambridge History of Iran: The Timurid and Safavid Periods*, ed. Peter Jackson and Laurence Lockhart (Cambridge: University Press, 1986), 43.

[50] No detailed study of the term Sahib Qiran and its use by rulers is available in English language scholarship. It is generally acknowledged to have become a royal title after Timur, see T. W. Haig, "Sahib Kiran (a. and p.)." in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman et al. (Brill, 2009), available at www.brillonline.nl. One scholar has pointed out that the expression appeared on coins only after Timur, see G. P. Taylor, "On the Symbol 'Sahib Qiran'," *Journal and Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 6 (1910). While the term became extremely popular after Timur, it can be found earlier in the poetry of Mas'ud Sa'ad Salman (d. 1121), Khaqani (d. 1190), Nizami (d. 1209), Sa'di (d. 1283/1291?) and Hafez (d. 1390) and in the chronicle *Jami' al-Tawarikh* of the Ilkhanid minister and historian Rashid al-Din (d. 1318), see "Sahib Qiran," in *Lughatname-yi Dehkhoda [Dehkhoda Dictionary CD-ROM]*, ed. Ali Akbar Dehkhoda (Tehran, Iran: Daneshgah-i Tehran, 2002). The Ilkhanid ruler Arghun (d. 1291), whose son Ghazan was among the first Mongol rulers to convert to Islam, also called himself Sahib Qiran, see Anne F. Broadbridge, *Kingship and Ideology in the Islamic and Mongol Worlds* (Cambridge: Cambridge University

Conjunction is an expression that has lost its meaning in ours. No scholarly study of the

Timurid period treats it in detail. Even simple definitions of the term are often

misinformed and inconsistent. The way Timur's title has slipped through the epistemic

cracks of modern historiography is indicative of a larger gap in our knowledge central to

understanding this formative moment in Islamic history. This lost fragment of the

Timurid cultural system consisted of a web of symbols, narratives, and practices through

which sovereignty came to be imagined, negotiated, and competed over. The invocation

of being a Lord of Conjunction was an extremely potent move, and many religious

figures and leaders of social movements competed with Timur for this title. It is in this

competition for sacrality and sovereignty that we begin to see a new style of charismatic

kingship emerging, a style that became enshrined in the memory of Timur. That is to say,

it was Timur who became uniquely identified with the label Lord of Conjunction. And so

began the age of Timur, the age of being a Lord of Conjunction. To view this process, it

is necessary to unlock the meaning this expression held for its aspirants in Timur's time

and later. This requires not only a literal definition but also a thick description of the term

"Lord of Conjunction," as it came to be used in different contexts for varying ends by

Timur, his followers, and his rivals.[51]

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Press, 2008), 44. Given Arghun's use of an astrological title, it is worth pointing out his deep interest in astrology, alchemy and other occult sciences. In fact, he died from an elixir of life meant to make him immortal, see Charles Melville, "The Mongols in Iran," in *The Legacy of Genghis Khan: Courtly Art and Culture in Western Asia, 1256-1353*, ed. Linda Komaroff and Stefano Carboni (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2002), 55.
[51] "Thick description" advocated as an ethnographic technique by Clifford Geertz needs little introduction. See Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973). Today, Geertz's programmatic statements on "culture" provoke criticism, but for a good defense of "thick description" and its advantages in interpreting unfamiliar texts from a distant past, see Stephen Greenblatt, "A Touch of the Real," in *The Fate of "culture": Geertz and Beyond*, ed. Sherry B. Ortner (1999). For a reassessment of the concept of culture, see William H. Sewell, "The Concept (s) of Culture," in *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*, ed. Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Avery Hunt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

Ibn Khaldun's Prophecy Concerning the Rise of Timur

The earliest mention we have of Timur as Lord of Conjunction in a non-Timurid

source is in a report of the eminent Arab historian, judge, and intellectual, Ibn Khaldun,

who spent a month at Timur's courtly encampment in Syria. Ibn Khaldun was in

Damascus when Timur arrived with his army in the year 1401, having conquered and

brutally ravaged Delhi and northern India two years earlier. During the siege of the city,

Ibn Khaldun learned that the conqueror had enquired after him. Seeing that the city was

about to fall now that the defending Mamluk army had retreated to Egypt, and in fear of a

plot against his life for supporting a negotiated surrender of the city, the seventy year old

scholar had himself lowered from the city walls and brought to Timur's courtly

encampment. When given the chance to speak, Ibn Khaldun told Timur that he had been

waiting for this moment for thirty or forty years. Ibn Khaldun explained:

> Before this, when I was in the Maghrib, I had heard many predictions (*hidthan*)
> concerning [Timur's] appearance. Astrologers who used to discuss the
> conjunction (*qiran*) of the two superior planets were awaiting the tenth
> conjunction in the trigon, which was expected to occur in the year 766 AH (1364).
> One day … I met in Fez in the Mosque of al-Qarawiyin the preacher of
> Constantine…who was an expert in this art (*kana mahiran fi hadha al-fan*). I
> asked him about this conjunction which was to occur, and its implications. He
> answered me, "It points to a powerful one who would arise in the northeast region
> of a desert people, tent dwellers, who will triumph over kingdoms, overturn
> governments, and become the masters of most of the inhabited world," I asked,
> "When is it due?" He said, "In the year 784 AH (1382 AD); accounts of it will be
> widespread." Ibn Zarzar, the Jewish physician and astrologer of Ibn Alfonso [son
> of Alfonso of Castile, known as Pedro the Cruel, d. 1369], king of the Franks,
> wrote to me similarly; also my teacher, the authority on metaphysics Muhammad
> ibn Ibrahim al-Abili…said to me whenever I conversed with him or questioned
> him about it, "This event is approaching, and if you live, you will surely witness
> it." We used to hear that the Sufis in the Maghrib also were expecting this
> occurrence. They believed, however, that the agent (*qa'im*) of this event would be
> the Fatimid to whom the prophetic traditions of the Shi'a and others refer. Yahya
> ibn 'Abd Allah, grandson of Sheikh Abu Ya'qub al-Badisi, foremost among the
> saints of the Maghrib, told me that the Sheikh had said to them one day as he
> came from morning prayer, "Today the Fatimid Savior (*al-Qa'im al-Fatimi*) was

born." That was in the fourth decade of the eighth century. Because of all this I, too, had been watching for the event; so now, on account of my fears, it occurred to me to tell him something of it by which he would be diverted and might become kindly disposed toward me.[52]

Ibn Khaldun had done his research, interviewing merchants from Iran ahead of Timur's arrival in Syria.[53] Accordingly, he chose a form of flattery to match the lore surrounding Timur. In so many words, he called Timur a Lord of Conjunction whose rise to the mastery of the world was signaled by a "conjunction of the two superior planets"; a leader awaited by the most learned men of the age, by Sufis, astrologers and physicians, by preachers and metaphysicians, by Muslims and Jews[54], in Muslim North Africa and in Christian Spain; a man who would inaugurate a new era, possibly the last one before the end of time; a man who was potentially the awaited Messiah (*al-Qa'im al-Fatimi*).

Lord of Conjunction was, as Ibn Khaldun knew, a messianic category derived from the science of conjunction astrology. It is not surprising that this messianic label had become part of Timur's lore because, at the time, messianism – the millenarian belief in the arrival of a savior to set right the unbearable order of things[55] – was a prevalent social phenomenon. To follow an eminent scholar of Timurid Iran, this expectation of the rise of an ideal sovereign, a true caliph, a *mahdi* (messiah), was on the "concrete plane"

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[52] I have modified the translation slightly from Ibn Khaldun and Walter Joseph Fischel, *Ibn Khaldun and Tamerlane: Their Historic Meeting in Damascus, 1401 AD (803 AH)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1952), 35-36. For the Arabic see, Ibn Khaldun, *Ta'rif bi-Ibn Khaldun wa-Rihlatuhu Gharban wa-Sharqan* (Lebanon: Dar al-Kitab al-Lubnani, 1979), 412-413.

[53] For the research Ibn Khaldun did before Timur's arrival see the commentary in Ibn Khaldun and Fischel, *Ibn Khaldun and Tamerlane*, 82.

[54] The Jewish physician and astronomer, Ibn Zarzar, mentioned by Ibn Khaldun was a famous intellectual who served both Muslim and Christian rulers of Spain. See the commentary in Ibid., 80-81.

[55] The New Oxford Dictionary of English (1998) defines millenarianism as "the doctrine of or belief in a future (and typically imminent) thousand-year age of blessedness, beginning with or culminating in the Second Coming of Christ."As eschatology, the idea is not limited to Christianity, however. Variations of it can be found in messianic traditions of a number of religious traditions. See Cohn, *Cosmos*.

perhaps the only coherent theme of religious life.[56] There exists no in-depth historical

explanation of why this period became the "messianic age" of Islam.[57] In its absence, the

generally accepted argument remains the one given for most instances of millenarianism,

i.e., social and economic deprivation.[58] In other words, the dismal state of affairs after the

Mongol conquests, which destroyed the political order and flattened social structures

across the eastern Islamic world, provided a space for a number of religious movements

that expressed themselves in a messianic idiom, promising a sudden turn for the better.

There are excellent studies of some of these movements.[59] However, when it comes to

the study of political culture or institutions of kingship, few have explored the nexus of

"popular" millenarianism and sovereign messianism, especially in the case of Timur.[60]

This is surprising, given that the widespread messianic myth was clearly a "political"

one; that is to say, it was integrally connected to notions of sovereignty and authority.

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[56] In a classic essay, Scarcia-Amoretti noted that in the Timurid and Safavid period of Iranian history, "…it is indisputable that there was a rapprochement on the concrete plane which occurred at a time when, as all scholars admit, there was a "return" to the myth of the ideal sovereign, a "true Caliph", and consequently to a renewal of the hope in the advent of a leader in spiritual affairs and so too in religious affairs. This eagerly awaited leader was the Mahdi, a figure who was variously delineated and characterised in the different areas and *madhahib* proclaiming and anticipating his coming." B. S. Amoretti, "Religion in the Timurid and Safavid Periods," in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, ed. Peter Avery, Gavin Hambly, and Charles Melville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 610. On the idea of the *mahdi* in Islam, see W. Madelung, "Mahdi," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, CD-ROM* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).
[57] For a succinct account of the factors that went into the making of the "messianic age" of Islamic history, see Bashir, *Messianic Hopes*, 31-41.
[58] Its pervasiveness in written and oral cultures around the world has led social scientists to use millenarianism as an analytical category for the study of social movements "that have been animated by the idea of a perfect age or a perfect land." See Sylvia L. Thrupp, ed. *Millennial Dreams in Action: Studies in Revolutionary Religious Movements* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), 11. Often, though not always, millenarian movements were a form of political protest by marginalized and oppressed groups. See E. J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1971); Peter Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound: A Study of "Cargo" Cults in Melanesia* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968). Sometimes this millenarian "enthusiasm" of the masses was harnessed for war, as was the case during the first crusade when many of Europe's poor left their homes to fight what they thought was the last battle before the end of time. See Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*. However, it must be noted that the theory of millenarianism as merely a collective reaction to social deprivation has its strong critics. See Douglas, *Natural Symbols*.
[59] See, for example, Bashir, *Messianic Hopes*; Shahzad Bashir, *Fazlallah Astarababi and the Hurufis* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005). Also, see Amoretti, "Religion in the Timurid and Safavid Periods."
[60] For such a case study of Safavid Iran, see Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*.

This much is evident from Ibn Khaldun's own famous writings on the philosophy of history.

Conjunction Astrology and the Messianic Worldview

It is intriguing that Ibn Khaldun called Timur the Messiah because elsewhere he derided the "stupid mass" who believed in such things as the imminent arrival of the savior.[61] Which Ibn Khaldun should we take more seriously, the historian's historian who despised superstitions of the masses (*khurafat al 'ama*)[62] or the self-professed collector of apocalyptic predictions and messianic prophecies? This issue is resolved once we realize that Ibn Khaldun's disdain for the gullibility of the masses did not apply to the discipline of astrology on which his own ideas of the millennium were based. Today, Ibn Khaldun is renowned for his sociological approach to history but not for his knowledge of astrology and divination. This bias in modern scholarship is understandable since astrology today is thought of derogatorily as "magic." Although now considered to be outside the respectable categories of either religion or science, astrology used to be an integral part of both.[63]

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[61] Ibn Khaldun wrote, "The common people, the stupid mass, who make claims with respect to the Mahdi and who are not guided in this connection by any intelligence or helped by any knowledge, assume that the Mahdi may appear in a variety of circumstances and places….Many weak-minded people go to those places in order to support a deceptive cause that the human soul in its delusion and stupidity leads them to believe capable of succeeding. Many of them have been killed…." Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah, an Introduction to History. Abridged and Edited by N. J. Dawood.*, trans., Franz Rosenthal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 259.

[62] Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddima Ibn Khaldun*, ed. Ihab Muhammad Ibrahim (Cairo: Maktabat al-Quran, 2006), 19.

[63] Astrology declined first in seventeenth century Europe and then slowly around the world as the results of the scientific revolution destroyed its intellectual foundations. Moreover, it was in the seventeenth century that the very category of "magic" as we understand it came into being, i.e., as false religion or bad science. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 335-424.

There are few detailed studies of the place and function of astrology in Muslim societies.[64] However, it is to our advantage that astrology was at the time a "global" science, with texts, methods, and results shared across the Christian and Islamic worlds.[65] Hence, the insights offered by Keith Thomas in his landmark work on early modern England hold true, in broad terms, for Timur's milieu as well. Thomas showed that before the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, astrology was not only a popular practice but also an intellectually demanding science. Its basic assumptions were not esoteric but part of the educated person's knowledge of the world and the cosmos. Indeed, as a systematic and comprehensive explanation of human and social affairs, astrology had few rivals at the time.[66] In short, astrology was an important intellectual tradition which contributed to elite theories on the relationship between temporality, sovereignty, and the body politic.

What concerns us here is conjunction astrology, which used the cyclical motion of the celestial spheres and the periodic alignment or "conjunction" of the planets to divide historical time into meaningful eras. A mixture of ancient Iranian, Indian, and Greek

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[64] There are, however, a number of bibliographical and technical studies on astrology and the occult. For unpublished Arabic sources see Toufic Fahd, *La Divination Arabe: Etudes Religieuses, Sociologiques et Folkloriques sur le Milieu Natif de l'Islam* (Paris: Sindbad, 1987). Rigorous technical studies, translations and overviews of Islamic astronomy and astrology include Kennedy, Pingree, and Masha'allah, *Astrological History*; Pingree, "Astronomy and Astrology in India and Iran."; Pingree, *Thousands*. For the pre-Mongol period see Pingree and Brunner, "Astrology and Astronomy in Iran."; George Saliba, "The Role of the Astrologer in Medieval Islamic Society," in *Magic and Divination in Early Islam*, ed. Emilie Savage-Smith (Aldershot: Ashgate/Variorum, 2004).

[65] The most influential vernacular treatise in seventeenth century England, William Lilly's *Christian Astrology* (1647), was a translation of the work of Abu al-Hasan ibn Abi al-Rijal (d. c. 1035, known in Europe as Albohazen). Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 336. Discussions of Islamic astrology's influence on European thought can be found in Garin, *Astrology in the Renaissance*. Also see, Smoller, *History, Prophecy, and the Stars*.

[66] Indeed, Thomas argued that astrology was in a way the precursor of today's social sciences. Astrology's decline in the seventeenth century was related to the increasing mass of astronomical evidence that gradually eroded elite confidence in the structure of the Ptolemaic cosmos. Nevertheless, this decline was desultory and unpredictable at the time. English ship-owners, for example, continued to consult astrologers before buying insurance for their ships. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 368.

traditions, it was first propounded in Islamic times by Masha'allah (d. ca. 815)[67], an

Iranian Jewish scholar and spread through the works of Abu Maʿshar (d. 886, known as

Albumazar in Europe) who became the most famous astrologer of medieval times.[68] To

put it schematically, these astrologers used the conjunction of the two "superior

planets"[69], Saturn and Jupiter, as a way of ordering historical events and predicting the

future. These conjunctions recurred every 20 years, 240 years or 960 years, depending

upon how they were calculated, and were called "small," "medium," and "great,"

respectively.[70] Ibn Khaldun explained the basics of conjunction astrology in his famous

treatise on the philosophy of history, the *Muqaddima*:

> The great conjunction indicates great events, such as a change in royal authority
> (*mulk*) or dynasties (*dawla*), or a transfer of royal authority from one people to
> another. The medium conjunction (indicates) the appearance of persons in search
> of superiority and royal authority; the small conjunction indicates the appearance
> of rebels or propagandists, and the ruin of towns or of their civilization.[71]

Conjunction astrologers were in great demand, as Ibn Khaldun himself noted,

"Rulers and *amirs* [commanders] who want to know the duration of their own dynasties

show the greatest concern for these things."[72] He quoted many astrologers on

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[67] See J. Samso, "Masha'allah," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, CD-ROM* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).
[68] When Abu Maʿshar's work was translated into Latin in the thirteenth century, his ideas had a major impact on shaping the intellectual basis of Christian millennial theories. J. M. Millas, "Abu Ma'shar," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, CD-ROM* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).
[69] Saturn and Jupiter were called the superior planets because they were the two farthermost bodies among the seven "planets" visible to the naked eye, namely, Moon, Mercury, Mars, Sun, Venus, Jupiter, and Saturn.
[70] This is how David Pingree puts it: "A Saturn-Jupiter conjunction takes place about every 20 years; a series will occur in the signs of one triplicity for about 240 years, that is twelve conjunctions; and they will have passed through the four triplicities and begin the cycle again after about 960 years. Then they shift from one triplicity to another, they indicate events on the order of dynastic changes. The completion of a cycle of 960 years, which is mixed up with various millennial theories, causes revolutionary events such as the appearance of a major prophet. The ordinary course of politics is dependent on the horoscopes of the vernal equinoxes of the years in which the minor conjunctions within a triplicity take place." See Pingree, "Astronomy and Astrology in India and Iran," 245.
[71] Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*, 261. For the Arabic, see Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddima Ibn Khaldun*, 349.
[72] Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*, 259.

conjunctions.[73] According to one such authority, Prophet Muhammad's birth in the seventh century had occurred under a conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter in the sign of Cancer. The Prophet of Islam, in other words, was a Lord of Conjunction. Another related that Sassanian astrologers had foretold the advent of Islam to the Persian king who was about to lose his throne to the Arabs. This conjunction signaled the end of the Persian-Zoroastrian dispensation and the beginning of the Arab-Islamic one. This obviously raised the question of when the era of Muslim and Arab supremacy would end. Apparently, scriptural traditions did not provide the last word on Islamic eschatology. Astrologers also had a range of opinions to offer.

One eminent astrologer, for example, calculated that Islam would wane in precisely 960 years, that is to say, upon the millennial anniversary of the conjunction that had signified the birth of Islam. Such predictions were also available, Ibn Khaldun reported, with other sacred lore in books of Shi'i apocalyptic literature called *jafr*.[74] In sum, conjunction astrology was an elite intellectual tradition embraced by kings and rebels, court astrologers and "schismatic" groups, Muslims and non-Muslims. Inspired by the revolution of the heavens, it sustained the truly ancient doctrine of the millennium: that prophetic and imperial dispensations last no longer than a thousand years and that they are destined to be overthrown or renewed at some regular interval of time – a predictable fraction or multiple of the millennium.[75] This doctrine made eminent sense in

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[73] Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddima Ibn Khaldun*, 348-352.
[74] Ibid., 351. Jafr originated as an occult technique for predicting the overthrow of the enemies of the Shi'a and the rise of the savior. Toufic Fahd, "Djafr," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, CD-ROM* (Leiden: Brill, 1999). It drew upon and overlapped with a variety of divinatory techniques including numerology, astrology and scriptural traditions. See Windfuhr, "Jafr."
[75] For example, it is well-known that Ma'shallah merged the astrological theory of Saturn-Jupiter conjunctions with Zoroastrian millenarian traditions. These traditions held that a savior, called the Saoshyant, will rise at the beginning of every millennium after Zoroaster to usher in a new era and renew the teaching of Zoroaster. Cohn, *Cosmos, 103.*

an age when the world was thought to last no longer than seven or eight thousand years from the birth of Adam.[76]

Lord of Conjunction, then, was in its most energetic form a millennial title, which signified change in religio-political order on a global scale and, potentially, the end of the world. But, more generally, the science of astrology allowed a conjunction to have a range of meanings. A condensed symbol, it could expand and change color to match the social situation and audience. A conjunction could signify a lucky general, a fortunate king, a world conqueror with a lasting dispensation, a prophet with a law, a messiah or all of the above rolled into one. It spanned the domain of religion and politics, encapsulating the ancient Iranian adage that kings and prophets are twins. Most importantly, however, Lord of Conjunction was distinct from other titles of kings and prophets in that it contained within it a unique conception of temporality. It made explicit a worldview based on cycles of time.[77] In this conception, historical time seemed to fold back upon itself: new events occurred and new figures appeared, but they were the fulfillment of earlier ones that had prefigured them.[78] This polyvalence and cyclical temporality

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[76] For a detailed eleventh century comparison of the various theories on the age of world including Islamic, Christian, Jewish, as well as pre-Islamic Iranian and Indian ones, see the work by the brilliant polymath Muhammad ibn Ahmad Biruni, *The Chronology of Ancient Nations: An English Version of the Arabic Text of the Athar-ul-Bakiya of Albiruni*, trans., Eduard Sachau (London: Published for the Oriental translations fund of Great Britain & Ireland by W. H. Allen and co., 1879).

[77] For notions of cyclical time as made explicit in some of the Sufi cosmologies of the time, see Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*; Bashir, *Hurufis*.

[78] Such a conception of time can be understood as "figural" to quote Erich Auerbach, who reminds us that unlike in symbolism and allegory "in a figural relation both the signifying and the signified facts are real and concrete historical events" and that "the interpreter had to take recourse to a vertical projection of this event on the plane of providential design by which the event is revealed as a prefiguration or a fulfillment or perhaps as an imitation of other events." See Erich Auerbach, "Typological Symbolism in Medieval Literature," *Yale French Studies*, no. 9, Symbol and Symbolism. (1952): 5-6. Benedict Anderson used Auerbach's conception of the figural to describe Messianic Time as "a simultaneity of past and future in an instantaneous present." See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. and extended ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 24. For a discussion of the concept of Messianic Time in history and theory, see Kathryn A. Woolard, "Is the Past a Foreign Country?: Time, Language Origins, and the Nation in Early Modern Spain," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 14, no. 1 (2004). A similar conception of the past seems to have animated classical Islamic historiography: "Unlike

ensconced in the expression Lord of Conjunction was of great use to Timur and, even more so, to his successors.

The Development of Timur's Sacred Persona

Let us return to the moment when Ibn Khaldun, in his long-winded way, called Timur the Lord of Conjunction. Instead of acknowledging Ibn Khaldun's flattery, Timur replied that he was merely a general (*amir*). The conqueror responded in a similar manner when Ibn Khaldun compared him to the great emperors of the past – Khusraw, Ceasar, Alexander and Nebuchadnezzar –, insisting that he was only akin to, and indeed shared a genealogy with, Nebuchadnezzar who had not been a sovereign but a mere general of the Persians. We are faced here with a conundrum. Timur publicly refused to accept the messianic title of Lord of Conjunction or even be acknowledged as an independent sovereign.[79] Solving this riddle is the key to understanding how the Timurid myth of sacred kingship developed.

Ibn Khaldun's report, written after 1401, suggests that Timur's formal, public portrayal as Lord of Conjunction probably occurred at the very end of his reign, and even more likely, after his death in 1405. What we know about Timurid historiography supports this conjecture. All the extant chronicles of Timur's reign, with one exception,

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the neutral reader of today, who harbors few specific expectation of how things might or should develop, the medieval reader was primarily interested in seeing where all this was leading to – whether events…would truly fulfill earlier prophecies and whether the religious lesson truly exists." Tayeb El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography: Harun al-Rashid and the Narrative of the Abbasid Caliphate* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 53. Few, however, have taken seriously the role astrology played in keeping alive an explicit formulation of Messianic Time. But see, Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*; Bashir, *Hurufis*.

[79] Timur asked for the real king, the descendent of Chinggis Khan, to be produced for the benefit of the historian. The lad, Timur was informed, had slipped away from the line of courtiers and out of the royal tent. Ibn Khaldun and Fischel, *Ibn Khaldun and Tamerlane*, 36. Timur professed his modest position as a subordinate to the Chinggisids to other people as well. See John E. Woods, "Timur's Geneology," in *Intellectual Studies on Islam: Essays Written in Honor of Martin B. Dickson*, ed. Michel M. Mazzaoui and Vera B. Moreen (Salt Lake City, Utah: Univeristy of Utah, 1990), 102.

were composed and completed more than two decades after Timur's death. The exception

is the chronicle written by Nizam al-Din Shami, which Timur had commissioned himself,

but even that was begun in 1401, the year Ibn Khaldun met Timur, and finished in 1404,

one year before Timur died.[80] Although all these chronicles call Timur "Lord of

Conjunction," none of them point to the precise moment when he adopted the title but

simply use it to refer to him from the beginning.[81] In order to make sense of the games

Timur and his successors played with his image, there is no choice but to wade through

the murky period toward the end of his reign and the two decades after his death. The

process of Timurid myth-making can only be guessed at but its broad outlines are

reasonably clear.

As was mentioned earlier, Timur upheld the "legal fiction" of Chinggisid

supremacy till late into his reign.[82] But this was not merely a matter of law. As one

historian has astutely observed, there also seems to have been something propitious about

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[80] John E. Woods, "The Rise of Timurid Historiography," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 46, no. 2 (1987).

[81] Note, however, that E. G. Browne recorded that Timur received the honor of being called Sahib Qiran when he overthrew his rival Sultan Husayn in 1370. Edward G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia*, 4 vols. (Cambridge, UK: The University Press, 1929), 2:185. In this, I believe, Browne was mistaken. Browne did not give a precise citation for his assertion but the edition of the *Zafarnama* he used does not contain such a statement and neither do the manuscript versions I consulted in the British Library. See Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi, *The Zafarnamah*, ed. Muhammad Ilahdad, 2 vols. (Calcutta: Asiatic Society Bengal (Baptist Mission Press), 1887), 211. The source for this error may have been an eighteenth century abridged translation from Persian via French into English which paraphrases Yazdi's poetry, stating erroneously that during Timur's coronation ceremony "they gave him the title of Sahib Qiran." See Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi, *The History of Timur-Bec*, trans., John Darby, 2 vols. (London: Printed for J. Darby [etc.], 1723), 1: 131. The actual verse carries no such meaning. For one, Yazdi's poetry is more likely rhetorical, not descriptive, and even if read descriptively, it states that "they showered him with gold and pearls and called him King Sahib Qiran" with the word "king" (*shah*) being the new operative term as it was a coronation ceremony, and not the term "Sahib Qiran," which the chronicle uses to refer to Timur from the beginning. Moreover, Yazdi's chronicle seems to have "revised" the earlier one of Shami in depicting Timur's accession ceremony. Yazdi depicted it as the moment of Timur's accession to the throne, calling him shah, while promoting the Chinggisid puppet ruler to the position of "khan." However, in the earlier chronicle by Shami, written at the end of Timur's reign, it was a Chinggisid who was crowned King of the World (*Padishah-i Jahan*) at this time and Timur was not "given" any formal title. See Yazdi, *The Zafarnamah*, 199, 211. And, Nizam al-Din Shami, *Zafarnamah: Tarikh-i Futuhat-i Amir Timur Gurkani*, ed. Panahi Simnani (Tihran: Bamdad, 1984), 61.

[82] John Woods calls it Timur's legal fiction. See Woods, "Timurid Historiography," 105.

it.[83] In other words, Timur's public deference to Chinggisid supremacy was a ritual act meant to preserve the right cosmological balance. Timur was not the first and only one to participate in this bit of magic. Mongols, Muslims and non-Muslims, made up a significant part of the army and descent from Chinggis Khan was a sacred marker of sovereign status. Even the Mamluk rulers of Egypt, often sworn enemies of the Chinggisids, in diplomatic negotiations asked for a Chinggisid princess bride.[84] Thus, early on in his career, Timur incorporated himself into the Chinggisid legacy by becoming a Chinggisid son-in-law, upholding Chinggisid law, and maintaining Chinggisid puppets on the throne. We should not lose sight of the ritual domain in which Timur performed these acts. As his stature grew with his conquests, he attempted to surpass Chinggis Khan in other performative, not to mention gruesome, ways: by the wholesale destruction of cities; by the rape, enslavement, and slaughter of their inhabitants; and by the building of towers of skulls on a scale that outdid the Mongol conqueror.[85] His reputation for public displays of cruelty seems to have exceeded even that of Chinggis Khan.[86] Although unpalatable today, these actions etched a reverent awe for Timur in the social memory of the time.[87]

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[83] "Le maintien à la tête de l'empire timouride d'un khan fantoche de sang gengiskhanide s'explique sans doute autant par des motifs propitiatoires que par des scrupules juridiques ou un calcul politique." See Jean Aubin, "Comment Tamerlan Prenait le Villes," *Studia Islamica* 19 (1963): 87.

[84] The bride was Tulunbay Khatun who arrived in Egypt in the year 1320. The Mamluks desire for a Chinggisid princess is understandable given they were a "slave" dynasty and the rulers could not claim a noble lineage. See Broadbridge, *Kingship and Ideology*, 132-135.

[85] Manz, *Tamerlane*, 15.

[86] Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 2: 428-436.

[87] Early to mid-sixteenth century copies of the Timurid chronicles include paintings which depict the towers of skulls with the same verve as the wedding celebrations of Timurid princes in which an eminent Islamic scholar of Samarkand inducted them into the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam (*bar nahaj-i qawaid-i millat-i hanafi*), see the 1523 version of Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi, "Zafarnama (b)," British Museum, London, MS Add 7635, f. 326a, 565b. Such towers can also be seen in another copy completed in 1552, see Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi, "Zafarnama (c)," British Museum, London, MS. Or 1359, f. 120a, 329a. This

Although Timur's charisma at the height of his reign may have begun to rival his

Mongol icon, its cultural expression took on a very different form from that of Chinggis

Khan. Let us briefly examine this process. The two conquerors' legendary status was

based on a similar sense of wonder about the secret of their world-conquering success.

After all, both men had been little more than sheep-raiders and horse-thieves in their

youth. What could explain this sudden rise to greatness? As Ibn Khaldun observed in the

case of Timur:

> This king Timur is one of the greatest and mightiest of kings. Some attribute to
> him knowledge (*al-'ilm*), others attribute to him heresy (*i'tiqad al-rafd*) because
> they note his preference for the 'members of the House' [of 'Ali]; still others
> attribute to him the employment of magic and sorcery (*'ala intihal al-sihr*), but in
> all this there is nothing; it is simply that he is highly intelligent and very
> perspicacious, addicted to debate and argumentation about what he knows and
> also about what he does not know.[88]

Ibn Khaldun's healthy skepticism notwithstanding, Timur's rise to power was, as

many suspected, due to a wide range of possibilities: "knowledge"; devotion to the

Prophet's family; or magic and sorcery. It can be argued that Timur's sacred aura was a

result of this collective need for a cosmological explanation to render meaningful his

meteoric and cataclysmic rise to world domination. Moreover, the conception and

articulation of this sacredness was shaped by established social institutions and cultural

forms. In the case of Timur, these institutions and forms belonged to a historically-

specific style of Sufism that had begun to regulate the religious and social life of the

region in the aftermath of the devastating Mongol conquests.

Around the fourteenth century, in the politically fragmented aftermath of the

Mongol invasions and wars, mystical brotherhoods in Iran and Central Asia began

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celebration of Timur's cruel displays of sovereignty were not just a matter of painting; Safavid and Mughal
rulers kept this wartime tradition alive more than a century after Timur.
[88] Ibn Khaldun and Fischel, *Ibn Khaldun and Tamerlane*, 47. Ibn Khaldun, *Ta'rif*, 428.

breaking out of their monastic shells and reaching out to the masses.[89] Sufi orders

absorbed local saint cults, Sufi shrines became important centers of pilgrimages and

social life, and Sufi leadership became hereditary. The result was a tremendous increase

in the material, cultural, and martial resources commanded by Sufi leaders, their kin and

devotees. And so began an era of competition and interdependence between mystics and

kings, of Sufi politics and royal saintliness, in which religion shaped, and was shaped by,

royal tastes and rituals.[90] We must turn to these recently-minted institutions, intellectual

traditions and practices of Sufism in order to appreciate how Timurid charisma was

constructed and imagined. For, the processes of cultural production which transmuted

kings into saints were spawned not in the domain of kingship but in the realm of

sainthood.

If the Damascene historian Ibn Arabshah[91] (d. 1450), a well-known detractor of

Timur, is to be believed, the conqueror already enjoyed a cult-like following among a

group of his soldiers who treated him as their spiritual guide. These men:

> …took him as their guide and protector independent of God, glorying in this and
> being outrageously insolent [about it]. Indeed, their denial of Islam (*kufr*) and
> their love for him were so great that had he claimed the rank of prophet or even
> divinity, they would have believed him in his claim. Each and every one of them
> sought to gain God Almighty's favor through devotion to him, making a vow to
> him when they fell into dire straits and [then] fulfilling it. They persisted in their
> false belief and their denial of Islam throughout his lifetime, and after his death

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[89] The classic account of this process remains that of Trimingham, *Sufi Orders*. For an updated view see
Green, *Sufism: A Brief History*. For a description of shrines and their architecture from this period see
Sheila S. Blair, "Sufi Saints and Shrine Architecture in the Early Fourteenth Century," *Muqarnas* 7 (1990).
A perceptive study of how shrines began to organize urban space see Ethel Sara Wolper, *Cities and Saints:
Sufism and the Transformation of Urban Space in Medieval Anatolia* (University Park, PA: The
Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003). This did not mean, however, that an antinomian anti-social
strain of mysticism did not sustain itself. See Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *God's Unruly Friends: Dervish
Groups in the Islamic Later Middle Period, 1200-1550* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006).
[90] This phenomenon is not as extensively studied as it should be. But see Simon Digby, "The Sufi Shaykh
and the Sultan: A Conflict of Claims to Authority in Medieval India," *Iran* 28 (1990).
[91] Ibn Arabshah had as a child accompanied his father, a scholar, when he was forced to relocate to
Samarkand after the fall of Damascus and work in Timurid imperial service.

they brought offerings to his tomb and made [ritual] sacrifice there. So strong was their [psychological] attachment (*musahaba*) to him that they attained the [spiritual] stage (*maqam*) where they [were able to] visualize [him] contemplatively (*muraqaba*).[92]

These soldiers had a bond with Timur much like a Sufi disciple had with his *pir* or master. In their eyes, he was already a *qutb* (*axis mundi*) around whom the world revolved, and a *qibla* (model) upon whose image they would meditate. The devotion of these men towards Timur was tinged with *ghuluww* (exaggeration), i.e., a tendency to treat the spiritual guide as divine.[93] We cannot dismiss this phenomenon as the belief of illiterate men or as shamanistic practices prevalent in the Mongol milieu.[94] In fact, this saintly process of sacralizing was very much at work in the way Timur's "hagiography" developed in elite circles after his death.

It was mainly upon the death of a Sufi leader that he was proclaimed a saint, his burial place revered, and his miracles described publicly by his inner circle, that is to say,

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[92] Ibn Arabshah quoted and translated in Maria E. Subtelny, *Timurids in Transition: Turko-Persian Politics and Acculturation in Medieval Iran* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 13. A variant translation is in Ahmad ibn Muhammad Ibn Arabshah, *Tamerlane*, trans., John Herne Sanders (Lahore: Progressive Books, 1976), 322. For the Arabic, see Ahmad ibn Muhammad Ibn Arabshah, *'Aja'ib al-Maqdur fi Nawa'ib Taimur*, ed. Ali Muhammad Umar (Cairo: Maktabat al-Anjulu al-Misriyah, 1979), 348.

[93] For the concept of *ghuluww* and its historical relevance, see Marshall G. S. Hodgson, "Ghulat," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, CD-ROM* (Leiden: Brill, 1999). Those who subscribed to this view were often called *ghulat* or *ghali*, meaning exaggerators. It was a worldview that persisted in Iran well into the early modern period. See Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*, xlv-xlvi, passim. How these soldiers came to view Timur as their spiritual master is not known. The Timurid chronicles do not mention the phenomenon. One can only speculate but it is plausible that Timur's spy network, which included Sufis and wandering mendicants, was used to spread the legend of Timur's sainthood and messianic potential. See, Ibn Arabshah, *Tamerlane*, 300. This method of spreading messianic propaganda (*da'wa*) was well-known in Islamic Iran, at least since the successful eighth century rebellion organized by Abu Muslim in the name of Alids against the reigning Umayyad dynasty, which resulted in the Abbasid dynasty's rise to power. A similar tactic was used in the Mongol period to pressure the young Ilkhanid ruler Ghazan (d. 1290) to convert to Islam and to propagate his image as the messianic reviver of Islam using reports of black banners, an emblem of Abu Muslim's call to arms. See, Charles Melville, "Padshah-i Islam: The Conversion of Sultan Mahmud Ghazan Khan," *Pembroke Papers* 1 (1990).

[94] For one, the literary sources from the period give us few accounts of shamans and often present the conversion of Mongol kings to Islam mostly at the hands of the learned men of Islam. See, Reuven Amitai-Preiss, "Sufis and Shamans: Some Remarks on the Islamization of the Mongols in the Ilkhanate," *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient* (1999). Also, see Devin A. DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde: Baba Tükles and Conversion to Islam in Historical and Epic Tradition* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).

by those who had been privy to the true extent of his spirituality but had been forbidden by the master to openly proclaim his greatness. Much the same happened in the case of Timur and his fame as Lord of Conjunction. It was upon his death that Timur's charisma was given official, coherent, and ornate shape by his successors. Although already a legend in his lifetime, it was only as a memory that Timur could openly become a Lord of Conjunction, complete with a holy genealogy, a shrine worthy of veneration, and miraculous powers such as the ability to prophecy the future and read men's mind.[95]

The formal posthumous sanctification of Timur was part of the same dynamic that reduced the importance of Chinggis Khan as the principal source of Timurid sovereignty. Even before Timur's rise to power in the fourteenth century, the pendulum of sacred sovereignty was swinging away from Chinggis Khan toward Islam. While it would not be correct to assume a clean and sudden break from the Chinggisid past, it seems that such a trend had existed in Timur's time and gathered strength after his death among his successors. Timur's son Shahrukh (see Figure 1-2 for an abridged Timurid genealogy) was first to publicly dismantle the Chinggisid façade. Shahrukh declared the supremacy of the Islamic *shari'a* over the Mongol *yasa*, abandoned the practice of taking Chinggisid brides for his sons, and together with his sons patronized the production of official histories that elided many references to Mongol practices in Timur's time.

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[95] As a Safavid astrologer-historian would note more than two centuries later, Timur had been so clairvoyant that he had no need for astrologer, see, Sholeh Quinn, *Historical Writing during the Reign of Shah Abbas: Ideology, Imitation, and Legitimacy in Safavid Chronicles* (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 2000), 49.
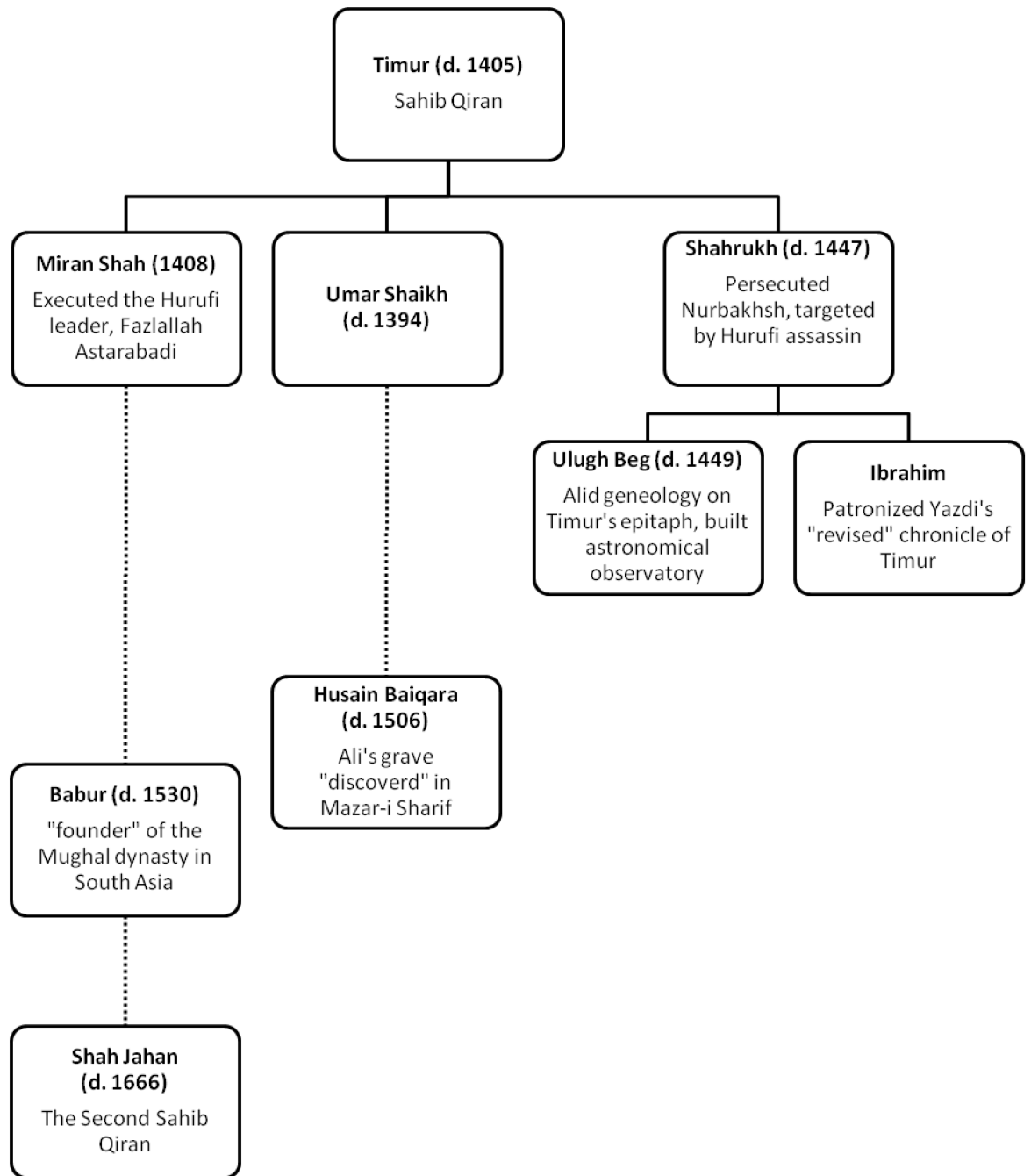
Figure 1-2: An Abridged Genealogy of Timurids Mentioned in the Text

The figure shows a genealogy chart with the following boxes and text:

Timur (d. 1405) — Sahib Qiran

Miran Shah (1408) — Executed the Hurufi leader, Fazlallah Astarabadi

Umar Shaikh (d. 1394)

Shahrukh (d. 1447) — Persecuted Nurbakhsh, targeted by Hurufi assassin

Ulugh Beg (d. 1449) — Alid geneology on Timur's epitaph, built astronomical observatory

Ibrahim — Patronized Yazdi's "revised" chronicle of Timur

Husain Baiqara (d. 1506) — Ali's grave "discoverd" in Mazar-i Sharif

Babur (d. 1530) — "founder" of the Mughal dynasty in South Asia

Shah Jahan (d. 1666) — The Second Sahib Qiran

As John Woods has shown, in these revised chronicles Timur alone appears as the absolute sovereign; the Chinggisid puppets on the throne are no longer called the "King of Islam" (*Padishah-i Islam*).[96] In addition, Timur is given stronger Islamic credentials; he makes more visits to Muslim holy men and their shrines than he did in the earlier chronicles. Sharaf al-Din Yazdi, composer of the most admired "revised" Timurid chronicle, also provided one of the earliest elaborations of Timur's cosmological position as Lord of Conjunction:

> Two individuals have come who by the strength of their arms, bravery and courage…have strengthened the religion of Islam…and brought the entire world under their dominion. The first one is Sikandar Zulqarnayn [Alexander, the Two Horned One], who is mentioned thus in the holy book: "they ask you about Zulqarnayn; say, I will tell you his story; we established his power on earth" [Quran, 18:83-84]. His manifestation (*zuhur*) and campaigns (*khuruj*) occurred in the cycle of the Greater Luminary (*Nayyir-i 'Azam*) [the Sun]. The second is Hazrat Sahib Qiran… Amir Timur Guregan….His manifestation and campaigns occurred in the time of the Lesser Luminary (*Nayyir-i Asghar*), that is to say the cycle of the Moon. Both these men are from the progeny of Japheth son of Noah.[97]

Timur here is equated and made to share a common biblical genealogy with Alexander of Macedonia, a prophet mentioned in the Quran, and of course, a Lord of Conjunction. The words used to describe their reigns, *zuhur* and *khuruj* meaning manifestation and holy campaign respectively, have messianic connotations. And we see again the notion of cycles of time associating the reign of each conqueror with the Sun and the Moon.

Yazdi did not give the astrological meaning of the expression cycles of the Sun and the Moon. However, he was most likely drawing upon the Iranian astrological

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[96] See Woods, "Timur's Geneology," 115-117.
[97] Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi, "Zafarnama (a)," British Museum, London, MS Add 18406, f. 3a. This comment is found not in the main chronicle but in a prologue (*iftitah* or *muqaddima*) which was written separately and perhaps meant for another unfinished work but sometimes accompanies the *Zafarnama* manuscripts. See Woods, "Timurid Historiography," 100-101.

tradition, through which many Zoroastrian notions had lived on in Islam, and in which these two heavenly bodies were considered to be the "Good Luminaries," created but immortal beings, who were "commanders over the stars."[98] Such Zoroastrian traditions regarding the Sun and Moon had entered Islam in various philosophical and occult forms, most importantly via the Illuminationist (*Ishraqi*) metaphysics of the famous eleventh century thinker Suhrawardi (d. 1191) who had even composed prayers in Arabic to ask the Sun for knowledge and salvation.[99] Furthermore, the famous *Shahnama* (Book of Kings) of Firdawsi, which had also kept alive many pre-Islamic Iranian cosmological concepts such as those of returning cycles of time, refers to "Sun of Iran" and the "Moon of Turan (land of the Turks)."[100] In addition, solar symbolism was used on royal flags and standards at the time, most famously in the image of the Sun on the back of a lion as a royal emblem seen in the region from at least the twelfth century.[101] While the Sun and lion were ancient symbols of kingship common across many cultures, the Sun on the lion's back was also used at this time for the Zodiac sign of Leo. In short, these astrological symbols were part of a thriving cosmology of sovereignty that sustained a cyclical conception of time and the notion of lord of conjunction.

Yazdi did not limit the use of this cyclical, messianic conception of time to Timur and Alexander, the Lords of Conjunction of yore. He also applied it in a more muted Islamized form to describe his living patrons. He called Shahrukh the centennial

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[98] See Pingree and Brunner, "Astrology and Astronomy in Iran."

[99] See Hossein Ziai, "Al-Suhrawardi, Shihab al-Din Yahya b. Habash b. Amirak, Abu 'l-Futuh," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman et al. (Brill, 2008), available at www.brillonline.nl.

[100] Shahpur Shahbazi, "Flags i. Of Persia," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online* (December 15,1999), available at www.iranicaonline.org.

[101] See Ibid. The Castilian ambassador Ruy Gonzalez Clavijo noted that the symbol of the lion and the sun was the standard of the king of Samarkand before Timur. Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo, *Narrative of the Embassy of Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo to the Court of Timour at Samarcand, A.D. 1403-6*, trans., Clements R. Markham (London: Printed for the Hakluyt Society, 1859), 124.

mujaddid or renewer of religion, expected to rise in the eighth century Hijri according to the Prophet's words (*al-maw'ud bi lisan al-nabuwwat*).[102] Chinggis Khan, on the other hand, was discussed neither as the source of Timurid sovereignty nor as a Lord of Conjunction although he appeared as part of the noble Mongol genealogical tree.

The Shift in Timurid Legitimacy: From Chinggis Khan to Ali

But if Timur's successors moved away from his long-held claim to be the protector and servant of the Chinggisids, what replaced this claim? Is it correct to assume, as it has been until now, that the order of Chinggis Khan gave way to the order of scriptural Islam? Can a man be replaced with a textual tradition? It is difficult to imagined how this could be the case in a milieu where notions of authority were embodied rather than abstract, where physical descent, actual and fictive kinship, and practices of bodily incorporation were the most "natural" ways of making alliances and establishing sovereign claims.[103] Although Chinggis Khan was losing some of his primacy as a symbol of kingship, it would be hasty to assume that an entire way of being dissolved with him. Rather, what seems to have happened is that Chinggis Khan co-existed for a time with and was eventually superseded by another symbol of power – a man from whom a uniquely Islamic sovereignty could be traced by descent. This was Ali

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[102] Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi, *Zafarnamah*, ed. Abbasi Muhammad, 2 vols. (Tihran, Iran: Amir Kabir, 1957), 1: 13. Also, see Woods, "Timurid Historiography," 105. The idea of the cyclically appearing renewer or *mujaddid* is, in my opinion, a tamer, routinized and more "orthodox" variant of the idea of the cyclically appearing millennial savior. Also, see E. van Donzel, "Mudjaddid," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, CD-ROM* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

[103] See Peter Parkes, "Fosterage, Kinship, and Legend: When Milk was Thicker than Blood?," *Comparative studies in society and history* 46, no. 3 (2004); Peter Parkes, "Milk Kinship in Islam: Substance, Structure, History," *Social anthropology* 13, no. 3 (2005). Also, see Lawrence Krader, *Social Organization of the Mongol-Turkic Pastoral Nomads* (The Hague: Mouton, 1963). For robing as a practice of bodily incorporation see Stewart Gordon, ed. *Robes and Honor: the Medieval World of Investiture* (New York: Palgrave, 2001); Stewart Gordon, ed. *Robes of Honour: Khil'at in Pre-Colonial and Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003).

ibn Abi Talib (d. 661), the son-in-law of the Prophet and the only male progenitor of his

descendents, from whose line the savior was expected to appear.[104]

As Ibn Khaldun observed, Timur already had a reputation for conferring favor

upon the descendents of the Prophet, the Sayyids or Alids.[105] After his death, Timur's

successors emphasized their closeness to Ali much more explicitly. The most important,

and indeed, the most intriguing evidence of this shift away from Chinggis Khan towards

Ali as a source of sovereignty is the engraving on Timur's tomb, in the "Grave of Amir"

(*Gur-i Amir*) complex in Samarkand.[106] It was his grandson, Ulugh Beg (d. 1449),

famous as a philosopher king for his pursuits in mathematics and astronomy, who had a

massive block of nephrite jade carried from the borders of China for Timur's

tombstone.[107] The inscription on this stone dates from around 1425, some twenty years

after Timur's death when the revised chronicles of Timur's reign were being finalized

under the watch of Shahrukh and his son Ibrahim Sultan. It traces Timur's genealogy all

the way to Buzunchar, son of the princess Alanquva, the "being of light" of Mongol

mythology, who was also an ancestor of Chinggis Khan. Using this device, the Timurids

claimed kinship with the Chinggisids on equal terms via a common ancestor in

"mythical" time. In this, however, the stone inscription is no different than what is found

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[104] Ali was the dominant symbol of Islam in Iran well before the spread of juridical Shi'ism beginning in the sixteenth century. The literature on Ali is vast. For a bibliography, see I. K. Poonawala and E. Kohlberg, "'Ali b. Abi Taleb," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online* (December 15, 1984), available at www.iranicaonline.org.

[105] See note 88 above.

[106] See Woods, "Timur's Geneology." Also, see Denise Aigle, "Les Transformations d'un Mythe d'Origine: L'Exemple de Gengis Khan et de Tamerlan," *Revue de Mondes Musulmans et de Méditerranée* 89-90 (2000).

[107] See V. V. Bartold, "Ulugh-Beg's Private Life and Scholarly Occupations," in *Four Studies on the History of Central Asia: Translated from the Russian by V. and T. Minorsky, Volume II, Ulugh-Beg* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1958); Beatrice Forbes Manz, "Ulugh Beg," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman et al. (Brill, 2008), available at www.brillonline.nl. The mentioned tombstone can be seen in Lentz and Lowry, *Timur and the Princely Vision*, 28.

in the revised Timurid chronicles. What is unique about it is the added claim – in Arabic – about the miraculous birth of Timur and Chinggis Khan's common ancestor:

> And no father was known to this glorious ancestor, but his mother [was] Alanquva. It is said that her character was righteous and chaste, and that "she was not an adulteress" [Quran 19:20]. She conceived her son through a light which came into her from the upper part of a door and "it assumed for her the likeness of a perfect man" [Quran 19:17]. And [the light] said that it was one of the sons of the Commander of the Faithful, Ali son of Abu Talib.[108]

The inscription uses fragments of Quranic verses from the chapter on Mary, which relates the story of the birth of Jesus, to describe Alanquva's chaste condition and the miraculous birth of her progeny.[109] However, unlike in the Quranic narrative, where an angel appears in human form to give Mary the gift of a son conceived without a human father, here it is a descendent of Ali who helps Alanquva conceive Timur's ancestor. The implications are clear: Timur was a descendent of Ali but only through an Alid's miraculous appearance in luminous form to a chaste Mongol princess who then gave birth to a Jesus-like being, the ancestor of future Mongol kings. This claim may seem fantastical, absurd, and heretical to us but it is important to note that it did not come from the minds of illiterate soldiers or shamanistic Mongols. The use of Arabic rather than Persian, Turkish, or Mongolian – the spoken languages of the masses – and cryptic references to the Quran not only enhanced the mystique of the message but also indicate that the producers and primary consumers of the inscription were those trained in the Islamic religious sciences.

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[108] Translated from Aigle, "Mythe d'Origine," 153. There are in fact two inscriptions on the stone with slightly different wordings but essentially the same message.

[109] In Islamic eschatology Jesus is expected to appear at the end of the world. He is sometimes conflated with the mahdi figure, and at other times he is expected to appear after the mahdi and aid him in his battle against the anti-Christ. See, Madelung, "Mahdi."

We do not know who among Ulugh Beg's scholarly entourage composed the *Gur-i Amir* inscription. Undoubtedly, however, it was a scholar with advanced religious learning; plausibly, someone with a background and training like that of the historian Sharaf al-Din Yazdi who crafted the cosmological connection between Timur and Alexander. Yazdi was not a mere chronicler. He was also a master of the *'ulum-i ghariba* (occult or hermetic sciences) and enjoyed close links with Naqshbandi and Ni'matullahi mystical orders.[110] This meant, of course, that he was good with numbers, a master of working their manifest mathematical properties as well as their hidden metaphysical ones. Unsurprisingly, he was an accomplished astronomer and astrologer. Two decades after Yazdi finished writing the revised Timurid chronicle, *Zafarnama* (Book of Victory), he was employed by Ulugh Beg to work with his team of mathematicians in his astronomical observatory in Samarkand. In short, in the episteme of the time, science, mathematics, scriptural knowledge and hermetic lore were united in an intellectual quest to decipher the patterns of Time and Cosmos.

To summarize, before Timur could become a Lord of Conjunction in his own right, his charisma had depended on how he ritually and symbolically engaged with the memory of Chinggis Khan and Ali. On the plane of Islamic history, as we understand it, it is difficult to see the equivalence between these two men. Indeed, they could not be farther apart. Chinggis was a cruel "pagan" conqueror who uprooted Islam and imposed his own law in its place. Ali, on the other hand, was a foundational figure of Islam – first cousin of the Prophet, his son-in-law, the fourth Caliph of Islam, revered by his partisans (*shi'a*) as the first leader (*imam*) of the Muslims after the Prophet. Indeed, Timur's juggling of these two symbols behind the modest facade of being an *amir* upholding

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[110] Woods, "Timurid Historiography," 101.

Sunni Islam while slaughtering and plundering on an unimaginable scale is what makes him so difficult to characterize today. However, the differences between Ali and Chinggis Khan fade away when we realize that both figures were Lords of Conjunction of the highest order, men destined to inaugurate new epochs and dispensations.[111] After Timur's death, the Timurids shifted away from Chinggis Khan as the sole symbol from which to derive their sovereignty. There were two aspects to this dynamic. First, Timur was publicly proclaimed a Lord of Conjunction comparable to the Quranic Alexander, a sanctified figure of kingship greater than Chinggis Khan. Second, in an important gesture towards Islam, the Timurids became partisans, and indeed, "fictive" kin of Ali.

Ali as a Sovereign in Popular Imagination

The Timurids are generally held to be Sunni Muslims. Yet, in their devotion to Ali and their pilgrimage to Shi'i holy sites they were so constant that it in the words of one historian "an 'officially' Shi'i dynasty could hardly have been more obsequious."[112] The most astounding phenomenon was the discovery of Ali's grave in Balkh during the reign of the Timurid Husayn Bayqara (r. 1469-1506), a find that led to a substantial shrine and a town around it now called Mazar-i Sharif (Noble Shrine).[113] The site received massive Timurid patronage and pilgrimage to it was officially promoted as an alternative to the *hajj* pilgrimage to Mecca. This Timurid preference for Ali is has been explained as part of the group religiosity of the times in which Sufi and Shi'i elements

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[111] Chinggis Khan was widely acknowledged to be a Lord of Conjunction. For example, a later Ottoman historian remarked that there had only been three Lords of Conjunction in world history, Alexander, Chinggis Khan, and Timur. See Fleischer, *Bureaucrat and Intellectual*, 281.
[112] Amoretti, "Religion in the Timurid and Safavid Periods," 616.
[113] The votive offerings the Mazar-i Sharif shrine attracted made it one of the most "profitable" shrines of the region. See, Subtelny, *Timurids in Transition*, 208-214.

came together in the light of a "reachieved Islamic unity."[114] This was a time when allegedly Sunni and Sufi figures were producing texts that would later become canonical Shi'i works; when popular stories and oral legends were being integrated with formal doctrine to shape new devotional narratives centered on the memory of Ali.[115] Thus the explanation for why Timur and his successors held such a fascination for Ali does not lie in Islamic textual traditions but in the devotional loyalty to Ali that animated the religious imagination of the time.

There are few detailed explanations of the phenomenon of Alid loyalty.[116] It implied a preference for Ali, an extra reverence reserved for him and his descendents over other iconic figures of Islamic history. It is plausible that the rise of the popular Sufi orders in post-Mongol Iran and Transoxania and their absorption of Isma'ili ideas of the spiritual primacy of Ali had something to do with it.[117] Indeed, nearly all the Sufi families in this period traced their descent from Ali, and through him, to the Prophet Muhammad. Ali was revered in this period as the first saint (*wali*) of Islam. His descendents, the Sayyids were akin to a caste-like status group that carried within its blood a permanent charisma. Sayyids were the preferred choice for religious office and Sufi rituals. Timur lavished special attention on them. For example, he enjoyed playing

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[114] Amoretti, "Religion in the Timurid and Safavid Periods," 616.

[115] The classic example of a figure from this period who defies categories but whom multiple sectarian and mystical traditions claimed as their own was the preacher and mystic Husayn Va'iz-i Kashifi, famous for writing the *Rauzat al-Shuhada*. A combination of formal Shi'i doctrine and oral lore, this work later became the master text for Shi'i ceremonies commemorating the martyrdom of Ali's son, Imam Husayn, and his family in the battle of Karbala. Kashifi wrote voluminously, producing for example a mystical exegesis of the Quran based on the inner symbolism of its letters and words, a famous work on chivalry (*futuwwa*) laying out the mystical code of conduct for artisanal fraternities, and a rendition of Indian animal fables entitled *Anwar-i Suhayli*. For an overview of Kashifi, see Maria E. Subtelny, "Husayn Va'iz-i Kashifi: Polymath, Popularizer, and Preserver," *Iranian Studies* 36, no. 4 (2003).

[116] For a succinct review of the sources of Alid loyalty see Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, 2: 495-500.

[117] The Isma'ilis constitute a major branch of Shi'ism. Their teachings, metaphysics, rituals, and organizational techniques deeply informed the Sufism of this period. See Farhad Daftary, *The Ismailis: Their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

chess with an eminent Sayyid, who despite being a Sunni jurist boasted that he had been taught the game in a dream by Ali himself.[118] All this however is only part of the story.

Ali also enjoyed a reputation as the greatest warrior of Islam, a champion of the battlefield. Much like the epic tales of war and conquest attributed to pre-Islamic Iranian kings and heroes in the famous *Shahnama* (Book of Kings) of Firdawsi (d. 1020), there existed as early as 1089 a similar versified epic relating the exploits of Ali called the *Alinama* (Book of Ali).[119] Another popular epic by a Timurid-era poet Ibn Husam (d. 1470), who styled himself the Second Firdawsi, is the *Khawarnama* (Book of Khawar) featuring Ali as the chief protagonist.[120] These tales in their oral form not only provided entertainment and "enthusiasm" (*hamasa*)[121], but also supplied much of the symbolism with which people, especially warriors, imagined themselves and identified with Islam and its heroes. Even in their stylized courtly forms, these works were a mixture of Islamic historical material and recycled stories of pre-Islamic Iranian heroes. For example, in the Khawarnama, Ali goes on a series of fantastic adventures fighting dragons and monsters much like Rustam of the Shahnama, but Ali begins his journey in the Hijaz and returns at the end to Medina where his father-in-law, the Prophet Muhammad, and his two sons, Hasan and Husayn, await him with open arms.[122] Overall, we have to be careful in making too sharp and general a distinction between "history" and "myth," between

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[118] Ibn Arabshah, *Tamerlane*, 313.
[119] The *Alinama* is mentioned in Aigle, "Mythe d'Origine," 162. For a description and bibliography of the popular literature on Ali, see Poonawala and Kohlberg, "'Ali."
[120] Two lavishly illustrated seventeenth century versions of the Khawarnama are in the British Library, one in Persian and the other a "freely rendered" translation in Deccani Urdu, see Muhammad bin Husam al-Din, "Khawarnama," India Office, London, MS. IOIslamic 3443; Kamal Khan Rustami, "Khawarnama Dakkani," India Office, London, MS. IOIslamic 834. For a description, see Hermann Ethe, *Catalogue of Persian Manuscripts in the Library of the India Office*, 5 vols. (Oxford: Printed for the India office by H. Hart, 1903), 1: 560-562.
[121] Ch. Pellat and others, "Hamasa," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman et al. (Brill, 2008), available at www.brillonline.nl.
[122] This welcoming scene which depicted in both the illustrated Khawarnamas mentioned earlier. See, Muhammad bin Husam al-Din, "Khawarnama," f. 359a, 361a; Rustami, "Khawarnama Dakkani," f. 541b.

popular and elite culture, or between religion and entertainment. This was a bias of only a

small minority from this period. Indeed, the early seventeenth century Deccani Urdu

Khawarnama, which is replete with paintings of gory battle scenes, was not dedicated to a

warring king but to the Adil Shahi princess Khadija Sultan Shehrbano[123], a devout Shi'a

who patronized this work as a devotee of Ali.[124]

    Ali was not the only hero of these epics. Many of his partisans and followers were

also extremely popular as protagonists of these stories.[125] These were figures like

Mukhtar (d. 687) in the *Mukhtarnama* and Abu Muslim (d. 755) in the *Abu Muslim-nama*

who had led messianic revolts against the Umayyads in the name of Ali in the seventh

and eighth centuries, respectively.[126] Ali and his supporters faced competition, however,

from other popular heroes. There was Hamza, an uncle of the Prophet and a great warrior.

And there were of course the ever popular ancient Iranian heroes like Rustam and Darab

of the "Firdawsian tradition." The question, of course, is whether these obviously

legendary tales had any transcendental significance; whether these stories could be used

to move people, shape their imagination and bond them together. To find an answer, we

must enter the localities where these stories were told, in aristocratic tents nestled in

grand symmetrical gardens, in inner city neighborhoods controlled by artisanal groups,

and most importantly in the military camps (*ordu*) of the marches.

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[123] She was the wife of Muhammad Ibrahim Adil Shah who became ruler of Golconda in South India in 1626.

[124] In the dedication, she is called "a slave girl of the five pure beings (*kanizak-i panj tan pak*) of the Prophet's family." The five pure beings according to Shi'i tradition are Muhammad, his daughter Fatima, his son-in-law Ali, and their two children Hasan and Husayn. It shows that this "legendary" epic had transcendental value for the patron. See, Rustami, "Khawarnama Dakkani," f. 543b.

[125] For a good overview of the religious epic tradition in Iran, see Rasul Jafariyan, *Qissah Khvanan dar Tarikh-i Islam va Iran* ([Iran ?]: Dalil, 1378 [1999]). Also, see Pellat and others, "Hamasa."

[126] For Abu Muslim, see G. H. Yusofi, "Abu Moslem 'Abd-al-Rahman b. Moslem Korasani," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online* (1985), available at www.iranicaonline.org. For Mukhtar, see G. R. Hawting, "Al-Mukhtar b. Abi 'Ubayd al-Thaqafi," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman et al. (Brill, 2008), available at www.brillonline.nl.

Timur's army was a diverse, complex and semi-permanent organization built up

of various tribal entities, armies of regional kingdoms, conscripted men, and volunteers.

Besides the Chagatay Mongols who formed the original kin-based core, the army

included people who were nomad and settled, Muslims and Christians, Turks, Tajiks,

Arabs, Georgians, and Indians.[127] The chronicler Ibn Arabshah, always inimical to

Timur, described the religious composition as follows:

> He had in the army Turks that worshipped idols and men who worshipped fire,
> Persian Magi, soothsayers and wicked enchanters and unbelievers. The idolaters
> carried their idols; the soothsayers spoke in verses and devoured that which had
> died and distinguished not between the strangled and the beasts slain with a knife.
> Diviners and augurs, who observe times and seasons, examined the entrails of
> sheep and from what they saw therein judged concerning the fortune of
> everyplace and what would befall in every region of the seven climes, whether
> security or fear, justice or injustice, abundance of crops of want, sickness or
> health and every other event, nor did they easily err.[128]

From Ibn Arabshah, we get a sense not only of the diversity of practice and belief

in Timur's army but also of the awe for the power of his diviners. Other travelers to the

region also commented on the multitudes of nations and religious communities gathered

together by Timur. For example, when Ruy González de Clavijo (d. 1412), the Castilian

ambassador, was being taken across Iran and Transoxania to meet Timur, he observed the

tents and herds of nomads near major cities wherever there were grassy plains and

plentiful water. When he reached Samarkand, he reported that Timur lived in grand tents

in beautiful royal gardens built on the outskirts of the city, not far from the tents pitched

for the army. The city itself was overflowing with people, "both men and women…of

many nations, Turks, Arabs, and Moors, Christian Armenians, Greek Catholics, and

Jacobites, and those who baptize with fire in the face, who are Christians with peculiar

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[127] Manz, *Tamerlane*, 66-106.
[128] Ibn Arabshah, *Tamerlane*, 321. Ibn Arabshah, *'Aja'ib*, 346.

opinions [most likely Hindus]," brought here from distant lands conquered by Timur.[129] Clavijo saw many of these people living under trees and in caves outside the city for there was no place for them inside the city walls.[130] We have little ethnographic information on what went on in these vast tent encampments or in cities filled with displaced people, forced migrants, slaves, refugees, traders, and fortune-seekers. The few sources that break out of the stylized political narrative of the Persian chronicles are European travel accounts.[131] A particularly interesting but much ignored one is the memoir of the Bavarian soldier Johann Schiltberger (d. c. 1440).[132]

Schiltberger was captured by the Ottomans in a battle against the Hungarians. When the Ottomans were defeated by Timur's army, he passed into their hands as a prisoner of war and slave. He spent nearly three decades in the Arab Middle East, Iran and Central Asia. As a runner and in other capacities, he travelled extensively with the Timurid army, even going far north into modern day Russia. Eventually he escaped and made his way back via Constantinople to Germany where he wrote and published his travel memoir. This is how Schiltberger described the religion of the "Infidels":

> It is to be noted that the Infidels have five religions. First, some believe in a giant called Aly [Ali], who was a great persecutor of Christians. Others believe in one who was called Molwa who was an Infidel priest. The third believe, as the three kings believed, before they were baptised. The fourth believe in fire, because they say that Abel, the son of Adam, brought his offering to Almighty God, and the flames of the fire were the offering; therefore they believe in this offering. Among

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[129] Gonzalez de Clavijo, *Narrative*, 171.

[130] Clavijo also described how Timur destroyed all bridges over the river Oxus and placed a tight control over boat crossings so that none of his valuable captives could escape back to their own countries. Ibid., 120.

[131] For a study of how some of these narratives informed conceptions of Islam in Europe at the time, see Margaret Meserve, *Empires of Islam in Renaissance Historical Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008). Thanks to Denise Spellberg for referring me to this work.

[132] Johannes Schiltberger, J. Buchan Telfer, and Filip Jakob Bruun, *The Bondage and Travels of Johann Schiltberger, a Native of Bavaria, in Europe, Asia, and Africa, 1396-1427* (London: Printed for the Hakluyt Society, 1879).

the fifth, some believe, and the largest number among the Infidels believe, in one who is called Machmet [Muhammad].[133]

The first impulse of the historian is to dismiss Schiltberger's observation as the garbled account of an ignorant and biased western Christian who, most likely, dictated his adventures in the exotic East to a scribe with a colorful pen. There is no denying Schiltberger's use of biblical categories to make sense of what he saw.[134] But then Schiltberger was correct in observing that most Muslims followed Muhammad, and he also narrated a few pages later a surprisingly well-informed account of the main religious obligations of Islam and the etiquette Muslims followed in mosque worship. Also, the diversity of religious belief he reported is supported by Ibn Arabshah's account quoted above. So it is worth taking Schiltberger seriously.

What are we to make of the "giant called Aly" whom Schiltberger mentions first?[135] This seems to be a reference to the Ali of epic traditions. After all, it was only with the strength of a giant that Ali was able to single-handedly unhinge and lift the heavy gate of the castle of Khyber, an incident much celebrated and illustrated in the written versions of the legends surrounding Ali.[136] Schiltberger brought up Ali again, when describing the history of early Islam. He reported that Muhammad had been adopted by the king of Babylon. When the king died, Muhammad married the king's wife and became a "Calpha" (a corruption of the word *khalifa*). Then he appointed four subordinates (the first four Caliphs of Islam). The "fourth was named Aly" whom

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[133] Ibid., 65.

[134] Schiltberger's reference to the biblical Magi is evident in his observation of the religion of the "three kings before they were baptised" in the quotation above.

[135] The "Molwa who was an Infidel priest" will remain a mystery unless one accepts the translator's interpretation that it referred to the *mulhids*, a pejorative term meaning heretic that was often used for Isma'ili and certain other Shi'i and Sufi groups. An alternative explanation could be that it is a corruption of the word "mawla" meaning lord or guide and refers to a saintly figure.

[136] Poonawala and Kohlberg, "'Ali."

Muhammad made "chief over all his people." Earlier, Schiltberger had mentioned Ali while describing the religion of the Iranian city of Ray. There, he observed, people "do not believe in Machmet [Muhammad] as do other Infidels. They believe in a certain Aly." In short, Ali appeared to Schiltberger as someone who was believed to be the true successor of Muhammad as the leader of the Muslims, a great warrior of superhuman strength, and someone who was revered even more than Muhammad in some cities. Muhammad, moreover, appears in this account as a king incorporated by marriage into the line of Persian (Babylonian) kings.

Historians have made little use of Schiltberger's descriptions of Islamic history and Muslim beliefs for they appear ill-informed and diverge widely from the well-known textual versions. But perhaps we need to read this work not as a historical document that would aid us in arriving at a better chronology or a finer understanding of events but analyze it in anthropological terms. There is little indication that Schiltberger ever learned to read or write the languages of the Islamic world or pursued a serious intellectual inquiry into its learned traditions. His information was gathered from listening and speaking to ordinary people in the military camp and the cities he visited with the army. By this argument, we get in Schiltberger's jumbled description, not just a view of an outsider puzzled by strange symbols and narratives, but also a report of the bricolage of the "natives."[137] That is to say, the organic connections wrought between the Prophet of Islam and the King of Persia, between Ali the Giant and Ali the chief of all

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[137] Bricolage refers to the way signs belonging to disparate groups are brought together in an organic relationship in the operation of "mythical thought, see Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 16-36. Bricolage does not exists only in "primitive" cultures but is all around us even in "civilized" forms, see Paul Christopher Johnson, "Savage Civil Religion," *Numen* 52 (2005). Also, see Marshall David Sahlins, "*La Pensée Bourgeoise*: Western Society as Culture," in *Culture in Practice: Selected Essays* (New York: Zone Books, 2000).

Muslims, while not historically accurate, were attempts to make sense of the present with signs that were, nevertheless, the detritus of history.[138] These signs, moreover, were communicated in malleable form in the oral epic traditions that sustained the religious and popular life of the camp and the city squares. The assertions above would have been arbitrary and unsubstantiated if it were not for the "heresiographical" writings of eminent Muslim scholars who condemned such "popular thought." One such scholar of the Mongol period – famous even today as a puritanical critic of popular religion – was Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328).

An expert in the Hanbali school of jurisprudence, Ibn Taymiyya had lived in Damascus under Mamluk rule. He is renowned for his trenchant critique of what he saw as widespread deviancy amongst Muslims.[139] Ibn Taymiyya was not a reclusive scholar, however. Active in organizing resistance against Mongol attacks, he was also familiar with the culture of the military camp. In his writing against the Shi'a, Ibn Taymiyya was so exasperated by what he perceived as their historically unsound arguments that he compared them to the misconceptions (*zann*) of the common people who routinely muddled their concepts of time and space.[140] According to Ibn Taymiyya, even learned Shi'i assertions were:

> like the mistaken belief prevalent among the common people who imagine that the Prophet [d. 632]…was a follower of one of the four schools of jurisprudence and that Abu Hanifa [d. 767, founder of the Hanafi school] and the other [founders like him] lived before the Prophet; and like the group of Turkmens who imagine that Hamza [d. 625] was responsible for great victories and they relate these stories among themselves while the learned know well that he only saw the

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[138] As Levi-Strauss remarked, "Mythical thought … builds ideological castles out of the debris of what was once a social discourse." Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 21.

[139] See Ibn Taymiyya and Muhammad Umar Memon, *Ibn Taimiya's Struggle against Popular Religion: With an Annotated Translation of his Kitab Iqtida' as-Sirat al-Mustaquim Mukhalafat Ashab al-Jahim* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976).

[140] He said that Shi'i scholarship was akin to that of Christians and Jews who could not substantiate their religious traditions with strong *isnads* or verifiable chains of authority to the original historical statement.

battles of Badr and Uhud and was killed on the day of Uhud; and like the large number of people who imagine that among the graves in Damascus are those of the wives of the Prophet…Umm-i Salma and others…while the scholars know that none of the Prophet's wives ever came to Damascus...; and like those ignorant ones who imagine that the grave of Ali is in Najaf while the learned know it is in Kufa…[141]

As Ibn Taymiyya's frustration against the warped imagination of the common people shows, historical time mattered little when it came to sacred symbols that shaped popular imagination.[142] For many, the place of these symbols in classificatory schemes based on local practice mattered more than their place in the dialectic of universal history. Not only time was tamed according to local practice but so was space. Shrines of holy figures, often heroes of oral traditions, served as the sacred centers of local religious practice. Entertaining stories of biblical prophets had existed since the earliest Islamic times, and their graves appear scattered across medieval Muslim geography.[143] In the Timurid period, the same process occurred with the miracle tales and shrines of Sufi saints. Timur, for example, made more than one stop to ask for divine help (*istimdad*) at the shrine of Abu Muslim, whose fame as a campaigner (*sahib al-da'wa*) for the sovereignty of the Alids was kept alive by the orally-recited tales of the Abu Muslim-nama.[144] It was not as if the intelligentsia did not try to assert proper historical consciousness, but woe betide the scholar who tried to tell the crowd that their storyteller

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[141] See, Ibn Taymiyya, *Minhaj al-Sunnah al-Nabawiyya fi Naqd Kalam al-Sh'ia wa al-Qadariyya*, 4 vols. (Bulaq, Misr [Cairo]: al-Matba'a al-Kubra al-'Amiriyya, 1904 (1322 AH)), 4:12.

[142] For his attack on astrology, in which he admits the influence of the planets but condemns any attempt to harness their powers, see Yahya J. Michot, "Ibn Taymiyya on Astrology: Annotated Translation of Three Fatwas," in *Magic and Divination in Early Islam*, ed. Emilie Savage-Smith (Aldershot: Ashgate/Variorum, 2004).

[143] See, for example, Josef W. Meri, *The Cult of Saints among Muslims and Jews in Medieval Syria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[144] See, Manz, *Timurid Iran*, 185. Also, Jafariyan, *Qissah*, 132.

had gotten his names and dates mixed up.[145] In general, boundaries between religion, oral

culture and public entertainment are hard to draw in this period. Further, we cannot

necessarily assume as if the learned elite were somehow above these concerns and did not

make recourse to "mythical thought."[146] This was certainly true in the case of Hamza of

the Turkmen tradition, against which Ibn Taymiyya fulminated so vehemently.

Hamza was indeed a popular hero of oral traditions of the marches.[147]

Nevertheless, literary versions of the story abound in manuscript collections and we

know of its popularity among the most learned of men.[148] The tales of Hamza belonged

to pre-Islamic Iranian lore that survived in oral culture as Iranians converted to Islam.[149]

In the process an Iranian hero became conflated with the historical figure of Hamza, the

warrior uncle of the Prophet Muhammad. Born, we are told in the epic, the same day as

Muhammad and given milk from the same wet-nurse, he becomes the Prophet's earthly

and cosmological twin. While Muhammad receives the revelation of Islam, it is Hamza

who rides out of Arabia, fighting the forces of evil and spreading the order of Islam all

the way from Greece to Ceylon. The stories of Hamza are structured by a plot that can

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[145] As Jalal al-Din Suyuti (1505), an Egyptian scholar, found out when he was stoned by the crowd for criticizing the stories of their preacher. Berkey, *Popular Preaching*, 25. For a sense of the competitiveness of Iranian storytelling environment, see Jafariyan, *Qissah*, 12-18.

[146] In discussing texts that today would be assigned to popular or "low" culture, Jonathan Berkey says "Literary works such as these wreak havoc on the project of cultural archaeology, since they were acknowledged, sometimes even composed, by some representatives of high culture, and so confuse the stratigraphy of the literary remains." Berkey, *Popular Preaching*, 10.

[147] The epic of Hamza was especially important in the "frontier culture" of thirteenth and fourteenth century Anatolia where the two religious traditions in confrontation were Christianity and Islam, see Cemal Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 63.

[148] See, for example, the magnificent paintings of the Hamzanama produced in the late sixteenth century at the Mughal court in India. John William Seyller and W. M. Thackston, *The Adventures of Hamza: Painting and Storytelling in Mughal India* (Washington, DC: Freer Gallery of Art; Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Smithsonian Institution, 2002).

[149] G. M. Meredith-Owens, "Hamza b. 'Abd al- Muttalib," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, CD-ROM* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

only be described as millennial. Should it surprise us, then, that in the epic our hero is called Amir Hamza Lord of Conjunction?

Other Lords of Conjunction: The Avatars of Ali

The tales of Hamza Lord of Conjunction was a cause of concern to partisans of Ali. The famous Timurid-era Sufi master, Sayyid Muhammad Nurbakhsh (d. 1464), for example, bitterly complained that the popularity of Hamza took away from the heroism of Ali. Nurbakhsh, however, had a unique reason for upholding Ali as the warrior-king of early Islam. He claimed that he was Ali's reincarnation, the *mahdi* (messiah), and the true sovereign of the age. He had made his messianic claim in the reign of Timur's son Shahrukh who had him arrested several times. Once Timurid authorities imprisoned Nurbakhsh in a deep well for more than fifty days after which he publicly recanted his messiah-hood. It is important to note that Nurbakhsh was not a crazy dervish, an antinomian mendicant living on the margins of society.[150] He was a Sayyid from an eminent family and highly trained in the religious sciences. As someone who articulated a coherent synthesis of Sufism and Shi'ism, he is counted among the most important religious figures of the period.[151] The order he founded flourished in Iran and Kashmir for centuries.

Nurbakhsh has fortunately left us with a work that can be called his messianic manifesto. Written in Arabic, it provides a detailed proof and explanation of his claim to be the *mahdi* as well its religious and political implications. Given his popularity and his entanglements with the Timurid authorities, it is worth examining closely some of his

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[150] However, note that even antinomian mendicants were not necessarily of low birth or devoid of learning. See, Karamustafa, *God's Unruly Friends*.
[151] Amoretti, "Religion in the Timurid and Safavid Periods," 616.

claims. Nurbakhsh maintained that it was the Abbasids – a dynasty that had risen to

power in the eighth century with the support of Alids but ended up persecuting them –

who had invented legends (*asatir*) like that of Hamza to undermine the reputation of Ali:

> The greatest of [the Abbasid] fabrications are two: one is the story of Hamza (*qissat Hamza*) which relates to the past; and the other, the story of the Messiah (*qissat al-mahdi*), which pertains to the future. Both of these are lies and false accusations against the claims of the Alids. The first is meant to distract people from commemorating Ali's bravery; and the other, to prevent them from accepting an Alid as an Imam after the twelve Imams. Limiting the number of Imams to twelve is also one of [the Abbasids'] tricks.[152]

The Abbasids, charged Nurbakhsh, had distorted both the past and the future,

deliberately spreading corrupt history and false prophecy. This is not surprising because

astrology was a key factor among the proofs he gave for his messianic claim.[153] But what

is the connection between these two seemingly unrelated complaints about the legends of

Hamza and the messiah? The answer becomes clear in the context of Nurbakhsh's

messianic claim. He had claimed to be the rightful Imam (leader), and thus was against

the quietist Twelver Shi'i doctrine that the imamate had been limited to the first twelve

holders of that office. He also believed himself to be the reincarnation or embodiment of

Ali, the first and the greatest of the Imams. Ali, he asserted, was the only one among the

Shi'i Imams who had possessed kingship. None of the successive Imams ever enjoyed

earthly sovereignty. With the cycle of Imamate completed in Nurbakhsh, he believed that

as the embodiment of Ali he was the true sovereign and king. By promoting Hamza as

the hero of early Islamic history, he complained, the Abbasids meant to take away from

the bravery (*shuja'at*) of Ali, and by association his avatar Nurbakhsh.

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[152] The text is in Arabic, edited and annotated by Shahzad Bashir, "The Risalat al-Huda of Muhmammad Nurbakhsh (d. 869/1464)," *Rivista Degli Studi Orientali* 75, no. 1/4 (2001): 119.

[153] In fact, when discussing his horoscope Nurbakhsh quoted the great Greek astronomer-astrologer Ptolemy as well as the ancient Zoroastrian sage Jamasp, who is also discussed below, in support of his destiny to be a sovereign. Bashir, *Messianic Hopes*, 80-82.

But how did Nurbakhsh become the embodiment of Ali? His explanation of the spiritual mechanism by which someone like him could become a messiah is intriguing. Instead of using the extremist or "exaggerated" (*ghulat*) explanation of transmigration of the soul or metempsychosis (*tanasukh*)[154] in which the soul leaves the body upon death to be reborn in another, he offered a version deemed more acceptable to mainstream Islamic traditions. He called this *buruz* (projection), a phenomenon in which "a complete soul pours into a perfect being (*kamil*) in the same way that epiphanies pour into him and he becomes their locus of manifestation."[155] In *buruz* the projecting body did not die and the receiving one did not have to be in the womb as was the case with transmigration. The notion of *buruz* had been used by other Sufi theorists to explain how saints were able to be at more than one place at the same time, but it was Nurbakhsh who used it to explain messianism. In his case, the phenomenon of *buruz* – the descent of the messianic soul into Nurbakhsh's body – was witnessed by one of his followers who saw:

> …in Irbil in the year 827 [1423-24], that one day people gathered together to wait for Jesus to descend from the sky. He saw that he descended in the form of light rather than body, and flowed toward me [i.e., Nurbakhsh] and held me. The same night I saw that I was present in the sky and in a human body on earth in the same instant.[156]

Have we strayed hopelessly afar from the discussion of how Timur became a Lord of Conjunction? Or have we circled back to the inscription carved out on Timur's tombstone in Samarkand around this time, in which Alanquva was impregnated by a ray of light that took on the form of a descendent of Ali? The "bizarre" Timurid claim of being descended

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[154] Tanasukh often brought down charges of heresy and rebellion as the concept was identified with the extremist or *ghulat* Shi'i sects that had revolted against the caliphate in the early centuries of Islamic history. In essence, ghulat had become a trope for schism and rebellion of the worst kind. See, D. Gimaret, "Tanasukh," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, CD-ROM* (Leiden: Brill, 1999). Hodgson, "Ghulat."
[155] See, Bashir, *Messianic Hopes*, 98-99.
[156] Bashir, "Risalat al-Huda," 51; Bashir, *Messianic Hopes*, 100.

from Ali was based on a concept of the returning messianic soul, the same "exaggerated" concept that Nurbakhsh propagated with considerable success in a sanitized neo-platonic version.[157] This may explain why even though Nurbakhsh hardly presented a significant military threat, he was pursued by the Timurids and lived in constant fear of his life and freedom. His followers went into a trance and danced in ecstatic joy when the news of Shahrukh's death was brought to their master because for them the Timurid ruler was the anti-Christ.[158] Conversely, from the Timurid perspective, Nurbakhsh's claim was transgressive not only because it deviated from accepted doctrine but because there could only be one legitimate sovereign, one true successor of Ali, and one Lord of Conjunction of the age.

Nurbakhsh was not alone in his spiritual challenge to Timurid sovereignty. His metaphysics was a variation on a well worn theme. Take for example the case of the three famous and well-studied messiahs of Timurid Iran. Nurbakhsh whose name meant "giver of light" has already been discussed. His more militant contemporary, Musha'sha'(d. 1461), based in southern Iraq had a similarly inspired name.[159] The word *musha'sha'* was derived from the Arabic verb *sha'sha'a* which "connotes dispersion, as light shining or liquid becoming diluted in water," an effect he felt at two moments of defeat in battle.[160] A believer in transmigration of the soul (*tanasukh*), he taught the mysteries of the name of Ali. A similar case of divine infection occurred with the founder of the influential and

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[157] Nurbakhsh's theories became part of a popular Sufi text, written by one of his disciples, Muhammad Lahiji, as a commentary on a famous Sufi work. See Muhammad ibn Yahya Lahiji, *Mafatih al-Ijaz fi Sharh-i Gulshan-i Raz*, ed. Muhammad Riza Barzigar Khaliqi and Iffat Karbasi (Tihran: Zavvar, 1992).

[158] Bashir, *Messianic Hopes*.

[159] Based in southern Iraq, he gathered Arab tribesmen around him and built a reputation as a master of thaumaturgic *ulum-i ghariba* (occult or Hermetic sciences). The movement is described in Amoretti, "Religion in the Timurid and Safavid Periods." For more detail, see Shahzad Bashir, "Between Mysticism and Messianism: The Life and Thought of Muhammad Nurbaks (d. 1464)" (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Yale University, 1997), 35-45.

[160] Bashir, "Muhammad Nurbaks", 41.

widespread Hurufi (letterist) mystical movement, Fazlallah Astarabadi (d. 1394).[161]

Fazlallah saw a bright star in a dream, which poured forth all its light into his right eye.

He declared himself the inaugurator of the third and final cycle of time – the cycle of

divinity (*uluhiyyat*), which had followed earlier cycles of prophethood (*nabuwwat*) and

sainthood (*wilayat*).[162] Fazlallah was executed by one of Timur's sons on Timur's orders

but not before he tried to make the prince a devotee. In an assassination attempt, one of

Fazlallah's followers nearly succeeded in killing Shahrukh as he was leaving a mosque.

Before his death, the Hurufi master, himself a Lord of Conjunction, had left behind

poetry warning the Timurids of the consequences of not following him:

> If the Khan of Khans, lord of the hosts, does not become my kin,
> I am the Lord of Conjunction of the world; I will destroy his kin and army. [163]

It is in this environment of messianic claims reverberating through the empire,

and graves of potential messiahs dotting the landscape that Nurbakhsh's theories begin to

make more sense. His explanation of the "projection of the soul" (*buruz*) was uniquely

suited to this cultural landscape in that it allowed for multiple messiahs to reappear

through history and even co-exist at the same time. There was no reason why the

complete soul could not descend into multiple perfect beings, a fact that was pointed out

by later expounders of Nurbakhsh idea.[164] Its philosophical niceties aside, the theory was

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[161] Famous for developing a comprehensive "cabbalistic" system of letter symbolism and magic, his order was known as Hurufi (letterist). A sayyid from an eminent family, his father was the chief judge of Astarabad. Hurufi teachings greatly influenced Sufism and became enshrined in the Bektashi order in Anatolia, which ministered to the spiritual needs of the Ottoman crack infantry, the Janissary. See Bashir, *Hurufis*.

[162] Ibid.

[163] "*Khaqan-i ordudar agar az jan nagardad il-i man; Sahib Qiran-i 'alam-am bar il o bar ordu zanam.*" Quoted in Aliriza Zakavati Qaraguzlu, *Junbish-i Nuqtawiyya* (Qum: Nashr-i Adyan, 1383 [2004]), 32.

[164] This was an argument made by 'Abd al-Qadir Badayuni, a supposedly "orthodox" historian and religious scholar at the Mughal court in the late sixteenth century. Badayuni wanted to defend the validity of overlapping messianic claims of Nurbakhsh and the Indian Mahdi of Jawnpur. This issue is discussed in detail in chapter 4. Also, see Moin, "Badayuni."

an attempt to make sense of a lived reality in which every region had its own sacred presence of a divinely-inspired savior[165] – most often dead but quite often alive; and in which much of the religious and entertaining lore in the public squares and military encampments was about saints who could multiply at will and Lords of Conjunction whose destiny it was to conquer the world.

This is an important point because too frequently it is assumed that the efforts of great thinkers moved society rather than the other way around. For example, the Illuminationist (*Ishraqi*) philosophy of the famous mystic and thinker Suhrawardi (d. 1191) is said to have enjoyed a great revival in early modern India and Iran, informing not only metaphysical writings but courtly literature.[166] Why did this philosophical school, which was already centuries old, regain its charm in this period? We have no answers, unless we are willing to turn metaphysical speculation right side up and root it in the earth of social reality. The attraction of Illuminationist thought may have had something to do with its comprehensive cosmology and angelology based on ancient Iranian traditions that not only gave primacy to the Sun and its illuminating powers but also looked favorably on the transmigration of the soul.[167] To put it baldly, Suhrawardi's philosophy appeared custom made to fit the social fact of millenarianism. But should this surprise us? It was after all the age of Lords of Conjunction.

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[165] Consider, for example, the number of places where Ali's grave is supposed to exist: "Some authorities claim that it is located at the Baghdad quarter of Kark or at Hella [in Iraq], while others place it in various spots outside Iraq, including Medina, Damascus, Ray [Iran], and Mazar-e Sharif (in Afghanistan)." Poonawala and Kohlberg, "'Ali."

[166] See, Asher Catherine B. Asher, "A Ray from the Sun," in *The Presence of Light: Divine Radiance and Religious Experience*, ed. Matthew T. Kapstein (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2004). Also, see Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History*.

[167] Sabine Schmidtke, "The Doctrine of the Transmigration of Soul according to Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi (killed 587/1191) and his Followers," *Studia Iranica* 28 (1999).

A Messianic Script of Kingship: The Astrological History of Jamasp

One could criticize the above account on the grounds that it has been constructed arbitrarily from fragmentary sources – an inscription here, a chronicle there – and mistakenly represented as a coherent view from within the culture. How can we be sure that a cultural actor from the Timurid period would have been able to make sense of the argument above in which Chinggis Khan, Alexander, and Ali appear as figures of the same type or signs in the same series? To allay these concerns and obtain a more "emic" view into the Timurid cultural episteme, it is worth examining a fifteenth century Persian work on astrological history entitled the "Book of Jamasp concerning Horoscopes of the Prophets" (*Kitab Jamasp fi Tawali' al-Anbia'*).[168]

This work is a challenge to interpret. It is anonymous and its place of production and extent of circulation unknown. Upon first examination, its contents appear to be a confusing mixture of ancient myths, historical knowledge and prophecies about the end of time. Moreover, it does not even mention Timur or his descendents. All we know is that it was produced roughly somewhere in fifteenth century Iran and survived in remarkably good condition. Despite all these difficulties, however, it is a revealing source for our purposes, for it neatly encapsulates the worldview of a milieu that gave rise to a Lord of Conjunction. Even its anonymity does not pose a problem once we realize that it was meant to be "anonymous." The purported author is a legendary Zoroastrian sage named Jamasp who lived in the time of Zoroaster and became a renowned source of Iranian apocalyptic traditions.[169] The text consists of the horoscopes of major figures of

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[168] "Kitab Jamasp fi Tawali' al-Ambia'," British Museum, London, MS. Add 7714. For a description see Rieu, *British Museum*, 2: 461.

[169] Our knowledge of Jamasp's life and times is as vague as that of Zoroaster (roughly 1000 BCE). Jamasp was famous for his knowledge of the future and Zoroastrian apocalyptic texts attributed to him were well

world history taken from Biblical, Islamic, and Iranian traditions. The time period

covered is from the very beginning (the birth of Adam) to the very end (the destruction of

the world). Since Jamasp supposedly lived in the time of the pre-Islamic Iranian king

Gushtasp (Vishtasp), the text gives us the "history" of the world from the birth of Adam

until this king's reign and thereafter assumes the form of a prophecy. In short, it is a

condensed history-prophecy of the world, based on a cyclical concept of time in which

conjunctions mark the coming and going of religio-political figures and change in world

affairs. It even uses the conjunction (*qiran*) as a measure of time equal to twenty years,

stating the prophecy, for example, that Prophet Muhammad's age will be three and one

sixth of a conjunction, i.e., sixty three years.

Its attribution to Jamasp notwithstanding, this Persian work is written from a

Muslim perspective and is in fact an Alid polemic. Writing in an arcane-seeming Persian

script, our pseudo-Jamasp tries to use the form, feel, and fame of the ancient Zoroastrian

Jamaspnama to get across a new messianic message in old millenarian garb.[170] Its "philo-

Alidism" is clearly enunciated in the way Ali and his descendents are given a prime role

in the future of the world. While the Prophet Muhammad is called Lord of Conjunction,

Ali's horoscope is made much more elaborate and praiseworthy. Ali is said to be a

relative of the Prophet who is:

> Tall, ruddy (*bi surat ashqar*), brave and agile. Every enemy who sees him will run
> away and his sword will dominate the entire world. He will always be victorious
> and from east to west all the kings of the earth will fear him. Despite all this he

known in Iran before and after the coming of Islam. For a Jamaspnama in Pahlavi with a French translation,
see E. Benveniste, "Une Apocalypse Pehlevie: le Zamasp-Namak," *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 106
(1932). Also, see M. Boyce, "Ayadgar i Jamaspig," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online* (December 15, 1987),
available at www.iranicaonline.org.

[170] The Zoroastrian Jamaspnama also starts with an explicitly millenarian theme: The king Vishtasp asks
Jamasp how long will our pure religion last, and what will happen after that? Jamasp replies that it will last
a *thousand* years and begins to describe the calamities that will then befall the people of Iran. See the
French translation of the Pahlavi in Benveniste, "Zamasp-Namak," 358-359.

will remain a dervish and will never have wealth or treasure. He will be killed by his slave. They will call him a lion and his ascendant will be a conjunction in Cancer, with the Moon and Venus in the ascendant. [The conjunction of] Mars and Saturn [indicating misfortune] in the house of sons will be the cause of his sons' death…. [The planets indicate that] he will certainly be a dervish, and will be one with that prophet (*bi an payghambar yaki bashad*). He will take kingship away from the kings of old and will conquer fourteen realms….Instead of a cap (*kulah*) he will tie a long turban. It would take too long to detail all his ways and customs. He will turn fire-temples into ruins and kill the Zoroastrian priests and put an end to our kingship and our customs. None of the prophesied ones will do to us what he will do….All fortune and success will be his. He will be a man broad of face and forehead, red-eyed, with a pleasing demeanor and a smiling face, kind to friend and stranger alike. Although a master of the sword (*sahib-i shamshir*), whatever he does, he will do with sound judgment (*bi hujjat*).[171]

Besides Ali the text does not mention any of the other Caliphs of early Islam.

Instead, it discusses the villains and heroes of Shi'i history, for example, the Umayyads

who usurped Alid sovereignty in the seventh century and Abu Muslim who organized the

messianic revolution in the eight century to overthrow them. Alexander, it should be

mentioned, is another figure whose horoscope is as elaborate and fortunate as that of Ali.

The man who receives one of the worst cosmological reviews, on the other hand, is

Chinggis Khan. In the words of the "Zoroastrian" oracle, Chinggis Khan is an infidel

Turk (*munkir-i turki*), who will come forth from the East:

Red-skinned (*surkh rang*), cat-eyed, short and eunuch-faced (*khadim shakal*), he will make a great claim (*da'wa*) and take the world. He will be called Chinggis Khan and he will subjugate all. He will conquer mostly by trickery and deviousness. No one will see his face. All will flee him. Four climes of the earth will be ruined at his hand and the world will become a desert. Twenty days of supply should be carried from city to city…otherwise all will die of hunger and people will eat human flesh. Our noble religion [Zoroastrianism] will suffer and mosques and towers all will be ruined…. And the wrath of God will be such that our places of worship will be burned and women will be stripped naked and paraded around the military camp (*ordu*) and the marketplace. May God Almighty protect the women and children of Muslims and unbelievers from such humiliation.[172]

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[171] "Kitab Jamasp," f. 24b-25a.
[172] Ibid., f. 33b-34a.

The contrast between Chinggis Khan and Ali could not be more striking. If the Mongol is depicted as a mean, unsavory character, Ali appears as a tall, robust, and athletic youth. If Chinggis Khan uses trickery to win battles so that he is never seen, Ali is a true warrior, a lion, who defeats his enemies openly. But Ali is more than a warrior. One with Muhammad, he is the agent through which the new Islamic order spreads through the world. He is the Lord of Conjunction who brings the Iranian-Zoroastrian dispensation to an end, a fate that pseudo-Jamasp seems serenely resigned to accept. Last but not least, Ali is a dervish, a Sufi who eschews all wealth and treasure even when he becomes the master of the world. He changes the ways and customs of the world. Instead of a cap (worn by the Mongols) he ties a long turban (worn by Sufi warriors). The historically-minded will be critical of this worldview in which Ali becomes, anachronistically, a turban wearing Sufi. But this is precisely the outlook that shaped Timurid cultural imagination. In the official chronicle composed at the end of Timur's reign, Ali is praised not as a Caliph but as the youthful model of chivalry (*fata*), Lord of Zulfiqar (*Sahib-i Dhu al-Fiqar*) and Lord of Duldul (*Sahib-i Duldul*), labels that invoke, respectively, Ali's famous two-pointed sword and trusty steed.[173] This was the Ali, not of Sunni or Shi'i doctrine, but of the popular preaching and oral epic tradition – an imaginative and imaginary realm inhabited, as we have seen, by Lords of Conjunction.

Chinggis Khan is also the last "historical" figure in the text after which the cast of characters that appear before the end of the world is borrowed from a mixture of Islamic

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[173] Shami, *Zafarnamah*, 6. Also, although we know little about the chronicler Shami's life, it is intriguing that one of his titles was *va'iz* (preacher), which should alert us to the possibility that he was familiar with oral narratives portraying the early heroes of Islam. See, Woods, "Timurid Historiography," 85. Note that Duldul was originally the Prophet's mule but later ridden by Ali according to tradition. See, Suliman Bashear, "Riding Beasts on Divine Missions," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 36 (1991): 26-27. Thanks to Denise Spellberg for pointing me to this reference.

apocalyptic traditions. Based on this internal evidence, it appears that the work was composed sometime after the Mongol invasion of the thirteenth century and was of value to those expecting an Alid savior to rise and put an end to the Mongol order in Iran. The important ones include the Alid (*'Alawi*), the Antichrist (*Dajjal*), the one who has the characteristics of Jesus (*sift-i 'Isa' darad*), and the successor of Jesus (*wali 'ahd-i 'Isa'*). That is to say, the descendents of Ali and Jesus-like figures will be pivotal in bringing about a just political order after the Mongol depredations, and before the end of the world. Overall, this is an outlook that fits well with the ethos behind the Timurid claim to be descended from Ali in a Jesus-like manner. Accordingly, it provides a neat script for the drama Timur's successors enacted in their move away from Chinggis Khan toward Ali as the ultimate symbol of sovereignty.

Conclusion

It is generally recognized by scholars that details of the religious history of Timurid Iran are particularly difficult to pin down.[174] It is not possible, for example, to declare with certainty whether a particular region or city followed Sunni Islam or the main sect of Shi'ism. In general, the import of juridical Islam itself is difficult to assess for large parts of the population and, surprisingly, even for monarchs. Timur presents a classic case of this problem. He kept most people guessing about his religious loyalties, not to mention his sacred powers. When arguing with Sunni divines, he used Shi'i arguments. When attacking Shi'i enemies, he charged them with religious deviance. Some believed that he was above the sectarian fray; that he communicated with an angel,

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[174] See Amoretti, "Religion in the Timurid and Safavid Periods."

and had even ascended to heaven on a forty-step ladder.[175] The way Timur and his successors transgressed the norms of classical Islamic traditions does not mean, however, that they had no regard for the "sacred." Timur's actions such as upholding Chinggisid sovereignty, providing for the descendents of the Prophet Muhammad, consulting astrologers and soothsayers, visiting shrines of holy men, cannot simply be reduced to political ploys. If these actions had been so transparently propagandist at the time as they appear to us, then they would not have possessed any efficacy. But they did, not only in Timur's time but for centuries after him as Timurid forms of sacrality became institutionalized and shaped the formation of imperial polities in fifteenth and sixteenth century India and Iran.

Timurid notions of sacred sovereignty were shaped by the messianic myth of the Lord of Conjunction. This was a time of transition. The existing Mongol order was receding into the background. Its symbol was Chinggis Khan. Another Islamic order was arising. Its symbol was Ali. The sacred myth that could explain this grand change in world affairs was the rise of a messianic figure who would inaugurate the new era. Timur inhabited this myth and performed it with relish. What everyone knew but could not say was that he was the Lord of Conjunction. Ibn Khaldun, an outsider, let it slip in court and recorded for posterity Timur's public denial that he was the Lord of Conjunction. Other sources tell us that a group of Timur's own soldiers had worshipped him, either as a saint, messiah or divinity much like the followers of Nurbakhsh, Musha'sha' and Fazlallah Astarabadi had venerated these men. There milieu of the military camp with its oral epic traditions and heroic ideals encouraged concrete modes of sacrality over textual religious

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[175] The best description of the bewildering array of religious practices and "magical" techniques followed by or ascribed to Timur, including praying Mongol-style to the Everlasting Sky, is to be found in Aubin, "Tamerlan." Also, see Subtelny, *Timurids in Transition*, 12-13.

doctrines. In such a setting, the fact of charismatic sovereignty was mostly what mattered, an embodied sovereignty that could be transmitted through blood or milk. Timur's successors openly proclaimed this fact upon Timur's death. The machinery of imperial tradition-making began its work and sages of the realm used esoteric lore to express what had popularly been known – Timur was the Lord of Conjunction, the descendent of Ali, the awaited Messiah.

In sum, Timurid claims to power were based on an engagement with the particular embodied forms of sacrality that were dominant at the time. Reports of this ritual theatre reach us either as heresies or as grandiose claims of being the Lord of Conjunction. There is, however, more than just religious deviance or bombastic language in these reports. There is instead a ritual process at work in which sovereign legitimacy was being forged. The way to win was not, as is normally assumed, to impose one's "ideology" on the masses, but rather the other way around: to pour oneself into the mythic molds of the hero, the saint, and the messiah that were shaped by collective imagination and social memory. Reputations of kings and saints were made or ruined depending on how their engagement with the sacred was enacted, publicized and collectively remembered. Successful ones became saints, world conquerors, and messiahs. Unsuccessful ones were labeled as heretics, corrupt tyrants, and the anti-Christ. The next chapter traces this dynamic for the formative period of the two large and imperial polities, the Mughal and the Safavid empires, that took shape almost a century after Timur and built upon the patterns and institutions bequeathed to them by the Timurid imperial project.

CHAPTER 2

The Crown of Dreams: Babur and Shah Isma'il

Introduction

In the early sixteenth century two imperial projects took shape simultaneously in Iran and India, and gave this inter-connected part of the world a political and cultural shape that was to endure until modern times. One dynastic realm was that of the Safavids (1501-1722) who reunited western and eastern Iran after a century of fragmentary politics. The other was the empire of the Timurids – now commonly known as the Mughal dynasty of India (1526-1857) – who expanded their dominion from Kabul to Delhi and beyond into South Asia to create one of the largest and wealthiest land empires of the time.[176] Although these two imperial polities took shape in an interlocking historical process and overlapping geographical space – in essence, competing for the same set of material resources, territories, social networks, and cultural symbols – they are rarely studied together. This chapter examines the beginning of Safavid and Mughal kingship to examine the nature of their early relationship. Specifically, it focuses on the shared cultural legacy of Sufism and Timurid kingship that went into the making of both these imperial projects.

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[176] For surveys of the political histories of these empires, see Richards, *Mughal Empire.* And, Andrew J. Newman, *Safavid Iran: Rebirth of a Persian Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006).

The Continued Legacy of Timur

In Iran, the century after Timur was one of short-lived empires and unstable confederations. Timur's successors had been reduced within a few generations to a set of petty kingdoms scattered across what is today Central Asia, eastern Iran and Afghanistan. Here, the Timurids competed with noble lineages claiming descent from other "mythical" sources of sacred sovereignty, namely Chinggis Khan, Ali and, Alexander.[177] In the jostling for sovereignty and the right to plunder and tax that came with it, none seemed able to claim more than a temporary allegiance of his commanders and soldiers. Even bonds of kinship seemed to hinder more than help in a Turkic social setting where generations of intermarriage, polygyny, and the high value of maternal kin ties created a complex web of relationships, producing competing demands of loyalty and an abundance of potential kings.[178]

Yet, in this chaotic milieu, the style of kingship remained dominated by the memory of Timur. The heirs of Timur, despite their loss of political power, had come to command great prestige as purveyors of royal behavior and aristocratic refinement.

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[177] It was argued in chapter 1 how these "mythical" and historical figures from Islamic and non-Islamic pasts were equivalent and interchangeable as sources of sacred sovereignty when seen through the lens of conjunction astrology and the millennial-messianic worldview it engendered. The political history in Iran after Timur can be found in John E. Woods, *The Aqquyunlu Clan, Confederation, Empire: A Study in 15th/9th Century Turko-Iranian Politics* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1976). Roger Savory, "The Struggle for Supremacy in Persia after the death of Timur," *Islam* 40 (1965). Subtelny, *Timurids in Transition*.

[178] Since the principle of primogeniture did not exist and most rulers had multiple wives from different noble lineages, a fierce competition for sovereignty took place among half-brothers who then would draw upon their maternal kin in their bid for power. An excellent discussion of these issues exists in Maria E. Subtelny, "Babur's Rival Relations: A Study of Kinship and Conflict in 15th-16th Century Central Asia," *Der Islam* 66 (1989). For the importance of maternal kin in Turkic kinship, see Krader, *Social Organization*. The political role this allowed women to play was substantially greater than had been the case in the pre-Mongol period. See, for example, Maria Szuppe, "La Participation de Femmes de la Famille Royale a l'Exercise du Pouvoir en Iran Safavide au XVIe Siecle," *Studia Iranica*, no. Part I (1994). The Timurid prince Zahir al-Din Babur's comments on the prestige of his Chinggisid maternal kin and the obligations and rights of his step mother and brother highlight the complicated politics surrounding these relationships. Zahir al-Din Mirza Babur and W. M. Thackston, *The Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor*, Modern Library pbk. ed. (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 241-242.

Indeed, one can argue that in the fifteenth century, Timurid courts and princely retinues, concentrated in eastern Iran and present day Afghanistan, were the main source of the long-acting "civilizing process" – the cultivated manners, habits, and tastes – that shaped elite Persianate "social personality" across large swaths of Asia.[179]

The formation of the Safavid and Mughal empires must be understood within this historical and cultural context. The two Turkish-speaking founders of these dynasties, the Safavid Shah Isma'il I (1487-1524) and the Timurid Mirza Babur (1483-1531), grew up under the sacred shadow of Timur, Lord of Conjunction. Their careers, unfortunately, have drawn little comparative interest from historians of these early modern empires. This is understandable given the fact that both men did little more than conquer. Their efforts at imperial consolidation and administration were rudimentary at best, as were their attempts at cultural production.[180] But if we focus our attention less on the functioning of stable empires and more on the question of how these imperial systems took shape and became stable in the first place, this moment in history regains its significance. More importantly, such a shift in perspective enables us to view these two struggling dynasts as belonging not to two different strands of the past – Safavid Iran and

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[179] The concept of the "civilizing process" is that of Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994). In a programmatic call, Elias argued that "a theory of social processes must diagnose and explain those long-term and unplanned, yet structured and directional trends in the development of social personality structures that constitute the infrastructure of what is commonly called 'history'." See, Norbert Elias, Robert van Krieken, and Eric Dunning, "Towards a Theory of Social Processes: A Translation," *The British Journal of Sociology* 48, no. 3 (1997): 355. Although such a historical sociology has yet to be attempted for the Timurid milieu and beyond in India and Iran, the "international" long-term influence of what is called the Timurid cultural renaissance suggests that such a study would be rewarding. To get a sense for how the Timurids set the "taste" and "style" of kingship for this milieu, see Maria E. Subtelny, "The Timurid Legacy: A Reaffirmation and a Reassessment," *Cahiers d'Asie Centrale* 3-4 (1997). Maria E. Subtelny, "Arts and Politics in Early 16th Century Central Asia," *Central Asiatic Journal* 27, no. 1-2 (1983). Subtelny, *Timurids in Transition*. Gulru Necipoğlu, "From International Timurid to Ottoman: A Change of Taste in Sixteenth-Century Ceramic Tiles," *Muqarnas* 7 (1990). Lentz and Lowry, *Timur and the Princely Vision*.
[180] The "classical" age of the Mughals and the Safavids was to come several generations later.

Mughal India – but to the same historical milieu.[181] It is then that we shall be able to see that despite their diverse backgrounds and diverging careers, the two struggling dynasts began their sovereign careers with common goals and experienced the same set of cosmological constraints and ritual processes that shaped their social personality as sovereigns.

Babur and Shah Isma'il: Sovereigns in a Shared Realm

Even though the lives of Babur and Shah Isma'il intersected at several key moments, no detailed study exists that examines their relationship or compares their sovereign careers. The historical image of these two men thus is rendered in two very different historiographical veins. Babur was, we are told, a Sunni Muslim of the sober and orthodox variety. Born to a minor Timurid ruler of Transoxania and his Chinggisid wife, he became a refined prince who wrote a thoughtful and reflective autobiography and, considering the temperament of the time, was a tolerant ruler who kept his religion to himself and did not impose it upon his subjects in India.[182] By contrast, the historical picture of Shah Isma'il is that of a Shi'i Muslim of a particularly extreme heterodox strain. The son of an Alid Sufi master and a Turkmen-Greek princess of the Aqqoyunlu dynasty of northwestern Iran, he became an ecstatic demagogue who whipped his followers into revolutionary frenzy with apocalyptic verse and messianic propaganda, and imposed his religious creed on the conquered population of Iran on pain of torture

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[181] See notes 29 and 30 above to see how modern historiography has divided the histories of these empires into different strands of the past.
[182] The most comprehensive work on Babur's life is Stephen F. Dale, *The Garden of the Eight Paradises: Babur and the Culture of Empire in Central Asia, Afghanistan and India (1483-1530)* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2004).

and death.[183] The question, however, is that if the two men had such ostensibly different social personalities, what compelled and enabled them to collaborate with each other, fight common enemies, exchange gifts and favors, patronize the same courtiers and artists, and even transact sacred oaths? Whatever the differences may have been between Babur and Shah Isma'il these have clearly been magnified and reified by the bifurcated historical narratives of later times.

If we chip away at the teleological crust of Mughal and Safavid historiography, however, the period of Babur and Shah Isma'il appears in a very different light. We get a glimpse of the formative phase of kingship when the political outlook and imperial style of either dynasty had not as yet taken mature shape. Instead of separate and fully-formed Timurid-Sunni and Safavid-Shi'i "ideologies," we witness an era of imperial pubescence with its rites of passage, exhilarating moments, and desperate acts. The mood of the time had a subjunctive and expectative quality to it: omens and portents were everywhere; new cosmologies were experimented with and novel rituals tried out; grand claims were made and painful compromises struck without thought to the dynastic angst it would cause later generations. The Safavids, for one, had to come to terms with the Shah Isma'il's charismatic reputation of being God descended to earth as a reincarnation of Ali.[184] The Mughals, in turn, had to contend with the embarrassment of Babur's submission to the Safavid messiah at a desperate moment in his life. In order to judge the import of these acts we must set aside the received categories of history which locate Babur and Shah

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[183] Shah Isma'il's political career is traced in Ghulam Sarwar, *History of Shah Isma'il Safawi* (New York: AMS Press, 1975). Also, see Jean Aubin, "L'Avenement des Safavides Reconsidere," *Moyen Orient & Ocean Indien* V (1988). Jean Aubin, "Shah Ismail et les Notables de l'Iraq Persan," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 2, no. 1 (1959). And, Roger Savory, "The Consolidation of Safawid Power in Persia," *Islam* 41 (1965).

[184] For a treatment of how Shah Isma'il's messianic legacy shaped Safavid politics, see Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*.

Isma'il at the opposite ends of a cultural spectrum. Instead, we must see these men as actors with a common subjectivity operating in a shared discursive realm. This was a realm where the competition for sovereignty occurred in a ritual fashion that still bore the stamp of Timur Lord of Conjunction.[185]

A way to trace the contours of this shared discursive realm is to analyze Shah Isma'il and Babur's bid for sovereignty in similar cultural terms. After all, they were fighting for the same territorial prize – the former dominions of Timur. This, however, presents a twofold challenge. On the one hand, Shah Isma'il, whose image as a mystagogue and messiah appears strange to us, needs to be made more familiar. On the other hand, Babur, who seems familiar as a rational and pragmatic ruler, needs to be shown operating in a stranger realm. Given the messianic controversy surrounding Shah Isma'il, it is easier to see him participating in a symbolic domain of sacred sovereignty similar to the one Timur had inhabited. However, Babur's sober image as the wielder of rational forms of authority makes matters more complex. The main source for this no-nonsense image is Babur's memoir, a rare first person account written in Chagatay Turkish that has been described as "preternaturally modern."[186] Some would say it is like stumbling upon early modernity in the guise of a well-read and well-mannered Turkish

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[185] For example, in the decades before the rise of Babur and Shah Isma'il, the "Sunni" ruler of the short-lived Aqqoyunlu dynasty of western Iran, Uzun Hasan, was portrayed as the fulfillment of many of the same types of prophecies that Timur and his sons had been. He was called the renewer (*mujaddid*) of the ninth century Hijri, much like Shahrukh had been called the renewer of the eighth one. Uzun Hasan's rise was said to have been mentioned in the Quran. There were suggestions made that he had taken the place of the Shi'i Imam. He had also seen a dream in which of all the great Sufis of the region had raised him to the throne. Finally, and much like Timur, he paid homage to Mongol myths of sovereignty. See Woods, *Aqquyunlu*, 82-83, 89. Also, Newman, *Safavid Iran*, 10.
[186] Dale, *Garden*, 1.

prince who possessed an ethos close to our own – an embodiment of "steppe humanism"

if not quite liberal humanism.[187] Had the age of messianic kingship passed Babur by?

At first glance, this appears to be the case. For one, Babur did not call Timur a

Lord of Conjunction in his memoir.[188] Moreover, he made no such claim for himself. His

miracles were modest ones, consisting mainly of dreams – discussed further below – in

which his patron Sufi saints delivered him victory or from harm. Babur, in an important

sense, adhered to the social norm that discouraged the self-narration of one's spiritual

achievement or written publicity of one's sacrality while alive – an etiquette that even

Timur seemed to have followed.[189] Thus, one of Babur's major spiritual achievements

was narrated, not in during his lifetime, but almost half a century later by his daughter,

the princess Gulbadan Banu.[190] She related how her father had miraculously saved her

brother Humayun's life. As the young prince had laid deathly ill, Babur had

circumambulated him, asking for Ali's intercession, and offering to take the place of his

dying heir. Babur's prayers were answered and his offer accepted. As the prince

recovered, the king fell ill and passed away. The way Babur's miracle was remembered –

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[187] Stephen F. Dale, "Steppe Humanism: The Autobiographical Writings of Zahir al-Din Muhammad Babur, 1483-1530," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 22, no. 1 (1990).

[188] Babur referred to Timur simply as "Timur Beg" (Lord Timur). There are no obvious answers for why Babur did not call Timur a Sahib Qiran. But, it is worth noting that Babur's memoir is incomplete and unfinished, with major gaps from 1508-1519 and 1520 to 1525 (likely result of loss during storm), and large portions in draft form. See Thackston's comments on this in the translator's preface, Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, xix. The work may have had a different story to tell if it had reached its final state. Babur had apparently begun to revise and polish the text in India but did not complete the project. One can speculate that if Babur's work had gone through the social machinery that produced stylized hagiographies and chronicles, it may have assumed a different style. However, Babur could not afford to maintain an elaborate entourage of poets and literati until late in life, after his conquest of Delhi. In any case, having Babur's writing in a "raw" and unembellished form is both a blessing and a nuisance for historians, as it affords a look at the inner workings of the sixteenth century writing process but at the expense of leaving us with an unbalanced and unfinished work.

[189] In fact, autobiographical writing such as Babur's was not the ideal genre for narrating one's spiritual accomplishments or making explicit claims of sacrality. This point is developed further in chapter 5 when the memoirs of Jahangir, Babur's great grandson, are discussed.

[190] Gulbadan and Annette Susannah Beveridge, *The History of Humayun (Humayun-Nama)* (Delhi: Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli, 1972), 31.

some would say made up – after his death is reminiscent of how Timur openly became Sahib Qiran after he passed away. This is not to say that Babur was sanctified at the same level as his famous world-conquering ancestor. Nevertheless, in Mughal dynastic memory, Babur possessed a spark of saintliness, a sacred link with the divine, which gave him the ability to perform miracles with succor from Ali.

To summarize, even though Babur never achieved a sovereign stature equivalent to that of Timur, nevertheless he and his memory experienced the same processes that had rendered Timur as the Lord of Conjunction. However, this worldview is only rendered visible in his writing if we read it in harmony with the sign-laden *mentalité* of his time and the social institutions which shaped it.[191] This means paying close attention to a number of acts, observations, and anecdotes in Babur's account that modern readers skip over because they seem strange and trivial. Interestingly, Babur also called these phenomena "strange" (*gharib*) but he accorded them a seriousness that today would be considered eccentric. In doing so, however, he was not alone. At the time, occurrences with a touch of the wondrous, the bizarre, the inexplicable, and the marvelous – the descent of the messianic soul into a human body, for example – were not treated as cultural marginalia and consigned to intellectual oblivion.[192] Instead such phenomena

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[191] The word *mentalité* is used here in the sense of the French Annales school with its concern for the socio-historical basis of beliefs and mental structures. The classic account in this vein remains Marc Bloch, *The Royal Touch: Sacred Monarchy and Scrofula in England and France* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1973).

[192] The idea of the marvelous and miraculous spanned many genres of Islamic literature including cosmology, cosmography, Quranic exegesis, travel literature, etc. For a bibliography, see Alice C. Hunsberger, "Marvels," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾan*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Brill, 2009), available at www.brillonline.nl. The attitude was not limited to the Persianate world but widespread across early modern Asia and Europe. See, Jorge Flores, "Distant Wonders: The Strange and the Marvelous between Mughal India and Habsburg Iberia in the Early Seventeenth Century," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 49 (2007).

were investigated, classified, and verified by religious and political authorities.[193] To

grasp this as an important aspect of public life is a first step in appreciating the fact that a

considerable part of the social role of kingship involved being able and willing to

confront and deal with "strangeness."

The Strangeness of Babur's World

In 1494, a "strange event" (*waqi'a ghariba*) occurred in the bucolic valley of

Fergana, situated a week's hard ride east of Samarkand. It involved a great great

grandson of Timur, Umar Shaykh Mirza, who had ruled this region from a fortress

perched on the edge of a deep ravine. Suddenly, along with his doves (*kabutar*) and

dovecote, he toppled off his fortress and "gave up the ghost."[194] This event would have

gone unnoticed if it had not been for the keen diary-keeping habit of his son, Babur.[195]

This was an important moment for Babur who began his memoirs with it: "In the month

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[193] It is worth noting that even in England it was only gradually in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that messianic claims became a sign of madness. Keith Thomas observes that "in the sixteen century the claims of a would-be prophet would always be seriously investigated, even if ultimately exposed as groundless, but by the eighteenth century the majority of educated men concurred in dismissing them a priory as ridiculous." Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 172-173.

[194] Note that in quotes from Babur's memoir, the language inside the brackets is Turkish unless stated otherwise. Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 8. Zahir al-Din Mirza Babur, W. M. Thackston, and Abdur Rahim Khan, *Baburnama: Chaghatay Turkish Text with Abdul-Rahim Khankhanan's Persian Translation* (Cambridge, MA: Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, Harvard University, 1993), 12.

[195] Babur's memoir is rightly hailed as a rare and remarkably frank first person account in Islamic literary history. Whatever its qualities as a literary product, however, in terms of genre it is close to the "court diary" that kept track of events (*waqi'a*) on a regular basis. Babur seems to have polished the earlier parts of this diary into more of a narrative but the later parts remain organized in an annalistic diary format. Usually it was such a court diary that was turned into a chronicle at the end of a great king's reign. In the case of Babur this never happened although variations in the extant versions – including the addition of some "miracles" indicate that the process was attempted, possibly after Babur's time. One can speculate that by the time Babur became wealthy enough to afford a proper chronicler, he was in the last few years of his life and did not get around to doing it. The issue of Babur's memoir, its audience, nature, genre, etc., is a complicated one that still remains to be addressed adequately but one cannot treat it as unique. Shah Isma'il's son, Shah Tahmasb who was Babur's contemporary, also composed a memoir in Persian but he called it a "*tazkira*" a term used for a biographical dictionary or the life of a saint. See, Tahmasb Safavi, *Tadhkira-yi Shah Tahmasb*, ed. A. Safari, 2 ed. (Tehran: 1363). No comparison between the two texts exists as far as I know.

of Ramadan in the year 899 [June 1494], in the province of Fergana, in my twelfth year I became king." He did so, one could say, because this was the day he came into his own. But why did he call his father's death strange? Let us examine a suggestion. Battle, poison, disease, and old age were all expected or "natural" reasons of the death of a sovereign, but falling off the castle wall while feeding one's birds was not. Since there was no obvious cause, the unexpected event itself became a cause.[196] That is to say, its inexplicability transformed the event into an omen – a sign whose signified lay not in the past or the present but in the future. We know that this omen was not immediately fulfilled. Upon his father's death Babur did not in fact become king. It was Babur's uncle who snatched away the reins of power. Ten years would pass before the young prince proclaimed himself king (*padishah*) in Kabul,[197] and it would take more than three decades to make him famous as the conqueror of Hindustan. Thus, it was at the end of his life that Babur's fame solved the temporal puzzle of his father's strange demise and fulfilled the omen that had launched his sovereign career. For Babur, who polished his diary and gave it a narrative frame late in life in India, this must have seemed like the appropriate moment to begin the story of his kingship.

Babur's memoir, like other literary and historical works from the period, is littered with such "coincidences." It is patterned by a causality that is no longer to our taste.[198] For example, take these two "strange" anecdotes. In relating a battle involving

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[196] This is to recall Levi-Strauss's observation that mythical thought is not illogical but hyper-logical in that it allows no event to remain meaningless, i.e., be without a cause or effect. It is not prior to "scientific thought" but exists alongside it in an all-encompassing demand for order and systemizing "what is immediately presented to the senses." Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 11.

[197] Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 260.

[198] To our modern sensibility, this interpretation would only be acceptable – if at all – as a literary-critical one. We would hesitate, in other words, to see it as a product of experiential reality. Here in lies the difference between our mode of thought and the one that held together the late-Timurid cultural world. We, for example, shrug off inexplicable coincidences and sudden events, finding it odd if anyone ponders too

his famous uncle, Husayn Bayqara (r. 1469-1506), the last Timurid ruler of Herat, Babur recorded the role a particularly perilous "Wednesday" had to play:

> It is a strange coincidence (*ghara'ib-i waqi'a*) that on the very Wednesday on which Sultan-Husayn Mirza defeated Badi'uzzaman Mirza, Muzaffar-Husayn Mirza defeated Muhammad-Mu'min Mirza in Astarabad. It is even stranger that a man named Charshamba ("Wednesday") un-horsed Muhammad-Mu'min Mirza and brought him in.[199]

Similarly, in another place, Babur commented on how a certain battle had proved to be a fated one for men named "Ibrahim":

> Some very great begs and superb warriors, such as Ibrahim Tarkhan, Ibrahim Saru, and Ibrahim Jani, were lost in this battle. It is strange (*gharib*) that in one battle three great begs named Ibrahim were lost.[200]

Babur's notes on such patterns of correlated words, names, numbers and dates – which he termed "strange" (*gharib*) – are a reflection of the fact that he was trained and attuned to seek out such resemblances. Importantly, this was not a private pastime but a public one. Indeed, there was a widespread cultural traffic in these signs. This traffic occurred at all levels of society. At the highest stratum, the discovery of hidden patterns was a pleasurable aesthetic and intellectual pursuit of the elite. At the fashionable court of the last Timurid kind of Herat, Husayn Bayqara (d. 1506), for example, the most desirable form of verse was the "enigma" (*mu'amma*) in which the listener had to guess

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long and in too public a manner over them. Conversely, in Babur's milieu it would have been considered unwise to leave strange coincidences and patterned occurrences unexamined. An aspect of this difference is located in how time was experienced and made cosmologically relevant. See, Gernot Windfuhr, "Spelling the Mystery of Time," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 110, no. 3 (1990); Windfuhr, "Jafr." For an example of how classical Persian literature was shaped by cosmological patterns, see Ziva Vesel, "Reminiscences de la Magie Astrale dans les Haft Peykar de Nezami," *Studia Iranica* 24 (1995). Georg Krotkoff, "Colour and Number in the Haft Paykar," in *Logos Islamikos: Studia Islamica in Honorem Georgii Michaelis Wickens*, ed. G. M. Wickens, Roger Savory, and Dionisius A. Agius (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984).

[199] Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 52. Babur, Thackston, and Khan, *Baburnama (polyglot)*, 86-87.

[200] Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 106. Babur, Thackston, and Khan, *Baburnama (polyglot)*, 180-181.

the hidden pattern in a poet's couplet.[201] Late in his life, when he could afford to, Babur

also patronized a famous "enigmatist" who had previously served Shah Isma'il.[202] But

there was more to this pursuit than mere aestheticism. The discovery or production of

such a pattern – such as a clever verse chronogram to indicate the birth of a prince – was

also a political act, useful for offering praise and demonstrating allegiance. Conversely,

such metaphorical devices could be used negatively, for delivering curses and insults. But

these practices were not simply rhetorical. Rather, they were undergirded by a strong

cosmological framework. According to the learned traditions of the time, patterns of

letters, words, numbers, and even colors had an association with rhythms of the cosmos.

Mastery of a system of knowledge which could encode, decode, and manipulate such

patterns was considered to be critical for rulers. Princes were tutored and kings served by

those who possessed such knowledge, while Lords of Conjunction like Timur were

considered masters of such affairs in their own right.[203]

It is important, then, to view the discovery, production, and consumption of such

meaningful patterns as more than an aesthetic activity or literary exercise underwritten by

a frivolous court culture. Rather, it should be seen as a widely sanctioned "practical"

activity operating in realm of the concrete, that is, not only via words but also through

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[201] Maria E. Subtelny, "A Taste for the Intricate: The Persian Poetry of the Late Timurid Period," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenlandischen Gesellschaft* 136, no. 1 (1986).

[202] See Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 407.

[203] Babur patronized astrologers. See discussion below. Babur's son, Humayun, had a tutor who trained him in finding and deciphering omens as discussed in chapter 3. Shah Isma'il's Ottoman rivals also used such services. See Cornell Fleischer, "Seer to the Sultan: Haydar-i Remmal and Sultan Suleyman," in *Cultural Horizons*, ed. Jayne L. Warner and Talat Sait Halman (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2001). A family of astrologers served the Safavids. See 'Ali Asghar Mossadegh, "La Famille Monajjem Yazdi," *Studia Iranica* 16, no. 1 (1987). The Hurufi leader Fazlallah Astarabadi, discussed in the previous chapter, claimed to be a perfect master in manipulating such patterns and controlling the universe. See, Bashir, *Hurufis*. Protective prayers, talismans and counter-spells were also deployed before critical battles. Babur gives one such prayer in Arabic which he used before attacking to retake Kabul from rebels. This prayer, which seems to be a variation on the famous Quranic "Throne Verse" (*ayat al-kursi*) has interesting additions such as providing protection from animals. Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 239. Babur, Thackston, and Khan, *Baburnama (polyglot)*, 418-419.

actions and objects. Observe, for example, how one of Babur's Mongol soldiers offered

him a gift at the beginning of a war campaign:

> Alone Tufan Arghun faced [a man named Ishqullah who was coming toward
> him], they exchanged sword blows, and Tufan unhorsed his opponent, cut off his
> head, and brought it while I was passing Sang-i Lakhshak. We took it as a good
> omen (*shugun*).[204]

Compare this with Timur's encounter with an antinomian dervish, Baba Sangu, on his

way to conquer Khurasan in 1385.[205] The holy man, "absorbed" in God, (*az ashab-i*

jazaba bud) threw a piece of meat at Timur. Timur took the act as a blessing and omen of

victory and marched on. Similar accounts of physical or dream appearances of Sufi saints

just before battle are common in Timurid chronicles.[206]

Rather than judge these events as true or false, or treat them as literary devices,

the analytical challenge is to grasp the social process which turned such disparate cultural

products – refined verses, dreams, disembodied heads, pieces of meat – into common

operators in a ritual domain. This perspective brings into focus a busy traffic in omens

which structured quotidian life as well as crucial moments of war and politics. Illiterate

soldiers participated in this exchange with as much enthusiasm as the most learned of

courtiers. In effect, this traffic and exchange in signs and omen was a "total social fact"

that, because of its widespread and compulsory nature, created obligations and provided a

type of social glue.[207] Such a system also gave a great deal of power to the brokers of

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[204] Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 252. Babur, Thackston, and Khan, *Baburnama (polyglot)*, 440.
[205] Browne, *A Literary History of Persia*, 2:185. Yazdi, *The Zafarnamah*, 310.
[206] For example Husayn Bayqara had an encounter with a dervish named Baba Khaki whose "gifts" prepared the Timurid for the conquest of Herat. Subtelny, *Timurids in Transition*, 63. See below for a discussion of Babur's Sufi-enriched dreams during his conquests of Samarkand.
[207] The French sociologist Marcel Mauss used the term "system of total services" or "total social fact" to describe a system of transactions between individuals in a society in which a valuable good or service is exchanged "in a somewhat voluntary form by presents and gifts, although in the final analysis they are strictly compulsory." Such a "total" system touches multiple cultural spheres – economic, religious,

these "strange" cultural products and the masters of this ritual domain. These were the

experts in the "sciences of strangeness" (*'ulum-i ghariba*): wise men, philosophers,

astrologers, physicians, and dream interpreters who promised to leave no sign

unexamined, no dream unexplained, and no event meaningless. No king could ignore

their presence or fail to acknowledge them if he was to conquer and rule. For, these were

the people who kept a finger on the pulse of the body politic and an eye on its health and

stability. This will become clear as we examine how rulers like Babur imagined the

characteristics of the land and the qualities of the people they ruled.

The Sacred Knowledge of Kingship

In Babur's description of the valley of Fergana, his father's pastoral dominion, we

discover a land of simple pleasures.[208] The fruits – melons, grapes, pears, apricots,

pomegranates, and almonds – were excellent and abundant. Running water and pleasant

gardens graced a country full of game and sporting birds. The people were feisty, ready

with their fists. Not all of Fergana's qualities were so rustic, however. A village near the

town of Margilan was famous for producing the author of the *Hidaya*, a famous work of

Islamic jurisprudence used across Transoxania.[209] But Margilan also supplied

Transoxania with its most renowned exorcists, people who could overpower *jinns*.[210]

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political, and aesthetic – and provides a type of social contract. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), 5-6. For an exposition of how the idea of the "gift" is linked to collective notions of the "sacred" see Godelier, *The Enigma of the Gift*.
[208] Babur begins his memoir with a description of the valley of Fergana. The section below is based on Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 3-7. Babur, Thackston, and Khan, *Baburnama (polyglot)*, 3-11.
[209] This was Shaykh Burhanuddin Ali Qilich al-Marghinani (ca. 1135-97), author of *Al-Hidaya fi Furu 'al-Hanafiyya* (Guidance in the Branches of Hanafism).
[210] The words of "exorcist" used by Babur in Turkish are *jinngiraliq, jinngiralar*. His sixteenth century Persian translator uses *jingarahgi, jingarhai* in Persian. Babur, Thackston, and Khan, *Baburnama (polyglot)*, 6-7. Jinns are "fiery" beings mentioned in the Quran sometimes translated as "genie" in English.

Their service was in great demand in a region where "the custom of exorcism is widespread." High-spirited folk and wayward demons were not the only things to watch out for when visiting Babur's valley. Even parts of the landscape were mischievous. The mountains north of the town of Khodzent made the air unwholesome, causing an inflammation of the eye that did not spare even the sparrows. A similar eye disease in Andizhan, a town known for a famous musician and unhealthy air, was called Cancer (*aqrab*) by the physicians. And near the town of Osh, on the lower slopes of the Bara Koh was a mosque named Gemini (*Masjid-i Jawza*). In the mountains surrounding Fergana was found the prized red-barked Spiraea tree. Excellent for making staffs, whip handles, bird cages, and arrows, people also carried it to "faraway places for good luck." If one looked for it, these mountain forests also yielded a plant that Babur thought to be the Mandrake – a favorite ingredient of alchemists and sorcerers.

Babur's description of his birthplace is notably free of the discriminations we would make today. Good fruit existed with unwholesome air. Experts in jurisprudence were a source of pride as were masters of exorcism. Wood that was good for making arrows also brought good luck. Mountains that yielded forest produce also gave magical plants. Diseases were linked to mansions of the Zodiac (Cancer) and so were mosques (Gemini). The people, the land, and the cosmos were knitted together into a whole, unmarred by boundaries of taste or relevance that we would erect: between the visible and the invisible world; between practical technology and magical technique; and between religious law and supernatural trait. Rather, in giving such detail, Babur seemed to "show-off" of his deep knowledge of the country. Indeed, such knowledge was indispensable for a king to have over any country he acquired.

It was in Kabul, a mercantile entrepôt on the "silk road" to South Asia situated about four hundred miles south of Fergana, that Babur first styled himself king (*padishah*).[211] Kabul was a new territory for Babur. The excitement he betrayed at seeing Canopus (*Suhayl*), "a brilliant star low on the southern horizon"[212] indicated that this may have been the first time he had come down this far south. Canopus was a navigational star, visible only below a certain latitude in the northern hemisphere. But it was also a sign of fortune (*nishan-i dawlat*) that lifted Babur's spirits, as one of his noblemen recited the following verse:

> Canopus, how far do you shine and when do you rise?
> You are a sign of fortune to all upon whom your eye lights.

Babur certainly needed the encouragement, having been chased out of his ancestral lands by the Chinggisid Uzbeks. In Kabul, safe from Uzbek depredation, he settled down to rule his new territories and set about "knowing" this country in the same way as he had known Fergana.[213]

In Babur's description of his new territory we get – besides an appreciation of its good fruits, excellent wine, and wholesome air – a picture of a trading crossroads teeming with people from all over Asia.

> Every year seven, eight, or ten thousand horses come to Kabul. From Hindustan, caravans of ten, fifteen, twenty thousand pack animals bring slaves, textiles, rock

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[211] He was called padishah in Kabul 260 in the year 913/1507-8. "Up to this time the descendents of Temur Beg has been called mirza, even when they were ruling. At this time I ordered that they call me padishah." Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 260. Babur, Thackston, and Khan, *Baburnama (polyglot)*, 455.

[212] Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 149. Babur, Thackston, and Khan, *Baburnama (polyglot)*, 256-257.

[213] The sociological concept of "knowing" the country in order to rule it, used in this section, is taken from C. A. Bayly, "Knowing the Country: Empire and Information in India," *Modern Asian Studies* 27, no. 1, Special Issue: How Social, Political and Cultural Information Is Collected, Defined, Used and Analyzed. (1993). Also see C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

sugar, refined sugar, and spices….Goods from Khurasan, Iraq, Anatolia, and China can be found in Kabul, which is the principal depot of Hindustan.[214]

With trade came a great diversity in people and languages: "Eleven or twelve dialects are spoken in Kabul Province: Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Mongolian, Hindi, Afghani, Pashai, Parachi, Gabari, Baraki, and Lamghani."[215] Babur enumerated in detail the tribes who lived in his dominion, the places where highway men operated, the passes through the mountains, the places to cross rivers, and displayed an impressive knowledge of numerous other useful facts. However, interspersed with this knowledge of the land and its peoples, Babur demonstrated a keen awareness of its sacred places and a curiosity about its miracles.

Near Kabul there was a footprint of Khwaja Khizr, an immortal Quranic figure who had once guided Moses and was believed to be still walking the earth to guide saints and emperors.[216] In Alishang district one could visit the tomb of Noah's father, Mehter Lam.[217] In the district of Kunar, Babur circumambulated a shrine where a famous mystic, Mir Sayyid-Ali Hamadani (d. 1384), had died while traveling through this region. These local sites representing globally famous people were not mere curiosities for Babur. Rather it seems to have been his "policy" to investigate the sacred topography of his new kingdom. For example, in the year he came to Kabul, Babur was informed about a village

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[214] Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 153. Babur, Thackston, and Khan, *Baburnama (polyglot)*, 264-265.
[215] Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 156. Babur, Thackston, and Khan, *Baburnama (polyglot)*, 270-271.
[216] Khizr was especially important in Sufi traditions, prophetic lore, and epic traditions, appearing at moments of peril, often in dreams, to guide saints and conquerors – the most notable example being Alexander the Great. See John Renard, "Khadir/Khidr," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾan*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Brill, 2009), available at www.brillonline.nl; A. J. Wensinck, "al-Khadir (al-Khidr)," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman et al. (Brill, 2009), available at www.brillonline.nl.
[217] Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 158. Babur, Thackston, and Khan, *Baburnama (polyglot)*, 274-275.

shrine where the tomb moved when prayers were offered. Upon arriving at the shrine,

Babur saw the miracle with his own eyes. Then he discovered that it was a trick: "They

had put a screen over the tomb, which, when they made it move, made it seem as though

the tomb was moving, just as it seems to people riding in a boat for the first time that the

shore is moving."[218] Although Babur chastised the attendants and had the false screen

destroyed, he did not condemn the "spurious" shrine. Instead, he had a proper dome built

over it. The exposure of trickery did not take away from the holiness of a place or the

possibility of its sacred nature. Miraculous sites had to be taken seriously, verified, and

protected from abuse. Moreover, such places were not merely mentioned in oral lore but

also in respectable literary sources. Babur had read in a history book about how

Sabuktekin, a tenth century Turkish ruler of Ghazni, a city not far from Kabul, had

defended himself against an attack by an Indian Raja by throwing filth in a certain spring.

It was written that if this stream was polluted it gave rise to a violent hailstorm. Babur

wrote regretfully, "No matter how much I searched for the spring in Ghazni, no sign of it

could be found."[219]

Mastery over weather was a crucial weapon of war and rule. No Turkish ruler was

without a servant skilled in working the "rain stone" (*yada* or *yat*), useful for bringing

down a storm on the enemy or putting out a raging fire.[220] Babur named three of his

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[218] Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 164. Babur, Thackston, and Khan, *Baburnama (polyglot)*, 284-285.
[219] Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 165. Babur, Thackston, and Khan, *Baburnama (polyglot)*, 286-287.
[220] The Turks were famous for their rainmaking ability. It was widely reputed that this was a special power taught to the Turks by the Biblical prophet Japheth, the son of Noah from whom Turks were believed to have descended. Eye-witness accounts of this phenomenon exist as early as eleventh century. An Arabic "dictionary" of the Turkish language, written in the eleventh century gives a detailed description of this unique ability of the Turks. The author, a Turk, noted that: "I myself witnessed it in Yagma. It was done to put out a fire that had broken out. Snow fell in the summer! -- by the grace of God most high -- and put out

officers who possessed this skill.[221] One of them worked up a thunderstorm on the river

Ganges as an impressive display for some visiting Mongol princes. Babur wrote, "I

invited the princes on to my boat. Tokhta Buqa Sultan worked the rain stone. A violent

wind arose and it began to rain. It was terrible! The weather was so bad that some of us

had *ma'jun* [an opiate] even though we had had some the day before."[222] To have such

men in imperial service was of strategic significance just as it was important to find out if

the enemy possessed such skills. Babur cited a spy report in which his ally, the Safavid

ruler Shah Tahmasb, had gathered a 105,000 strong army to attack the despised Uzbeks

in Herat. The Uzbeks were reportedly unperturbed because they planned to deploy expert

rainmakers to trap the superior Safavid forces:

> The Uzbeks learned of this and, taking no notice of their foe, decided in council
> as follows: "Let all of us khans and sultans sit in Mashhad. We will assign twenty
> thousand men to a few princes to encircle the area of the Qizilbash's [the Safavid
> soldiers] camp and not allow them to stick their heads out. When the Sun enters
> Scorpio we will order the rainmakers to cause rain, and thus reducing them to
> inability, we will take them."[223]

What are we to make of Babur's interest in miracle graves, magic springs, saintly

footprints, and rain-making stones, which he pursued with as much intellectual vigor as

other more "rational" types of knowledge about the peoples and regions he ruled? Were

such phenomena little more than sideshows to the "real" political and religious spectacle

of court intrigues and transgressions of law that was supposed to concern rulers? Babur,

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the fire in my presence." See Robert Dankoff, "Kasgari on the Beliefs and Superstitions of the Turks," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 95, no. 1 (1975): 77.

[221] Besides the Tokhta Buqa Sultan mentioned in the text, the other two were Ali Dost Taghayi, a falconer who had served Babur's father, and Khwajagi Mulla Sadr, an able warrior and seal keeper of Babur's father, who besides being skillful with the rain stone, was a scholar, composer, and expert falconer. In short these were not shamans or religious specialists but noblemen and warriors. Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 19, 59.

[222] Ibid., 439. Babur, Thackston, and Khan, *Baburnama (polyglot)*, 768-769.

[223] In this case, the Uzbek rainmaking plan did not bear fruit and they were routed by the Safavids, according to Babur. Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 422. Babur, Thackston, and Khan, *Baburnama (polyglot)*, 738-741.

an eminently learned prince, made no such distinctions.[224] These "strange" matters

attracted his interest and were brought to his attention in intelligence reports in much the

same way as other more mundane affairs. Certainly, one can say that these phenomena

enjoyed a reality at the time that is no longer substantial for us. But what is more difficult

to grasp is that this reality was given substance not just by false science or blind faith –

what we would term magic and superstition – but also by social institutions that shaped

thought and channeled curiosity. In other words, pursuit of such knowledge was part of

the institution of kingship and indispensable for wielding political authority.

To illustrate this point, let us examine Babur's confrontation with a famous

Persian astrologer, Muhammad Sharif. Babur's knowledge and interest in astronomy and

astrology is well-attested from his writings.[225] This particular astrologer had first come to

see Babur and offer his services (*mulazimat*) when the latter had been suffering from a

serious illness, unable to leave his tent.[226] Although Babur did not say, it would be safe to

assume that Sharif played a role in treating the king. Astrology at the time deeply

informed medical knowledge.[227] Babur, for example, once attributed a recurring earache

to the cycles of the Moon.[228] But astral knowledge was not only a science of the human

body. It was also a science of the social body. Just as astrologers could explain choleric

irruptions as celestially induced imbalance of humors in the physical body, they could

predict rebellion and heresy as cosmologically related disorders in the body politic, and

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[224] In fact, an argument can be made that learning and education was where this attitude came from. See note 203 above on how princes were trained in such knowledge and patronized scholarly experts in it.
[225] For Babur's account of Ulugh Beg's observatory in Samarkand, see Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 58.
[226] Ibid., 286.
[227] See, See, H. J. J. Winter, "Persian Science in Safavid Times," in *The Cambridge History of Iran: The Timurid and Safavid Periods*, ed. Peter Jackson and Laurence Lockhart (Cambridge: University Press, 1986).
[228] Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 413.

suggest the appropriate time for countermeasures. Thus, it was in moments of uncertainty and danger – disease and disturbance – that the "ecumenical" knowledge of physicians and astrologers became critically important.[229] From Babur's own account, we know that battle formations and time of attack were often planned according to the configuration of the planets and their physical location vis-à-vis the army.[230] We can imagine, then, Babur's consternation when on the eve of a momentous battle in India his Iranian astrologer issued the direst of predictions.

In 1527, Babur's hold on his newly conquered Indian territories was fragile. He faced the experienced Rajput warrior Rana Sangha who possessed an army that had pressed fear into the heart of Babur's officers.[231] The morale of Babur's men, unused to Indian conditions and facing a large and disciplined force, had begun to flag. His Hindustani allies had begun to leave him. His own diagnosis of the problem involved the "ill-omened" (*shum nafs*) astrologer:

> At such a time, when there was such hesitation and fear among the soldiers over past events and loose talk, as has been mentioned, Muhammad Sharif the doom-and-gloom astrologer, although he did not dare speak to me personally, with great exaggeration told everyone he met that Mars was presently in the west and anyone who fought from that direction would suffer defeat. The more these disheartened people consulted the prophet of doom, the more disheartened they became.[232]

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[229] For an example of astronomical and medical knowledge was used in public discussions and debate on socio-political conditions in eighteenth century South Asia, see Bayly, *Empire and Information*, 247-283.
[230] For example, Babur described how he changed the timing of battle because of astrological concerns: "The reason for my anxiousness was so that on the day of battle the Pleiades would be between the two armies. If the day had passed, the Pleiades would have been behind the enemy for thirteen or fourteen days. Such considerations were futile, and I hastened the battle for naught." Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 104. In general, Timurid chronicles give many examples of how an astrological prediction threw a powerful army in disarray and brought ruin on the king.
[231] Babur related, "I don't know whether it was of their own fear or whether they were trying to scare the men, but in any case Qisimtay, Shah-Mansur Barlas, and all who came from Bayana [where Rana Sangha had struck up camp] could not say enough of the audacity and ferocity of the Infidel's army (*kop sitayish o ta'rif kildilar*)" Ibid., 377. Babur, Thackston, and Khan, *Baburnama (polyglot)*, 664-665.
[232] Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 379.

The way Babur dealt with this challenging situation is revealing. Instead of punishing the difficult astrologer, Babur set about negating his gloomy predictions with a set of propitious measures. First, he publicly declared his intention to renounce wine. Three hundred of his commanders and soldiers joined him in enacting this pledge of temperance. The offensive beverage, many jars of which had been recently brought from Kabul for royal consumption, was either turned into vinegar or poured on to the ground. Babur ordered a step-well to be dug – a particularly Indic act of expiation – in the place where the earth had swallowed up the wine. He also ordered a charitable building built next to the well. He further announced that if the battle was won, Muslims would no longer suffer the infamous *tamgha* tax on trade, a Mongol practice. These two "momentous events"– renunciation of the un-Islamic drink and repeal of the un-Islamic tax – were written up in imperial decrees, "copied and dispatched to the entire realm."[233] Finally, Babur gathered his commanders and made them swear on the Quran that they would hold their ground in battle. Despite these efforts, desertions grew and important Indian commanders abandoned Babur. Some plundered the countryside on their own. Others joined the "infidel" enemy's camp. Nevertheless, with the planets propitiated, somehow Babur's remaining soldiers took heart. The battle was fought and the enemy defeated. At this juncture, one would have expected Muhammad Sharif to make his escape and for Babur to hunt him down. But surprisingly, the astrologer turned up to congratulate the victorious king and received a substantial reward. Babur wrote:

> I cursed him roundly and made myself feel much better. Although he was heathenish (*kafirvash*) and pessimistic (*shumnafs*), terribly conceited, and very cold, he had a long service record, so I gave him a lac [hundred thousand] with the proviso that he not remain in my realm." [234]

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[233] Ibid., 381.
[234] Ibid., 394. Babur, Thackston, and Khan, *Baburnama (polyglot)*, 692-693.

The fact that Babur offered a large bribe to the troublesome astrologer to leave his kingdom shows the latter's high status and the importance of his ecumenical knowledge. Moreover, the way Babur acted "Islamically," forsaking wine, demonstrates how astrology and Islam were linked together in practice. It was astrological knowledge of possible defeat and loss of sovereignty – not the confrontation with an "infidel" enemy – that led to the invocation of an Islamic ritual of atonement, the giving up of wine. This was no frivolous pledge either. Babur swore that he never touched wine again. He simply made do with opium.

To summarize, Babur's actions as a king were structured and constrained by more than just a Mongol code of conduct, Persian ideal of justice, or Islamic tradition of law. In practice, he had to navigate a political landscape enveloped in a web of signs – omens, cosmological patterns, and invisible forces – which were in an important sense more "universal" and "real" than any code, ideal, or legal tradition. Much of the news Babur received and the knowledge he acquired of his enemies, subjects, territories, and army was filtered and colored by this semiotic prism. His astuteness and sagacity, then, is to be measured not by whether he scoffed at such phenomena but by how sensitively he read these signs and acted accordingly, deflecting the foul and incorporating the efficacious ones into his imperial program. But it would not do to reduce such practices too simply to superstition, faith, or political calculation of an individual. Rather, these should be viewed as constituting a domain sustained by social institutions and widespread social practices.[235] The rituals Babur engaged in were not the empty gestures and silent words

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[235] For a useful discussion of anthropological literature on how such "magical" thought and action is better interpreted with reference to social structures, cultural forms, or "language games," and not necessarily as a reflection of individual intent or intelligence, see Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and*

of a private rite or individual prayer. By reacting ritually, Babur was in fact responding to social situations. By manipulating symbols publicly he was engaging with social institutions and, in the process, mobilizing men and material.[236] He was, in other words, exercising his sovereign agency.

It is important to note that such public acts absorbed a substantial portion of the king's time and energy. One reason for this was that rulers like Babur had to establish their dominion without a centralizing bureaucratic order and an enumerating, naming, and documenting state. This had to be done, moreover, on a population that was both highly mobile and diverse in terms of ethnicity, religion, and language. An absence of institutions that produced social classifications and fixed social identities should have, on the face of it, led to an unstable polity and incoherent social discourse. The reason this did not occur was because such social institutions did exist, but in forms that were decentralized and distributed across the ecumene.[237] An astute ruler had to locate these cultural sites and demonstrate an ability to engage with them. In a sense, the role of the king and the script of kingship were inscribed in social institutions that were largely outside the control of courtly circles. In the absence of a strong state apparatus, kings engaged with these institutions through a circulating sovereign presence and a mastery of

the Scope of Rationality (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). The classic work of social history in this regard remains Keith Thomas's study of early modern England, Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. Many of Thomas's insights were based on structure-functionalist understandings of the relation between collective thought and social structure pioneered in E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: The Clarendon press, 1950). Although structure-functionalism has fallen out of fashion in anthropology, many of Evans-Pritchard's insights were congruent with the still fashionable philosophy of the later Wittgenstein. For an excellent discussion, see, Mary Douglas, *Edward Evans-Pritchard* (New York: Viking Press, 1980).

[236] In other words, "ritual" here invokes the strand of anthropological theory which sees collective rites as a mechanism for structuring society, organizing collective activity, and concentrating group consciousness. The literature on this topic is vast. A classic work is Turner, *Ritual Process*.

[237] The ecumene can be thought of as a patrimonial political order consisting of a collection of communities participating in a shared moral discourse of rights and obligations. See, Bayly, *Empire and Information*, 181, n. 6.

local knowledge.[238] Indeed, reading Babur's memoir one is constantly surprised by how few barriers existed between him and the locals.[239] Constant movement of the ruler for military campaigns, hunts, pilgrimage to holy sites, or seasonal migration from summer to winter quarters, thus served to bring the body politic under sovereign surveillance and authority. Moreover, this circulation allowed the king to both contribute towards and tap into a network of news and opinion managed by various "knowledge communities."[240] These were communities whose social position was a function, not primarily of wealth, but of their specialized knowledge of ecumene and society.

Such a perspective on kingship brings into focus the power and privilege of intermediary groups – holy men, Sufis, storytellers, astrologers, and physicians – which are often neglected in scholarship. Such groups controlled key nodes of social knowledge and opinion formation. They also provided access to "affective" knowledge, a window into local idioms of thought and opinion.[241] Their control over local knowledge created spheres of autonomy within the polity and as such provided a check on the ruler's

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[238] It is well-acknowledged that kingship in pre-modern times had a strong performative element to it but few recognize it as an itinerant role performed outside the stylized setting of the palace court. For a sense of how mobile the institution of Mughal kingship was, see Jos Gommans, *Mughal Warfare: Indian Frontiers and Highroads to Empire, 1500-1700* (London: Routledge, 2002), 100-111.

[239] For example, when Babur was ruling Kabul, he went out on a tour of the autumn harvest and decided to throw a "private" party in his tent. To this, he invited a woman because he had "never seen a woman drink before," a wandering dervish, and a couple of local "men who played the *rubab*." Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 300.

[240] The king, his collaborators and competitors, all tapped into flows of information fed by formal postal systems and intelligence gathering mechanisms as well as by regular movement of people due to trade, pilgrimage, and seasonal migrations, which carried news and information across vast distances. It is important to remember that even though a large ratio of the population was illiterate at this time, people were literacy-aware and written information could easily be replicated and disseminated in oral form and vice-versa. This argument, made by Bayly for eighteenth century Mughal India, which also did not have a strong centralized administration, applies to Babur's period as well. Bayly, *Empire and Information*.

[241] Bayly describes social knowledge of use to authority as consisting of two types: a) Patrimonial knowledge, i.e., the deep local knowledge of the "magnates and nobles" who knew particular regions because they ruled them or had deep influence over them; b) Affective knowledge, i.e., "the knowledge gained through participation in communities of belief and marriage through religious affiliation and association with holy men, seers, astrologers and physicians." Rulers established their writ by cooperating with status groups formed on the basis of both types of social knowledge, patrimonial and affective. See, Ibid., 17.

authority. Although the "strange" forms of knowledge these groups dealt in – divination, dream interpretation, astrology, apocalyptic verse, morality tales, miracle stories, and edifying epics – do not fit into "respectable" categories of religion or politics, they played an important role in the dissemination of political messages and news as well as in the formation of social memory.[242] In other words, the cultural logic of the discourse of "strangeness" becomes more apparent, and less strange, once we take into account the collective practices and social institutions that sustained it. Armed with these insights, we are ready to take a closer look at Babur's ritual development as a king.

Babur's Dreams of Samarkand

Although Babur is famous today for conquering Hindustan, it was really his early and sustained quest to become the master of Samarkand that forged him as a king. For about twenty years, from the year of his father's death in 1494 until 1513, Babur strove to acquire and rule from Samarkand, a city which, he wrote, had been founded by Alexander, conquered by Arabs in the reign of the third caliph Uthman, and made into his capital by Timur. It is difficult to overstate the attraction Samarkand held for Babur who gave a loving and detailed description of it in his memoir. However, he was only able to realize his dream for short periods of time in 1496, 1500, and 1511.[243]

The first time Babur took Samarkand was two years after his father's death. Being barely fourteen at the time, he only had nominal control over his affairs. Rather, the conquest of Timur's city was a joint project in which the young Timurid was a partner –

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[242] Bayly makes a similar argument for late Mughal India, see Ibid. For a general discussion based on examples taken from European history of how social memory was shaped in pre-modern cultures see, James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory: New Perspectives on the Past* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1992), 87-143.

[243] Dale, *Garden*, 64.

possibly, a junior one – by dint of his lineage. Babur admitted that victory would not have

been possible without the help of Khwaja Qazi, a prominent notable of the region.

Khwaja Qazi was the scion of a rich and educated family that had produced many judges

(*qazi*) and religious authorities (*Shaykh al-Islam*). Descended from famous Sufi masters,

he had also been a disciple of Khwaja 'Ubaydullah Ahrar (d. 1490), the most famous

Naqshbandi saint of the Timurid period whose leading role in matters of economy,

welfare, politics, and war were legendary.[244] Not only were Khwaja Qazi's spiritual

credentials impeccable but he was also a man of considerable means. As a significant

show of support for young Babur – who had little to offer his soldiers besides an

opportunity to plunder – the Khwaja[245] had distributed eighteen thousand head of sheep

among those fighting on Babur's side. However, upon conquest, Babur's men and allies

found that the besieged and ravaged city had little left in it to loot and they began to

desert and mutiny. Again, it was Khwaja Qazi who negotiated with the unruly

commanders. The negotiations failed and Babur had to abandon Samarkand, having ruled

the city for only a hundred days. In the ensuing skirmishes, Khwaja Qazi was captured by

the opposing camp and executed. The news of his death deeply aggrieved Babur who

considered the Khwaja to be a true saint. He wrote: "What better proves his sainthood

(*wilayat*) than that within a short time there was no trace left of those who had him

killed? …His bravery too indicates his sainthood."[246]

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[244] For a discussion of Khwaja Ahrar's political activism and how it was remembered in Timurid Iran, see Jurgen Paul, "Forming a Faction: The Himayat System of Khwaja Ahrar," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 23, no. 4 (1991).
[245] Khwaja was a title of respect used for Sufi masters and their descendents
[246] Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 65. Babur, Thackston, and Khan, *Baburnama (polyglot)*, 110.

The case of the wealthy and saintly Khwaja Qazi shows that Samarkand, like most cities of the region, could not be taken or ruled without support from urban notables who, in this milieu, drew their status from an association with regional Sufi orders. These patrician Sufis did not fit the image of the proverbial world-renouncing mystic. Rather, men like the Khwaja were authority figures who controlled the city with their wealth, prestige, and charitable organizations. From Babur's account and other sources we know that Naqshbandi leaders could help raise armies, control the city rabble, offer political refuge, intercede in princely disputes, act as ambassadors, and negotiate with conquerors on the city's behalf. They enjoyed a close relationship with royal and aristocratic families, often acting as teachers, tutors, and mentors to youths of noble birth.[247] In short, with their aristocratic connections and local, urban ties, these Sufis literally held the keys to the city and could act as kingmakers.

Unsurprisingly, then, in planning his next attempt on Samarkand in 1500, Babur once again turned to a Naqshbandi leader. This time it was Khwaja Yahya, a son of the renowned saint, Khwaja Ubaydullah Ahrar. Babur had high hopes of receiving assistance because he wrote "if the Khwaja agrees, Samarkand can easily be taken without fighting or battle."[248] Although disappointed when he only received a lukewarm response from the Sufi leader, Babur did not give up. As he sat one day in counsel with his nobles the discussion turned to how long it would take to conquer the city. All manner of estimates were put forth, some based on pragmatic calculations and others on auspicious ones: "Some said by summer (it was then late autumn), some said a month, some said forty

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[247] Indeed, there is some indication that Babur's childhood religious education may have been in the hands of Khwaja Qazi. Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, xxxviii-xxxix, 227.
[248] Ibid., 93. Babur, Thackston, and Khan, *Baburnama (polyglot)*, 158-159.

days, some said twenty days. Noyan Kukaldash said 'We'll take it in fourteen days.'"[249]

It was to be as the last man had said. The city would be taken – as if by a miracle – in less than a fortnight. The miracle occurred in the shape of a "strange dream" that Babur saw just days before the conquest:

> I dreamed that Khwaja Ubaydullah [Ahrar] had arrived and I had gone out to greet him. He came and sat down. The tablecloth must have been laid somewhat unceremoniously before him, for it seemed that he was offended. Mullah Baba looked at me and motioned. I motioned back as if to say, "it's not my fault. The steward is to blame." The Khwaja understood and accepted this apology. Then he rose, and I rose to escort him. In the entry way he took me by the arm, the right or the left, I don't remember which, and lifted me so that one of my feet was off the ground. In Turkish he said, "Shaykh Maslahat berdi" [Shaykh Maslahat has bestowed (the city?)]. A few days later I took Samarkand.[250]

Khwaja Ubaydullah Ahrar was, as mentioned earlier, the famous but deceased father of the equivocating Khwaja Yahya. Even though the son – a living saint – did not offer a firm commitment, his father came posthumously in a dream to Babur's aid. The second figure mentioned in the dream, Shaykh Maslahat was an even more ancient saint whose tomb in Khujand (Khodzent) was a famous pilgrimage site, which had been venerated by Timur himself. It was at Shaykh Maslahat's shrine that Babur had found refuge in 1497 after having lost Samarkand the first time.[251] So with the blessing of these two buried but still active saints, Samarkand fell in two weeks, miraculously, without even a fight.

This time around, Babur's control over Samarkand lasted for almost a year. Then the Uzbeks arrived under the command of the dreaded Shaybani Khan. Besieged, with supplies running out, Babur had no choice but to abandon the city once again. This year,

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[249] Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 98. Babur, Thackston, and Khan, *Baburnama (polyglot)*, 168-169.
[250] Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 99. Babur, Thackston, and Khan, *Baburnama (polyglot)*, 168-169.
[251] See, Zahir al-Din Mirza Babur, *The Babur-nama in English (Memoirs of Babur)*, trans., Annette Susannah Beveridge, 2 vols. (London: Luzac & co., 1921), 1: 132, n. 2.

1501, was a particularly ignominious one for him. Not only did he lose his prized city but in order to secure his freedom he also had to part with his older sister and only sibling, Khanzada Begim, whom Shaybani Khan captured and took as his wife. The nineteen year old Babur, defeated and without an army, was pursued by his enemies. After a skirmish, Babur escaped with a few men and hid in a country garden. He sent for help but his companions betrayed him and sent a message instead to the enemy. Babur sensed that treachery was afoot but resigned himself to fate. As he bowed down in prayer, preparing for death, he fell asleep:

> I dreamed that Khwaja Ya'qub, son of Khwaja Yahya and grandson of Khwaja Ubaydullah [Ahrar], was coming toward me on a dappled horse, surrounded by a group also mounted on dappled horses. "Grieve not," he said. "Khwaja Ahrar has sent me to you. He has said that we were to assist you and seat you on the royal throne. Whenever you are in difficult straits, think of us and speak. We will be there. Now victory and triumph are coming to you. Raise your head and awake!"[252]

Soon after Babur awoke, a band of riders entered the garden. The men turned out to be Babur's trusted retainers. When asked how they had known where to find Babur, one of them replied that Khwaja Ahrar had informed him in a dream where to find Babur:

> When we fled form Akhsi and got separated, I came to Andizhan because the khans had gone there. In a dream I saw Khwaja Ubaydullah [Ahrar] saying, "Babur Padishah is in a village called Karnon. Go, get him and come, for the royal throne belongs to him.[253]

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[252] Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 138. Babur, Thackston, and Khan, *Baburnama (polyglot)*, 242-243.

[253] Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 138-139. Babur, Thackston, and Khan, *Baburnama (polyglot)*, 242-243. Note that this dream does not appear consistently in the different extant versions of the Turkish manuscripts and is absent from the later Persian translations of the Mughal period. On this basis and other reasons, it was judged "spurious" by Annette Beveridge. See, appendix D in Babur, *The Babur-nama in English (Memoirs of Babur)*, 2: ix-xvi. There is no way to decide whether the dream was narrated by Babur or whether it was added by one of his descendents or devoted courtiers. Even if the dream is a later addition, it is an indication of how miracles began to be attributed early on to Babur in the context of his struggles to acquire Samarkand. It is interesting to note that the saint Khwaja Ahrar played a similar "legendary" role in the "spurious" memoirs of Timur that were "discovered" in the reign of Shah Jahan who also launched an attack on Transoxania in the middle of the seventeenth century. See note 42 for a reference to this memoir of Timur.

How should we treat the interconnected and patterned dreams of Babur and his men? Reading them in a text, we tend to view dreams as metaphors – as a more poetic way of describing reality. Or we dismiss them as propaganda meant to provide legitimacy and uphold ideology. To take dreams as fact feels like a deeply misplaced empiricism. Our uneasiness towards dreams may be explained by the fact that we, unlike our medieval Muslim counterparts, are neither reared from childhood to retain and recount our dreams nor trained as scholars in the science of dream interpretation. Indeed, in Babur's time, dreams served as emotive metaphors and powerful propaganda tools precisely because dreaming was a social fact. Dreaming was a widespread social practice that operated within the cultural logic of "strangeness" described earlier.

Dreams implied a prophetic connection with the invisible world and were considered a highly regarded source of truth. The ability to see clear, unambiguous dreams indicated a refined intellect and a pure soul.[254] This gave dreaming a powerful ontological property. By bringing saintly and prophetic figures from the past into the present, dreams could bend time and transmute it, turning profane moments into sacred ones. When seen, dreams could sacralize social relations and, when narrated, they could

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[254] Note that Babur even had a nobleman called Khwabbin (Dream Seer). Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 192. Babur, *The Babur-nama in English (Memoirs of Babur)*, 255. Dreams were considered to be slivers of prophetic powers that the laity – and not just among Muslims but all humanity -- had legitimate access to. Neither all dreamers were of equal ability nor all dreams of equal value, however. Clear dreams, which required no interpretation, and especially those in which prophetic, saintly, or royal figures appeared, contained the highest truth content. Moreover, the ability to receive such clear dreams required one to have a pure soul and a refined intellect. For, the Islamic conception of dreams was based on Plato's theory of the intellect, which held that it was only when the physical senses were at rest during sleep and could not interfere with the perceptive power of the intellect that it could perceive the noblest truths of the world of being. Supported by high philosophy, dreaming was also grounded in social discourse. Dreams were a serious topic of public discussion and frequently referenced in religious, political, and military affairs. Indeed, oneirocriticism was both akin to and competitive with astrology as a divinatory science against which even the Islamic legal tradition had few arguments. The literature on the theory of dreams in Islam is vast. For, a review, see A. Azfar Moin, "Partisan Dreams and Prophetic Visions: Shi'i Critique in al-Mas'udi's History of the Abbasids," *Journal of the Oriental American Society* 127, no. 4 (2007).

operationalize political alliances. For example, we saw in the case of Babur and the Naqshbandis how dreams transformed mundane political pacts into spiritual bonds, and routine events of war into fulfillments of saintly prophecy. Moreover, dreams worked in two directions. On the one hand, a dream could touch and change the self of the seer and, on the other hand, it could articulate with networks of community. In the latter sense dreaming was, oddly, a public ritual much like Babur's declarative forsaking of wine. But in the former sense, dreaming could function as a lifecycle ritual that marked the crossing of socially prescribed thresholds in the development of the self. Babur fought countless battles in his life, but he narrated his dreams only during his early and desperate struggle for Samarkand. These dreams, then, must be viewed as marking the rite of passage of a budding Timurid sovereign. It is no accident that these visions occurred at a moment in Babur's life when he was a dispossessed prince in search of dominion – a liminal condition that was an accepted part and expected phase of a Timurid prince's political development.[255]

If Babur's dreams were indeed rituals of sovereignty, then the role of Naqshbandis in them takes on a deeper significance. They reveal how deeply Naqshbandi Sufi families were embedded in the moral and political economy of Transoxania. Sovereignty over the region was theirs to grant. Samarkand could only be acquired through the spiritual intercession of past Naqshbandi saints and the material assistance of living ones. This makes it truly remarkable that in his third and final attempt on Samarkand in 1511, Babur abandoned the Naqshbandis and instead embraced their arch-nemesis. This was the Sufi brotherhood of the Safavids which, under its youthful leader

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[255] This phase was referred to as *qazaqliqlar* in Turkish and *Zaman-i qazaqi* in Persian meaning literally the "days of being a Cossack," or, more appropriately, the time of political vagabondage. For a good discussion of the topic, see Dale, *Garden*, 99-108.

Shah Isma'il, had moved beyond the role of mere kingmaker to claim sovereignty for itself. Between 1501, when he had taken the Aqqoyunlu capital of Tabriz in the east, and 1510, when he defeated the Uzbeks and conquered Herat in the west, Shah Isma'il became the sole sovereign of Iran. But he was no ordinary king. He was also the perfect guide (*murshid-i kamil*) and the messiah. All the prominent Sufi and aristocratic families now faced the same stark choice. They could submit to the new order and accept the political and spiritual leadership of the Safavid Shah and Shaykh. Or they could resist and be annihilated.

The Rise of Shah Isma'il

The rise of Shah Isma'il was a cataclysm of a magnitude not felt in the region since the conquests of Timur. A twelve year old boy had accomplished in ten odd years what no one else had been able to for over a century. Shah Isma'il had brought eastern and western Iran under one rule and launched an aggressive assault on Transoxania. His soldiers had accomplished this, moreover, with a ferocity and ruthlessness that was reminiscent of Timur's methods. It is not surprising then that the founder of the Safavid dynasty became, like the earlier Lord of Conjunction, a mythical figure in his lifetime.[256] This is in sharp contrast to Babur, who remained an "ordinary" figure and about whom contemporary sources have very little to say. In order to understand the nature of Babur's relationship with Shah Isma'il, it is important to develop an appreciation for the popular image and political stature of the latter. For, in the first decade of the sixteenth century, when Babur was scraping together a living by raiding Afghan villages and keeping his

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[256] Barry Wood, "The Shahnama-i Isma'il: Art and Cultural Memory in Sixteenth-Century Iran" (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Harvard University, 1997), 1-33.

sovereign ambitions alive by writing down his dreams in a diary, Shah Isma'il was enacting the myth of Lord of Conjunctionship and news of his invincibility and miraculous victories was echoing across Asia and Europe.

The earliest and richest accounts we have of Shah Isma'il are from Italian and Venetian sources that refer to him as the "Sofi."[257] The Europeans had been keenly following the politics of northwestern Iran because they sought an ally here against the powerful Ottomans with whom they competed for trade routes. They knew that Shah Isma'il's maternal grandmother, the Aqqoyunlu queen Despina Khatun, was a Christian princess from the small Greek kingdom of Trebizond on the Black Sea coast.[258] Consequently, their accounts were full of reports about the rise of a new child-king, son of Martha, who may in fact be a secret Christian. It was believed, erroneously, that in the internecine violence that broke out after the death of Uzun Hasan, the Aqqoyunlu king,

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[257] These accounts were by ambassadors or merchants who had been in the region during the reign of Shah Isma'il or later. Some even claimed to have seen him. However, they mainly relate the stories and rumors circulating about the mysterious child ruler of Iran. Yet, barring a few errant plots and muddled names and dates, these accounts are consistent with what we know from other chronicles of the period. In fact, these European accounts based on oral reports and bazaar gossip may in fact be more valuable in constructing Shah Isma'il's popular image than any royal chronicle. Palmira Brummett, "The Myth of Shah Ismail Safavi: Political Rhetoric and 'Divine' Kingship," in *Medieval Christian Perceptions of Islam*, ed. John Victor Tolan (New York: Routledge, 1996).

[258] Shah Isma'il's father, Shaykh Haydar was a nephew and son-in-law of Uzun Hasan, the last powerful Aqqoyunlu king. Shah Isma'il's maternal grandmother and wife of Uzun Hasan was Despina, daughter of the last emperor of Trabizond, a small remnant of the Byzantine empire on the southern coast of the Black sea. Despina had been married to Uzun Hasan in a political alliance by her father to seek military assistance from the Aqqoyunlu ruler in case of an Ottoman invasion of Trabizond, which bordered Ottoman and Aqqoyunlu territories. As part of the marriage pact, however, Despina kept her Christian faith and reportedly raised her three daughters as Christians. Accordingly, from European accounts, we hear that Shah Isma'il's mother was named Martha. See, Charles Grey, ed. *A Narrative of Italian Travels in Persia, in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1873), 4. Safavid chronicles, however, give her the Muslim name Halima and do not mention her Christian mother. See, Sarwar, *History*, 24, n. 22. Overall, Shah Isma'il's Sufi and royal descent shows the diversity of this "borderland" region, and the flexibility in making political alliances across religious and sectarian divides. The way Persian chronicles erase this complexity to construct a clean genealogy and smooth narrative also shows the care needed in reconstructing this history. For a review of the Persian chronicle tradition treating the early years of Shah Isma'il, see Alexander H. Morton, "The Early Years of Shah Isma'il in the *Afzal al-tavarikh* and Elsewhere," in *Safavid Persia: The History and Politics of an Islamic Society*, ed. Charles P. Melville (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996). Also, see Jean Aubin, "Chroniques Persanes et Relations Italiennes: Notes sur les Sources Narratives du Regne de Sah Esma'il Ier," *Studia Iranica* 24 (1995).

Shah Isma'il had been given refuge and taught the Scriptures by a Christian Armenian priest on an island on Lake Van.[259] This "good priest, who professed to be an astrologer and to know the course of events from the aspect of the heavens, cast his [Isma'il's] horoscope and foresaw that he would yet become lord of all Asia."[260] The author of this account knew, however, that Shah Isma'il's conquering career came to an abrupt end with his defeat by Ottomans at Chaldiran in 1514. But even then, he observed that "if the [Ottoman] Turk had been beaten, the power of Isma'il would have become greater than that of Tamerlane, as by the fame alone of such a victory he would have made himself absolute lord of the East."[261]

Despite the mythical stature of the two conquerors, Shah Isma'il's rise to power as Lord of the East is a very different story from how Timur the Lame had become the Lord of Conjunction. When Shah Isma'il appeared on the political stage, he already had a sparkling pedigree linking him to Ali and to the Aqqoyunlu ruler of western Iran.[262] But what made Shah Isma'il different from any other general or prince was his position as the head of the Safavid Sufi order. This gave him a substantial advantage over other claimants to kingship – an ability to recruit and inspire devoted and loyal fighting men. The Safavid Sufi order had become militarized under Shah Isma'il's grandfather, Junayd, who had gathered a number of devotees among nomadic Turkmen tribes. Shah Isma'il inherited this spiritual position from his own father Haydar. In other words, he did not become a messiah but rather he was born as one. In the eyes of his Sufi followers, Shah

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[259] Grey, ed. *Italian Travels*, 187.
[260] Ibid., 47.
[261] Ibid., 61.
[262] For a discussion of and review of literature on how the Alid lineage of the Safavids was created and polished over time, see Kathryn Babayan, "Sufis, Dervishes and Mullas: the Controversy over Spiritual and Temporal dominion in Seventeenth-Century Iran," in *Safavid Persia: The History and Politics of an Islamic Society*, ed. Charles P. Melville (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996), 122-123.

Isma'il was Ali reborn and divine. It was said that his soldiers prayed in camp facing his tent, and trusted him to protect their lives by his miraculous abilities. They were willing to sacrifice their lives for their adolescent perfect spiritual guide (*murshid-i kamil*). An European observer noted:

> This monarch is almost, so to speak, worshipped, more especially by his soldiers, many of whom fight without armour, being willing to die for their master. They go into battle with naked breasts, crying out "Schiac, Schiac", which, in the Persian language, signifies "God, God". Others consider him a prophet; but it is certain that all are of opinion that he will never die.[263]

The devotion of Shah Isma'il's soldiers toward him was something few princes could hope to possess. By contrast, Babur faced great difficulty throughout his life in raising an army of men loyal to him for an extended period of time. What Babur did not have was the elaborate recruitment and indoctrination apparatus of the Safavid Sufi mission (*da'wa*).

Two generations before Shah Isma'il, the Safavids had developed an extensive network of preachers and proselytizers targeting the Turkmen tribes of Anatolia, southern Caucasus, and Azerbaijan. This network of dervish agents was managed by a hierarchical organization of deputies (*khalifa*) and head deputies (*khalifat al-khulafa*).[264] The message transmitted through this network was that the messiah had arrived and was rallying men of true faith to him. It was a message, moreover, that was designed to resonate with the Alid beliefs and practices already widespread in the region. The gist of these beliefs and practices was the spiritual primacy and divinity of Ali who, it was expected, would periodically return to earth to end tyranny and establish justice. As mentioned earlier, heresiographical literature of the period termed such groups extremists or exaggerators

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[263] Grey, ed. *Italian Travels*, 115.
[264] Roger Savory, "The Office of Khalifat al-Khulafa under the Safawids," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 85, no. 4 (1965).

(*ghulat*) in that they exaggerated the significance of Ali to the point of divinity.[265]

However, it is important to realize that for the population that was the target of Safavid

agents (*da'i*), these notions were not heretical in the sense of being a deviation from

majority belief but, rather, a significant part of the norm. This was true not only for the

nomadic Turkmen milieu but also in urban chivalrous organizations and brotherhoods of

craft guildsmen across the region.[266] The messianic movements of the previous century –

Nurbakhshi, Hurufi, Musha'sha', and others – had also paved the way for many of these

"strange" ideas and practices to be systematized and made compatible with elite Sufi

metaphysics and philosophy which, it is critical to note, overlapped with the "sciences of

strangeness" and the rituals they sustained. In sum, the Safavids did not arise suddenly

out of a vacuum but rather evolved gradually – and in keeping with the times – from a

sedate, urban, and largely Sunni spiritual brotherhood in Ardabil into a militant,

aggressive, and undeniably ghulat mystical order that came to dominate Iran and nearly

overtook Ottoman Anatolia.

As a child of about twelve in 1501, it is unlikely that Shah Isma'il was directly in

charge of the organization. Rather, the control in the early years seemed to have been in

the hands of one of his brother-in-laws who was also a chief of the Safavid mission

(*khalifat al-khulafa*). But Shah Isma'il was a crucial symbol for the project as the

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[265] Said Amir Arjomand, "Religious Extremism (*ghuluww*), Sufism and Sunnism in Safavid Iran: 1501-1722," *Journal of Asian History* 15 (1981). Jean Aubin, "La Politique Religieuse des Safavides," in *Le Shi'isme Imamite* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1970). See notes 93 and 154 above for a discussion of ghulat. It would be incorrect, however, to characterize ghulat as a doctrinal sect. Generally, these ideas did not become broadly systemized into a set of independent or long-lived doctrinal institutions. Despite the popularity of ghulat symbols, they were mainly held in opposition to the well established doctrines of scriptural Islam. Nevertheless, ghulat conceptions were widely accommodated in the teachings and practices of Sufism, and even informed metaphysical doctrines of Shi'ism. See Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*, xlv-xlvi, passim.
[266] See, for example, G. G. Arnakis, "Futuwwa Traditions in the Ottoman Empire: Akhis, Bektashi Dervishes, and Craftsmen," *Journal of near Eastern Studies* 12, no. 4 (1953).

spiritual guide and messiah. This we can judge from poetry attributed to him, written in a simple Azeri dialect of Turkish, which was used in Safavid missionary propaganda.[267] This poetry is all we have from Shah Isma'il who unlike Babur did not leave behind a detailed narrative of his life. In these poems Shah Isma'il claimed to be the embodiment of Divine Truth (*haqq*), Ali, Jesus, the twelve Shi'i Imams, and, importantly, of great warriors and emperors of the pre-Islamic Iranian past. It is significant that Shah Isma'il's verse, written under the pen name *Khata'i* (Sinner), became widely adopted as devotional poetry and scripture in different Turkish-speaking Sufi communities and Alid sects in the region.

Sufi Movements and Messianic Expectations

One group that preserved the poetry of Khata'i was the Bektashi Sufis of Anatolia.[268] The Bektashis were popular among Ottoman soldiers at least since the late fourteenth century and later became recognized as the spiritual order that ministered to the crack slave infantry units known as the Janissaries. The fact that soldiers of a significant military arm of the "Sunni" Ottomans had a deep affinity for the messianic symbolism of their "Shi'i" Safavid enemies makes for a complicated military history. For example, when the Ottomans defeated the Safavids in 1514 and captured the latter's capital at Tabriz, they did not consolidate their claims. Rather, they quickly left the region because they feared that their own soldiers were susceptible to Safavid

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[267] V. Minorsky and Shah Isma'il I, "The Poetry of Shah Isma'il I," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 10, no. 4 (1942).
[268] Irène Mélikoff, "La Divinisation d'Ali chez les Bektachis-Alevis," in *Au Banquet des Quarante: Exploration au Cœur du Bektachisme-Alevisme* (Istanbul: Isis, 2001). John Kingsley Birge, *The Bektashi Order of Dervishes* (London: Luzac Oriental, 1994), 68.

propaganda.[269] This case highlights the inadequacy of studying this period with labels like Shi'i and Sunni, based on doctrinal differences. In order to avoid being straitjacketed by these labels, we must pay more attention to patterned actions and practices of cultural actors – those "transient examples of shaped behavior"[270] of interest to ethnographers – that informed a common social experience and provided a common social spectacle.

The effectiveness of the Safavid dervish missionaries becomes obvious once seen against the backdrop of the spectacle of "deviant renunciation" that had spread across the Anatolia, Iran, Transoxania, and India in this period.[271] There existed in large numbers bands of mendicant dervishes – variously referred to as Qalandars, Abdals, Rums, and Haydaris – who were mystics of a type quite unlike the princely Naqshbandi Sufis of Samarkand. Rather than hobnobbing with royalty and funding coups in pursuit of power and status, these renunciants strove to achieve the opposite effect of permanent social marginality. It was not necessarily class, birth, or even education that divided the conformist (*ba-shar'*) from the deviant (*bi-shar'*) mystics. Rather, it was how they lived, what they consumed, and the way they adorned their bodies, deliberately breaking as many of society's taboos as possible.

Sixteenth century reports about these groups relate that instead of keeping beards, these mystics shaved off their entire facial and body hair.[272] They wore nose rings, pierced their bodies, carved out signs on their flesh, tattooed themselves and went around naked, begging for food. They said they shaved all the hair on their face "to make the

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[269] The Ottoman Sultan Selim I was given counsel after the battle of Chaldiran in 1514, in which the Safavids were defeated, that it was too dangerous to remain in the territory of an enemy leader who is revered by so many Ottoman soldiers. Birge, *Bektashi Order*, 67.
[270] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York,: Basic Books, 1973), 10.
[271] Karamustafa, *God's Unruly Friends*.
[272] This composite and hypothetical portrait of renunciant dervishes in the sixteenth century is based on the descriptions provided in Ibid., 65-84.

mirror of the face more brilliant."[273] They said they shunned clothing because that was

the way of Adam who wore nothing but a fig leaf when he was cast out from paradise.

They slept on the ground and were awakened by a horn, the sound of the trumpet of

Israfil, the angel who will announce the end of time and summon the dead. They eagerly

awaited this moment for they were already dead to the world, calling themselves the

beheaded dead people (*ser buride murde*).[274] They did not adhere to the prescribed rituals

of Islam. Instead, they lit a great fire in the evening, told stories, took intoxicants, and

danced in circles, holding hands and singing. They "carried lamps and played

tambourines, drums, and horns, at the same time screaming."[275] Suffice it to say, if any of

these raucous and unruly friends of God entered a village, a city neighborhood, or

military encampment, it would be difficult to take one's eyes off them. And, what would

one see? In all his glory, Ali!

Ali's name or an image of his double-tipped sword Zulfiqar would be tattooed

across their chests. They wore collars around their necks as slaves of Ali. They would

carry a hatchet of Abu Muslim, the epic defender of the Alids, whose heroic deeds

regaled and inspired people all over the region. Like Abu Muslim, they were ready to

fight the enemies of Ali. They would swear vengeance for Ali's family by reciting

apocalyptic verse by poets like Nesimi and Khata'i.[276] They carried a horseshoe

belonging to Duldul, Ali's famous mule.[277] When they would beg for alms, they would

do so in the name of the King of Men (*Shah-i Mardan*), Ali. They would wear a tall

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[273] The Timurid ruler of Herat, Husayn Bayqara, tried to stop this practice of shaving all facial hair among some young men and qalandars of his realm. Ibid., 59.
[274] Ibid., 83.
[275] Ibid., 71.
[276] Nesimi was a famous Hurufi poet. Khata'i, as mentioned earlier, was the pen name of Shah Isma'il.
[277] Frederick De Jong, "The Iconography of Bektashiism: A Survey of Themes and Symbolism in Clerical Costume, Liturgical Objects and Pictorial Art," *Manuscripts of the Middle East* 4 (1989): 10.

conical hat with twelve gores signifying the twelve Imams, i.e., Ali and his eleven rightful successors. On four sides of the hat would be written the Muslim profession of faith, the names of Muhammad, Ali, and his two sons Hasan and Husayn.

In sum, these antinomian dervish groups were the bodily instantiation of the messianic myth of Ali. As they moved across the land, they re-inscribed this myth in social memory, reminding all who saw and heard them of its key symbols and narratives. They were ideally suited to do so. For, they cut a figure that was awesome and jarring, eye-catching and repulsive, sacred and dangerous. One can imagine the worry they engendered among those in authority because these ascetics – drugged, armed, and hard to control – were often very popular among those not in authority. They presented a dilemma for kings. While rulers boasted in proclamations and edicts how they had put an end to such groups, in practice, they deftly accommodated these spectacular deviants and used their gripping displays of religiosity to enhance their own charisma.[278] Thus, when a screaming, naked dervish threw a piece of raw meat at Timur, the Lord of Conjunction wasted little time in declaring it an omen of victory.[279] For all he knew it was gift from Ali.

As much as any text of prose or poetry, it was the visual, aural, and somatic culture kept alive by these antinomian mystics that gave Alid symbols and narratives the force of truth. Through them, the fantastic and miraculous tales of Ali and his partisans were made substantial and real.[280] There was a parallel and related development in elite

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[278] The Aqqoyunlu ruler Uzun Hasan, for example, boasted about suppressing heretic Qalandar and Haydari dervishes in a letter to an Ottoman prince. Karamustafa, *God's Unruly Friends*, 58.

[279] See note 205 above.

[280] Many of these legends are still alive in the oral traditions of Alavi groups in the region. See Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Faith, Ritual and Culture among the Ahl-e Haqq," in *Kurdish Culture and Identity*, ed. Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Christine Allison (London: Zed Books, 1996).

culture at this time where Ali's image as a hero of Islam was given a coherent symbolic and visual form. Beginning in the thirteenth century, after the Mongol invasion, Ali began to be depicted and painted in both historical and literary texts produced in Iran.[281] In the fifteenth century, Ali's painted image had developed standardized details – he was shown apart from the crowd as red-haired, veiled, and haloed, with his sword Zulfiqar and his mule Duldul. Interestingly, in European accounts, Shah Isma'il's physical descriptions match the painted image of Ali. The Safavid king was said to be a handsome and agile youth with red hair who, some said, veiled his face.[282] With the air thick with the expectation of the rise of Ali's heir, and of Ali's own bodily return, the fact that the lore surrounding Shah Isma'il depicted him with features matching the popular and painted likeness of Ali is too striking to be ignored. Whatever may be the case, one thing is certain. He had little choice in how he would be imagined and remembered. The Safavid dervish missionaries and soldier devotees had already decided on the messianic template. Shah Isma'il was destined to perform the role he had been born into as the legatee of Ali.

Making the Body of Iran Safavid

Shah Isma'il's conquests were achieved both by a whirlwind of savage violence and a scheme of flexible political accommodation. Later Safavid historians would have us believe that his first priority upon gaining the throne was the imposition of doctrinal Shi'ism on the largely Sunni population of Iran. But the reality was far more complex and

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[281] Serpil Bagci, "From Text to Pictures: 'Ali in Manuscript Painting," in *From History to Theology: Ali in Islamic Belief*, ed. Ahmet Yasar Ocak (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 2005).

[282] His physical description is given in Grey, ed. *Italian Travels*, 111, 202. It was Giovanni Rota au Doge, writing in 1504 or 1505 who reported that Shah Isma'il is adored as a prophet and keeps his face covered and veiled. Quoted in Aubin, "L'Avenement des Safavides," 39.

interesting. Shah Isma'il's main powerbase was his Qizilbash soldier devotees who considered him to be their perfect guide and messiah. They were not in the least interested in changing their religious ways, many of which were informed by the transgressive practices of antinomian dervish orders. There was an immediate need, on the other hand, to put a Safavid stamp on the administrative structures and socio-political arrangements of previous rulers. The early Safavid response to these conflicting needs was to use a religious idiom of power that was not doctrinal and legal but symbolic and corporeal. In many ways, this was to be expected of a Sufi organization with well-established rituals of initiation, incorporation, and submission of disciples. Accordingly, the initial Safavid domination of the body politic of Iran took place not via legal or administrative measures but via a politics of the body.

The most visible symbol of the new order was the Safavid crown or *taj* known as the *Taj-i Haydari* (Crown of Haydar).[283] According to Safavid tradition, Ali had come in a dream to Shah Isma'il's father, Shaykh Haydar in 1487 and given him instructions to make a distinctive headgear or taj. This consisted of a hat topped by a tall red baton with twelve facets (*tark*) around which a turban could be tied. This crown, whose wearers began to be called Red-heads (*Qizilbash*) was worn by the Safavid order as a mark of devotion to Ali and to his heir incarnate the Safavid perfect guide (*murshid-i kamil*). Although called a crown, it did not mark the leader of a group. Rather, its function was the opposite, to incorporate the wearer into the body of the group. As the Safavid order became militarized, this practice was extended into the political domain. To become a partner in the Safavid project, one had to replace one's headgear with the Safavid hat. If

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[283] A short history of the Safavid "taj" along with pictures is given in Barbara Schmitz, "On a Special Hat Introduced during the Reign of Shah Abbas the Great," *Journal of Persian Studies* 22 (1984).

later Safavid court paintings are any indication, this requirement was most vigorously and broadly enforced in the time of Shah Isma'il when courtiers of every rank wore the red taj.[284]

The donning of a new headgear must be seen as more than just a cosmetic change. The form of one's clothes, the shape of one's hat and the type of symbols that decorated one's body was dictated by more than just aesthetic taste. Swapping one set of apparel for another meant adopting a new social personality with its attendant norms of comportment.[285] Moreover, the significance of such an act was widely understood and reported. European accounts of the Safavids, for example, describe the shape of the red Safavid taj and relate how it was used in formal ceremonies of submission involving the defeated Uzbek princes who, it was said, exchanged their green "caftans" for the red ones of the Safavids.[286] The import of the red Safavid crown can only be appreciated if we see it within ensemble of practices sustaining and sustained by a "highly corporeal religious imagination"[287] – that is, an imagination that focused on bodily submission, incorporation, and destruction.

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[284] Ibid.: 104.

[285] This was true broadly across the greater Persianate world which included even non-Muslim areas such as South India where courtly dress followed Persian fashion and differed, for example, from dress worn for temple ceremonies. See, Phillip B. Wagoner, "Sultan among Hindu Kings: Dress, Titles, and the Islamicization of Hindu Culture at Vijayanagara," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 55 (1996).

[286] Reportedly, Shah Isma'il said to the sons of the defeated Uzbek Shaybani Khan: "I will spare your lives, and allow you to return to your country on condition that you wear the red caftan, and that this river [Oxus] be your boundary." The young men replied, "Sire, we are content with what pleases your majesty, and will give in our submission." Grey, ed. *Italian Travels*, 117.

[287] The phrase and the argument is that of Shahzad Bashir. See, Shahzad Bashir, "Shah Isma'il and the Qizilbash: Cannibalism in the Religious History of Early Safavid Iran," *History of Religions* 45, no. 3 (2006): 255. The innovative practices of body symbolism that shaped the religious culture of this time remain understudied. But see, Scott Kugle, *Sufis & Saints' Bodies: Mysticism, Corporeality, & Sacred Power in Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

An important corporeal practice involved the ceremony of the *chub-i tariq* (Stick of the Path).[288] In this ceremony, which one observer called a "wedding," courtiers were bonded to the Safavid Shah by an officiant of the Safavid Sufi order. The ceremony was open to anyone the Shah invited, including non-Muslims. The Venetian-Cypriot envoy Michele Membré, for example, was shown favor by Shah Tahmasb, son of Shah Isma'il, when he was asked to participate in the ritual. Membré described his experience as follows:

> … the *khalifa* [deputy] has a substantial wooden stick, and begins from the first to the last; one by one they all come for love of the Shah to the middle of the room and stretch themselves out on the ground; and the said *khalifa* with the stick gives them a most mighty blow on the behind; and then the *khalifa* kisses the head and feet of the one he has given the blow; then he himself gets up and kisses the stick and thus they all do, one by one; so, as I was sitting then came to be my turn, and the villain, who had a pair of cloth breeches, gave me a blow which still hurts.[289]

Much like the red Safavid crown, the stick of the Safavid *khalifa* melded the bodies of the Shah's disciples into one obedient and orderly social body.

Another, more grisly, way of demonstrating loyalty with the Shah consisted of the frenzied devouring of an enemy sovereign's body. Reportedly, one victim of this ritual act was the Uzbek ruler Shaybani Khan whose muddied and bloodied corpse was eaten by a stampeding crowd of Qizilbash soldiers when Shah Isma'il said "whoever among our sincere soldiers (*qurchiyan-i kathir al-ikhlas*) and special servants (*mulaziman-i kathir al-ikhtisas*) loves our imperial head (*sar-i navab-i humayun-i ma*) should partake of the flesh of this enemy." [290] It has been observed that this transgressive act of

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[288] Alexander H. Morton, "The Chub-i Tariq and Qizilbash Ritual in Safavid Persia," *Etudes Safavides* (1993).
[289] Michele Membré, *Mission to the Lord Sophy of Persia (1539-1542)*, trans., Alexander H. Morton (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1993), 42-43.
[290] Quoted in Bashir, "Shah Isma'il and the Qizilbash," 243.

cannibalism was a demonstration of the Qizilbash disciples' loyalty to the Shah in a deeply affirmative sense – by the consuming together of tabooed flesh – as well as in a negative sense by the corporeal destruction of all other possibilities of sovereignty.[291]

These bodily rituals used to uphold Shah Isma'il's sovereignty can be used to make sense of the larger pattern of social accommodation and annihilation that occurred in his reign. It is well-known that organized Sufi orders declined under Safavid rule.[292] However, this decline was gradual and many mystical brotherhoods survived for generations. Their fate depended for the most part on how they responded to the new Safavid regime. For example, the important Ni'matullahi Sufi order, which spanned Iran and South India, thrived for over a century by accepting the Safavids' messianic claim. The Ni'matullahis seems to have paid for Safavid patronage in the ecumenical coin of "strangeness." Their founder Shah Ni'matullah Wali, who has been called the Nostradamus of the East, was famous for his mystical and divinatory poetry, which was used to predict the end of time and change in religion and politics.[293] Under the Safavids, the Ni'matullahis produced proof that Shah Ni'matullah's verse had predicted the rise of the Safavids as the expected messianic order.[294] As part of the accommodation, the

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[291] See, Ibid. These reports of battlefield cannibalism exist only for the reign of Shah Isma'il. We do not find them before or after his realm. Later, in the reign of Shah Abbas, when the Qizilbash had lost their power and replaced as a military force by an army of slave soldiers, the ritual devotees of the Shah had been reduced to services such as the torture of the Shah's enemies by eating them alive.

[292] While it is true that Iran became Shi'i under the Safavids and organized Sufism declined, the process was a complex and desultory one and took more than a century after the reign of Shah Isma'il.

[293] Hamid Algar and J. Burton-Page, "Ni'mat-allahiyya," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, CD-ROM* (Leiden: Brill, 1999). E. G. Browne notes that even though Shah Ni'matullah's poetry has little artistic merit it has, nevertheless, remained popular for its apocalyptic message and divinatory potential. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia*, 3: 468.

[294] The Ni'matullahi prediction regarding the rise of the Safavids appears in *Jami'-i Mufidi*, a history of Yazd written in 1679 by Muhammad Mufid Mustaufi Yazdi. See the introduction in Jean Aubin, *Majmu'ah dar Tarjumah-'i Ahval-i Shah Ni'matullah* (1956), 7-8. In this work, which is based on earlier Ni'matullahi writings, Shah Isma'il is depicted as Isma'il the Guide (*hadi*) who manifested himself as the deputy of the messiah (*naib-i mahdi*) in 909 AH. The author states that before Isma'il's manifestation (*khuruj*), Iran was in a dismal state due to political fragmentation, war, cruelty and oppression; Shah Isma'il, as predicted by

Ni'matullahis not only retained control over their major shrine complex in Yazd but also received choice posts in Safavid religious administration, married into the Safavid royal family, and even played an important role in dynastic politics.

Not all Sufi orders were so fortunate. Not even being openly Shi'i guaranteed an order's survival if its leaders refused to submit or developed dangerous ambitions. The Nurbakhshi brotherhood, for example, had strong Shi'i leanings even before the rise of the Safavids.[295] This may have been why Nurbakhshis received favor from Shah Isma'il who initially enlarged Nurbakhshi land holdings in Rayy. Even when Nurbakhsh's son was tortured to death by Isma'il for reasons that remain unknown, the family continued to hold sway in Rayy. It was only when Nurbakhsh's grandson, Shah Qawam al-Din, began to build castles and fortifications in Shah Tahmasb's reign that he was arrested, executed, and the order suppressed. The suppression of a Sufi order meant the destruction of its shrine or its incorporation into an Alid-Safavid symbolic order. The place of Sufi shrines across Iran was taken over slowly during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by holy sites dedicated to the Shi'i Imams and their progeny. However, in the early Safavid period, shrine destruction and grave desecration appears to have been patterned not by a systematic imposition of juridical Shi'ism but by a logic of imperial conquest and local resistance.

Shah Ni'matullah's verses, then rose to unify all of Iran under just rule and to impose Twelver Shi'ism. However, since this account is more than a century after the death of Shah Isma'il, in it the Safavids and the Ni'matullahis are depicted as Shi'is from the beginning, erasing all trace of the exaggerated Alid (*ghulat*) past of the former and Sunni-Sufi legacy of the latter.

[295] On the basis of religious content alone, the message of the Nurbakhshis, a Shi'i 'sect' of the Kubrawi Sufi order, was also close to Twelver Shi'ism. Although Nurbakhsh initially had made messianic claims, towards the end of his life and after his death, his teachings were given a Twelver Shi'i coloring. When Shaykh Muhammad Lahiji (d. 1515), Nurbakhsh's foremost disciple, established a hospice in Shiraz, Shah Isma'il visited the place. See, Hamid Algar, "Nurbakhshiyya," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, CD-ROM* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

When the Safavids conquered Baghdad, their soldiers desecrated the grave of the famous Sunni jurist Abu Hanifa.[296] His bones were dug up and burned. The same thing occurred with the graves of famous Naqshbandi figures, such as the famous saint and poet Jami, in Herat. One could argue that these acts showed a pattern of anti-Sunni acts of the Safavids. While there is no denying the dissonance between Qizilbash practices and those of Sunni Islam, such violence needs to be examined within the context of how armed resistance was punished and political vendettas settled. In the early Safavid period, this meant the destruction of the body of the local ruler, or of the local holy site which was often the grave of a revered saint linked to the ruler's sovereignty.[297] Moreover, this practice affected not only Sunnis but also rebellious Shi'i, Isma'ili, and even ghulat groups.[298] Thus, when some of the Qizilbash rebelled against Safavid imperial policies aimed at restricting their power within the realm, one of the ways they were punished was by the destruction of the shrine of Abu Muslim, the epic Alid hero who was a central figure in Qizilbash religious imagination.[299]

In sum, those who played by the new rules were incorporated into the Safavid symbolic order. Sunni and Sufi elites were encouraged to join the Safavid project on the

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[296] The Ottoman Sultan Selim wrote and asked Shah Isma'il to explain why he had desecrated Abu Hanifa's grave. See Andrew J. Newman, "The Myth of the Clerical Migration to Safawid Iran: Arab Shiite Opposition to ʿAli al-Karaki and Safawid Shiism," *Die Welt des Islams* 33, no. 1 (1993). For an overview of how the early Safavids acted to eliminate rival sacred figures and Sufi orders, see Arjomand, "Religious Extremism." Also, see Aubin, "L'Avenement des Safavides," 44-45.

[297] This argument follows Richard Eaton's detailed study on the pattern of Hindu temple destruction in India by Turkish and Afghan armies. Eaton's argument, simply put, is that this was a phenomenon related to rules of conquest and punishment of resistance and rebellion that was practiced by Hindu and Muslim rulers and not related to any sustained religious policy of Muslim kings against Hinduism. See, Richard Maxwell Eaton, "Temple Desecration and Indo-Muslim States," in *Essays on Islam and Indian History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000). While Eaton's argument is limited to South Asia and focuses only on Hindu temples, enough evidence exists of Sufi shrine destruction and desecration in Safavid and Timurid Iran that it is worth examining the wartime practice of destroying sacred sites linked to local political authority as common across Iran and India, and across Islam and Hinduism.

[298] Arjomand, "Religious Extremism."

[299] Babayan, "Sufis, Dervishes and Mullas," 124.

condition that demonstrated their loyalty by wearing the red headgear. Without the help of these established families, the Safavids would not have succeeded. This is why when Shah Isma'il had defeated Shaybani Khan and wanted to conquer Samarkand, he chose to enlist Babur, a Timurid experienced and motivated in taking this important city in Transoxania. The way Babur received a message of friendliness from Shah Isma'il was again corporeal. Shah Isma'il returned to him his sister Khanzada Begum – rescued from the camp of the defeated Uzbeks – whom Babur had surrendered to Shaybani Khan in Samarkand ten years earlier.

Babur the Qizilbash

Babur's memoir is mostly silent about the rise of Shah Isma'il, containing only six brief but respectful mentions of him. Moreover, Babur does not allude to the Shah Isma'il's messianic pretensions or openly disparage his religion. This is surprising given the savage treatment meted out to the population of Timurid Herat under the Safavids. Unfortunately, we do not have Babur's account of the years in which Shah Isma'il came east, defeated the powerful Uzbeks, conquered Herat, and enrolled Babur in his plans to take Samarkand and Transoxania. There is a large gap in the text from 1508 to 1519.[300] In the extant portions, Babur passes no comment on Shah Isma'il's heretical reputation. Instead, he reserves his most venomous remarks for the Uzbek Shaybani Khan. From Babur's perspective, the "Shi'i" Shah Isma'il Safavid had done him a great favor by eliminating the "Sunni" Uzbek who had for so long shamed the Timurids with his

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[300] For a discussion of whether this gap is due to an accident or deliberate destruction see Ney Elias's note in Mirza Haydar, *A History of the Moghuls of Central Asia: Being the Tarikh-i-Rashidi of Mirza Muhammad Haidar, Dughlat*, ed. Ney Elias, trans., E. Denison Ross (Patna, India: Academica Asiatica, 1973), 246, n. 2.

subjugation of their territories in Transoxania and Khurasan. This again shows how doctrinal labels are of little use in understanding the politics of the time. Yet, religious symbols and rituals played an important role in royal affairs. To resolve this paradox, we need to focus less on doctrine and more on practice. This shift in perspective makes clear how well-attuned Babur and his fellow Timurids were to the "strange" rituals of the Safavids.

Shah Isma'il and his followers were not the only ones swept up in the messianic expectations of the time. Babur related how the people of Herat, facing annihilation at the hands of the Uzbeks in 1507, also tried to seize the moment. But the Timurid princes of Herat were too refined and unwarlike to be given the role of divinely-appointed saviors.[301] Rather, it fell to the lot of an important Mongol nobleman, Zu'n-Nun Arghun, to confront the massive Uzbek army. Babur described the manner of his selection and motivation:

> He held such a position of authority and importance in Herat that several Shaykhs and Mullas went to him and said, "We are in touch with the Qutb [*axis mundi*]. He has named you 'Lion of God,' (*Hizibrullah*) and you will conquer the Uzbeks." He swallowed this praise and, throwing a shawl around his neck, said prayers of gratitude. When Shaybani Khan had defeated the mirzas one by one at Badghis, Zu'n-Nun, believing those words to be true, faced Shaybani Khan at Kara Robat with a hundred or 150 men. A large contingent came forth, seized them, and took them away. Zu'n-Nun was executed.[302]

The unfortunate Zu'n-Nun Arghun was told that the hidden master saint of the age had named him the Lion of God (a famous title of Ali recognizing his bravery in battle). Thus inspired, he rose up as a messianic champion to confront the Uzbeks with only a few

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[301] Babur remarked about these princes, "Although these mirzas were outstanding in the social graces (*suhbat va suhbatarayliqda va ixtilat u amezisda*), they were strangers to the reality of military command and the rough and tumble of battle." Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 224-225. Babur, Thackston, and Khan, *Baburnama (polyglot)*, 392-393.

[302] Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 206. Babur, Thackston, and Khan, *Baburnama (polyglot)*, 358-359.

hundred men. A miraculous victory was so widely expected that "the fortress was not made fast, battle weapons were not made ready, reconnoiterers and scouts were not sent to give information on the enemy's advance, and the army was not adequately prepared for battle…."[303] The man responsible for this scheme was a courtier, Kamaluddin Husayn, whom Babur called a self-declared Sufi (*mutasawwif*). It was plausibly a dream vision of the mystically inclined Kamaluddin, known for his deep knowledge of saintliness and kingship, which set the whole "strange" affair in motion.[304] Babur admired the Mongol amir's bravery but called him "a bit of a fool" for falling for such flattery. Nevertheless Babur had nothing disparaging to say about Shah Isma'il whose reputation as Ali reborn was well-known. In fact, when the Safavid "Lion of God" defeated the Uzbeks three years later and conquered Herat, Babur willingly put on the red, twelve-gored, Crown of Haydar and joined the rank of Shah Isma'il's Qizilbash devotees.

Babur was well aware that to join the Safavids meant becoming a disciple of the Shah and submitting oneself to Qizilbash rituals. Many of these rituals were not that different from Timurid norms of the court and the camp. For example, the Timurids also paid attention to the design of their turbans. In his memoir Babur described in detail the way his father used to tie his turban and how he always wore it when holding court, even

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[303] Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 248. Babur, Thackston, and Khan, *Baburnama (polyglot)*, 432-433.

[304] Babur related that Kamaluddin was known for a literary work called *Majlis al-'Ushshaq* (The Assembly of Lovers) consisting of short biographies of seventy six prophets, saints, legendary lovers (Layla and Majnun) and historical kings of Iran (including Timurid and Aqqoyunlu ones). Babur called it a false and blasphemous work because in it each person was paired with a carnal lover. Babur's distaste notwithstanding, the work seems to have been quite popular given the large number of surviving manuscripts in Iran and India. Rieu, *British Museum*, 1:351. Ethe, *Library of the India Office*, 1035. C. A. Storey, *Persian literature: A Bio-Bibliographical Survey*, 5 vols. (London: Luzac & co., 1970), 1: ii: 961.

in the heat of summer when he would usually don the lighter Mongol cap.[305] The style of

a man's turban signified his allegiance to a group. During battle, when soldiers deserted

and crossed over to the opposing camp, they did so turban in hand.[306] Moreover, Babur

was used to stringent bodily regimes that dominated the Timurid's Mongol-style court

ceremonies.[307] His own military experience included rituals that were little different than

those of the Qizilbash. He described battles in which fighting was "enjoined without

armor"[308] and protective charms used.[309] His soldiers were as rowdy and uncontrollable

as the frenzied Qizilbash warriors. Discipline had to be imposed by shooting arrows into

an unruly group or by summary dismemberment of two or three men. Once, such a

disciplinary action led to the accidental death of a favorite storyteller of Babur's son,

Humayun.[310] While we do not know what stories this unfortunate man used to tell the

prince and his men, it would be surprising if they did not include the heroic tales of Lords

of Conjunction like Abu Muslim and Amir Hamza.[311]

Much like the Safavids, Babur also followed the wartime practice of desecrating

graves. In one of his punitive raids against the rebellious Yusufzai and Dilazak Afghans,

he destroyed a local shrine commemorating a dervish named Shahbaz Qalandar who,

Babur said, had led these tribes into heresy (*ilhad*).[312] Nevertheless, religious deviancy

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[305] Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 9.
[306] Ibid., 254.
[307] For example, when Babur met one of his royal cousins who was also a king but only slightly higher in rank to Babur, the encounter was structured by strict norms governing bodily composure, spatial placement of the two sovereigns, precedence of movement and gestures, see Ibid., 223-224.
[308] Ibid., 36.
[309] Ibid., 239.
[310] Ibid., 318.
[311] While Babur does not mention it, we know that tales of Abu Muslim and Hamza were related in the courts and camps of Humayun and Akbar. See next chapter.
[312] Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 269. Babur, Thackston, and Khan, *Baburnama (polyglot)*, 470-471.

was not an impediment for Babur in seeking an alliance with the most notorious "heretic" of his time, Shah Isma'il.

Babur had no delusions about Shah Isma'il's messianic claim. He mentioned how one of his cousins, a son of Husayn Bayqara, who became "a devotee (*murid*) of Shah Isma'il" and "died astray in that heresy (*batalat o gumrahi*) in Astarabad."[313] When his own turn came, however, a contemporary chronicler politely wrote how Babur sent "eloquent ambassadors with generous gifts to the fortune-adorned threshold [of Shah Isma'il] and made manifest his sincerity and fealty."[314] In return Shah Isma'il provided military assistance and promised Babur control over any territory he could take from the Uzbeks in Transoxania. With Qizilbash help, Babur was able to conquer Samarkand for the third time in 1511. However, this time he would rule not as a Timurid sovereign but as a Safavid satrap. His cousin, Mirza Haydar Dughlat, who had accompanied him as a child described how the populace of Samarkand greeted Babur with a display of overwhelming joy. But their delight soon turned to consternation when they saw that he had adorned himself with the "garments" of the Qizilbash which was "pure heresy, nay almost unbelief."

> [The people] sincerely hoped, when he mounted the throne of Samarkand, (the throne of the Law of the Prophet) and placed on his head the diadem of the holy Sunna of Muhammad, that he would remove from it the crown of royalty, whose nature was heresy and whose form was as the tail of an ass.[315]

Babur disappointed the people of Samarkand. He did not take off the Qizilbash taj with the tall red baton sticking out like "the tail of an ass." Instead, he kept his agreement with

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[313] Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 198. Babur, Thackston, and Khan, *Baburnama (polyglot)*, 344-345.

[314] Giyas al-Din Khwandamir, *Tarikh-i Habib al-Siyar*, vol. 4 (Tehran: Kitabkhanah-yi Khayyam, 1954), 4:523.

[315] Haydar, *Tarikh-i-Rashidi (translation)*, 246.

Shah Isma'il and had coins struck with the names of the twelve Imams and the Alid

formula "*Ali wali Allah*" (Ali is God's appointee/friend/saint).[316] Babur could not fight

off the Uzbeks without Safavid help. So he "overlooked the gross errors" of the

Qizilbash.[317] We do not know what the Qizilbash did at Samarkand. But if their antics in

Herat are any model to go by, it would have included extortion of treasure via torture;

harassment of the clergy and lay people by forcing them to publicly curse the first three

caliphs considered to be rivals of Ali; and the desecration of the graves of Naqshbandi

Sufi saints.[318] Babur could do little to check their aggression in the region and lost

support of the locals.[319] Soon thereafter when the Uzbeks attacked he went out to fight

them. Upon returning defeated to the city, however, he was "unable to get a firm footing

upon the steps of the throne" and had to bid "farewell to the sovereignty of

Samarkand."[320] A pro-Uzbek author, Ruzbihan Khunji, who was present in Samarkand

during Babur's defeat poured scorn on him for becoming a Qizilbash in the following

verse:

> That horde scattered again from the gates of Samarkand
> Toward Hisar they fled like veiled women
> Babur enjoyed sovereignty till he remained a Sunni

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[316] The Arabic term *wali* meaning friend, guardian, or successor is notoriously difficult to translate. It points to an important concept of sovereignty and sainthood in both Shi'i and Sufi thought. In the former case, see Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: the History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism* (Oxford: G. Ronald, 1985), xxii, 17, 157. For a good discussion on its use in the literary traditions of Sufism, see Vincent J. Cornell, *Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism*, 1st ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), xvii-xxi.
[317] Haydar, *Tarikh-i-Rashidi (translation)*, 246.
[318] For a detailed study of the political history of the Safavids and Qizilbash in Khurasan, and especially Herat, see Martin B. Dickson, "Shah Tahmasb and the Uzbeks: The Duel for Khurasan with Ubayd Khan: 930-946/1524-1540" (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 1962).
[319] For example, when the Safavid general Najm al-Din Thani ordered a general massacre (*qatl-i 'am*) of the people in the fortress of Qarshi, near Samarkand, which led to the killing of fifteen thousand people including many locals, Babur could not prevent it. Khwandamir, *Tarikh-i Habib al-Siyar*, 528. Iskandar Beg Munshi, *The History of Shah 'Abbas the Great: Tarikh-e Alamara-ye Abbasi*, trans., Roger Savory, 2 vols. (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1978), 1: 66.
[320] Haydar, *Tarikh-i-Rashidi (translation)*, 260.

When he sided with a heretic (*rafizi*), he came to regret his decision[321]

Such were the insults the descendents of Babur had to face. Although his later conquest

of Hindustan seems like a redeeming accomplishment, this view reflects our perspective

more than that of sixteenth century Mughals. Mughal rituals of sovereignty and symbols

of kingship were deeply informed by their knowledge of Safavid practices and of what

Babur (and later his son Humayun) had to go through as disciples of the Safavid Shah.

Timurid sovereignty was severely undermined by Babur's discipleship to the Shah

Isma'il. As the next two chapters show, a considerable amount of ritual and symbolic

effort came to be expended by Babur's son and grandson, Humayun and Akbar, to restore

Timurid sovereignty. However, here, the final question that will detain us is that with the

expulsion of Babur from Transoxania and the end of Timurid rule in Iran, what happened

to the cultural memory of Timur Sahib Qiran? Did it disappear with the rise of Ali's heir?

To answer this question, we have to ask how Shah Isma'il saw himself as a king. While

we do not have his own views on the subject, we can infer a great deal from the actions

he took once he became the king of unified Iran.

Shah Isma'il the Lord of Conjunction

While Shah Isma'il was considered to be the embodiment of Ali by his Qizilbash

devotees, his own ambitions were much broader and more "universal." This can be seen

in the way he named his sons. None of the Safavid princes have a Shi'i or Alid name.

They do not even have Arabic Islamic names. Instead, they have names of heroes from

the classic Persian epics like the Shahnama (Book of Kings) and the Khawarnama (Book

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[321] Ruzbihan Khunji, *Suluk al-Muluk*, ed. Muhammad Ali Muvahhid (Tehran: Shirkat-i Sahami-i Intisharat-i Khvarazmi, 1984 [1362]), 60. Khunji's account is also full of "strange" dreams in which he sees omens of victory of the returning Uzbeks.

of Khawar): Sam, Bahram, Tahmasb, Alqasp, and Rustam.[322] Shah Isma'il's fascination with the Shahnama can also be judged from many other sources. As mentioned before, in his poetry Shah Isma'il called himself the reincarnation of Islamic figures as well as those from pre-Islamic Iran.[323] On the battlefield, he is said to have rallied his soldiers by shouting verses from the Shahnama. Oral legends of the manner of Shah Isma'il's birth bear a striking similarity to anecdotes about the birth of a hero in the Shahnama.[324] The pervasiveness and seriousness of these references to ancient Iranian lore makes it difficult to dismiss them as mere rhetoric. Even if we set aside the puzzle of why an Alid messiah would inspire his men by invoking champions of Zoroastrian Iran, it is more difficult to ignore the naming of princes after heroes of a pre-Islamic past. This is because naming was not merely a rhetorical practice. Rather, it was a cosmologically-informed act – an act with "strange" consequences that had to be performed with consultation and care.[325] On the face of it, Shah Isma'il's deep commitment to the Iranian epic tradition is just as difficult to reconcile with his image as a promoter of doctrinal Shi'ism as are the shockingly deviant practices of his Qizilbash devotees. That is, until we remind ourselves that this was the age of Lords of Conjunction.

As argued in the previous chapter, the "time" of kingship was based on the cyclical motion of the cosmos which was thought to dictate the rise and fall of dynasties and religions. According to this view, sovereignty was shared by and rotated among Lords of Conjunction – both prophets and kings. It was widely accepted that the Arab

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[322] This is in sharp contrast to how his son, Shah Tahmasb, named his own sons after Alid figures. Wood, "Shahnama-i Isma'il", 4.

[323] In one verse, he says "I am Faridun, Khusraw, Jamshid, and Zahhak; I am Zal's son (i.e., Rustam) and Alexander." Minorsky and I, "The Poetry of Shah Isma'il I," 1027a-1029a.

[324] It has been suggested that there are similarities between the European accounts of Shah Isma'il's birth and the stories of the birth of the hero Sam in the Shahnama. Wood, "Shahnama-i Isma'il", 103.

[325] Babur, for example, named one of his sons Hindal because he was born while Babur was on his way to conquer "Hind" (India). He took it as a good omen. Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 275.

Islamic past had provided the world its great prophets and the Zoroastrian Iranian past its great kings. Whether it was in works of astrological history or in oral epic literature, figures from these two pasts were considered equally "historical" and co-existed interchangeably in popular and political imagination.[326] There were certainly attempts to contain this confusion and to keep apart the two orientations in separate genres – the Arab Islamic one in the chronicle tradition and the Iranian Zoroastrian one in the epic and storytelling genre – but it would be a mistake to think that these attempts were successful, especially in this period. This is evident from the cultural production of Shah Isma'il's reign which transcended these generic boundaries and blended the Iranian and Islamic orientations toward the past. This cultural production, moreover, was based directly on Timurid practices of kingship.

When Shah Isma'il captured Timurid Herat in 1510, he acquired the best artists, poets, and writers of the eastern Islamic world. In order to celebrate his centennial feat – the reunification of Iran – he commissioned not chronicles but paintings and epics. In terms of painting, Shah Isma'il ordered the epic Persian narrative of the Shahnama to be illustrated. The Safavid version of the epic was produced with such finesse that it remains unsurpassed as an example of Persian miniature painting to this day. This was not merely a "secular" act of celebration, however. A painting in this pre-Islamic Iranian epic depicted the Prophet Muhammad, Ali, and his sons Hasan and Husayn together on a ship

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[326] See chapter 1. Also, a good discussion of this topic exists in Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*, 9-46.

at sea, all wearing the *Taj-i Haydari*.[327] It was as if Iran and Islam had become one under the sign of the Safavids.

Shah Isma'il also commissioned an epic to celebrate his own heroic deeds in the versified form of the Shahnama. Appropriately, it was called *Shahnama-yi Isma'il* (The Shahnama of Isma'il). In it, Shah Isma'il performs the role of the quintessential epic hero who was more than a match for the Iranian champions of yore. He makes a drinking cup out of Isfandiyar's skull.[328] He uses the ring in Rustam's ear as his lasso.[329] As far as Islamic symbols are concerned, the epic contains heavy Alid and ghulat overtones: Shah Isma'il's sword is compared to Ali's sword Zulfiqar and he is called, with more than a hint of transgression, the "lamp of the bedchamber of the husband [Ali] of the Virgin [Fatima]."[330] His plans to conquer the world follow the plot of other Lords of Conjunction, both legendary (Hamza and Ali) and real (Alexander, Chinggis and Timur); they include the territories of Shirvan, the two Iraqs (Persian and Arab), Egypt, Georgia, Syria, Rum, Khurasan and India.[331] At one point, the story takes a legendary turn when the presence of demons is reported in Isfahan and Shah Isma'il sends off a troop of soldiers to fight them off.[332] But for the most part the epic remains grounded in real events. This is not to say, however, that it is a "historical" narrative. The battle of Chaldiran against the Ottomans, which Shah Isma'il lost, is not mentioned.[333] The

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[327] See Robert Hillenbrand, "Iconography of the Shah-nama-yi Shahi," in *Safavid Persia: The History and Politics of an Islamic Society* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996), 70. Note that this Shahnama was started in the reign of Shah Isma'il but completed in the time of Shah Tahmasb.
[328] Shah Isma'il had in fact made a gilded drinking cup out of the skull of his Uzbek enemy Shaybani Khan.
[329] Wood, "Shahnama-i Isma'il", 79.
[330] Ibid., 78.
[331] Ibid., 62. See chapter 1 for the world conquering deeds of Lord of Conjunctions such as Amir Hamza in the epic tradition and of Ali in an astrological history. Timur of course was a Lord of Conjunction who did indeed come close to actually enacting this plot.
[332] Ibid., 65.
[333] Ibid., 71.

conquest of Samarkand, on the other hand, is mentioned but Babur's name does not come up.[334] In short, a mixture of fact and fiction, history and legend, this work defies characterization – unless, of course, we describe it as a narrative of Lord-of-Conjunctionship.[335]

The large number of surviving manuscripts attests to the popularity of Shah Isma'il's epic among the kings and nobility of early modern India and Iran.[336] In many of these manuscripts, moreover, this epic is paired with the earlier, similar work on Timur on which it was modeled.[337] The literary practice of celebrating the achievements of a living or recently deceased king in an epic – as opposed to commemorating a legendary emperor like Alexander – had been pioneered by the Timurids.[338] Thus, the similarity between Timur and Shah Isma'il was not lost on posterity. Indeed, his son Sam Mirza called Shah Isma'il the "late Sahib Qiran." Later Iranian and Indian historians did not have a problem recognizing the value of Shah Isma'il's epic. They used it liberally as a source of poetry, beautiful phrases and even to describe "mythical" moments such as the versified correspondence between the young Shah and his guardian in which Isma'il decides to make his initial messianic manifestation or "emergence" (*khuruj*).[339] Most telling, however, is the observation of the traveler Michele Membré who visited Iran in the decade after Shah Isma'il's death. He wrote that "mountebanks" sitting in town

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[334] Ibid., 67.
[335] Indeed, it has been argued, this epic should be understood as "not a faulty chronicle, but rather as a historically conscious work of myth." Ibid., 77.
[336] Ibid., 85-92.
[337] Ibid., 89.
[338] The poet to whom this task fell was Muhammad Qasim Gunabadi, of Timurid Herat, who used the pen name of Qasimi. Before Qasimi, four other poets had been commissioned for this purpose but they died before completing the task. Qasimi completed this epic in 1534, ten years after Shah Isma'il's death. Ibid., 81.
[339] Ibid., 72.

squares would read from books the tales of the "combats of …Shah Ismaʻil."[340] Whether this book of stories was the above mentioned epic of Shah Ismaʻil we do not know. But we do know that like Timur he had become a legendary and messianic king in his own right.

Conclusion

These were strange times indeed. Babur, the heir of Timur, became a devotee of Ali. Shah Ismaʻil, a son of Ali, became another Timur. If an artist of Timurid Herat was to depict our bafflement, he would do so with the stylized gesture of a forefinger raised to the lips. The goal of this chapter was to confound some of the received categories of Mughal historiography by bringing them in dialog with those of Safavid historiography. This is necessary if we are to see what shape kingship was taking in the eastern Islamic world a hundred years after Timur.

What we find is a formative moment that was not yet part of either a Mughal future or a Safavid one. In this moment a few major symbols were available for making a claim to power. One was Ali and another Timur. The Timurids, however, were by this time too weak to make effective use of either of these. Babur, for all his trying, remained a minor king for most of his life. The first quarter of the sixteenth century belonged instead to Shah Ismaʻil, the descendent of Ali who conquered Iran and assumed the trappings of Timurid kingship. Oddly, our knowledge of the two men is inversely proportional to their fame. Babur, an unknown prince in his time, is intimately familiar to us because of the fact-rich memoir he left behind. Shah Ismaʻil, the famous conqueror, remains impossibly remote as a Sufi king about whom we have more legends, poems, and

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[340] Quoted in Morton, "Early Years of Shah Isma'il," 45.

rumors than facts. Between Babur's facts and Shah Isma'il's myths, however, we have enough to develop a composite picture of kingship.

From Babur's detailed account we get a sense of the ritual and symbolic realm a ruler had to negotiate. Even though he was a Muslim king ruling over a largely Muslim population, the aspect of religion that he had to interact with had little to do with law and doctrine. Instead, much of his time was spent in engaging with embodied symbols and performed myths. This aspect of kingship is difficult to recover from Babur's writing, however, without developing an appreciation of the learned cosmology and the embodied practices of the time. Rather than being separated by social strata, elite knowledge and popular practices co-existed in harmony, one often reinforcing the other. An aspect of this co-existence can be explained by the shared participation of all classes in the religious life of the period dominated by shrine-based Sufism. This is also evident in the way rulers like Babur had to share power, prestige, and material wealth with local Sufi families. These bonds between princes and mystics were not merely those of pragmatic politics; they were also reinforced by religious education and popular rites.

From such a world, then, it is not difficult to imagine the emergence of a figure like Shah Isma'il. As a regional Sufi leader with strong links to the local royal dynasty, he too was a product of the symbiosis of kingship and sainthood that had developed by this time. But he was not just a Sufi master. He was also born to perform a mythical role as Ali's messianic heir. As we saw in the last chapter, Timur and his immediate successors had also tried to engage with the messianic myth of Ali. But they had lacked the institutional wherewithal to deploy it effectively. Shah Isma'il, on the other hand, inherited an organization in which the Alid myth was already operationalized. The

Safavid missionary organization opens up a vista onto yet another realm of practice, that of antinomian mendicancy. These unruly mystics, notable for their affected marginality and exaggerated deviance, represented one more link between the wider social world and the realm of kingship. Many of the Alid symbols they kept alive provided a charismatic draw for kings, strong echoes of which can be found in the courtly paintings and royal epics of the time. In summary, we find a great deal of innovation in the style and practice of kingship, much of it derived from institutions, cosmology, and rituals of the different types of Sufism that dominated social and religious life in this period. There was a tremendous willingness to invent new rituals and symbols or to adapt old ones to new situations. Doctrinal religious categories of Islam preserved in texts did not drive or constrain kings as much as symbols that were embodied and performed. Accordingly, rulers valued doctors of religion and ritual specialists less for their interpretation of law and doctrine and more for their "strange" and socially-inflected knowledge of time and cosmology.

These insights have the potential to radically change the way the story of Mughal kingship in South Asia is told. Seen from the perspective of South Asian historiography, the Mughals entering from Kabul appear as another Muslim dynasty that brought Sunni Islam to India. Once there, the Mughals are said to have softened their Islamic ways and adapted themselves to the practices of their Hindu subjects. In this version of history, little consideration is given to the flexible, innovative, and evolving nature of Muslim kingship that the Mughals brought with them from the extremely diverse religious and social environment of Iran and Central Asia. In other words, we need to question how rigidly doctrinal or legalistic were these Islamic institutions of rule to begin with, and

emphasize instead their foundation of symbolic and corporeal practices which were readily adaptable to the social and religious situation in India. This, then, is the task taken up in the remaining chapters which focus on the establishment of Mughal rule in South Asia.

CHAPTER 3

The Alchemy of Kingship: Humayun's Royal Cult

Introduction

Humayun, one of the greatest kings in the world, had five lac [100,000] troops and 12,000 elephants. Then…he became so vain as to claim divine powers. His occasional appearance to the people was described as divine effulgence (*jalwa-i quddusi*). In his entire dominion and in his army, the Shari'at was abrogated and heresy (*ilhad*) and evil prevailed. One day he called a meeting of his notables, soothsayers and astrologers and said he had seen in a dream that the moon, the sun and stars had come down to the foot of his throne. The soothsayers and astrologers said that the position of the heavenly bodies confirmed the purport of the dream and that the Sultan of Turkey, the Shah of Iran, the rulers of Turan and other kings would soon have to present themselves at his (Humayun's) court and accept his service, and their tenure of sovereignty will depend on his will.[341]

So wrote the Safavid ruler of Iran, Shah Tahmasb (r. 1524–76), to his rival

Ottoman Sultan Sulayman (r. 1520-1566). The two sovereigns had frequently

corresponded with each other but the exchange was rarely friendly, strained as it was by

the violent struggle over border regions, the granting of asylum to traitors and princely

defectors, and the memories of past battles and treacheries.[342] The taunts the two

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[341] Shah Tahmasb's letter translated and quoted in Riazul Islam, *Indo-Persian Relations: A Study of the Political and Diplomatic Relations between the Mughul Empire and Iran* (Teheran: Indo-Persian Relations, 1970), 36. The letter, dated 1554 or later, appears in many compilations of royal letters as well as chronicles in sixteenth century Iran and India. For a more detailed treatment and full list of sources which record this letter see Riazul Islam, *A Calendar of Documents on Indo-Persian Relations*, 2 vols. (Tehran; Karachi: Iranian Culture Foundation and Institute of Central & West Asian Studies, 1979), 2: 293-294. Furthermore, the charge that Humayun made claims of being a manifestation of the divine is also repeated by Abd al-Qadir Badayuni, a theologian and historian at the court of Humayun's son, Akbar (r. 1556-1605). As discussed in detail in the next chapter, Badayuni wrote a clandestine and critical chronicle of the Mughal period. Bada'uni, *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh (translation)*, 1: 573. Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, 1: 446.
[342] For a summary of Ottoman-Safavid relations at this time and references to secondary literature on the topic, see, Newman, *Safavid Iran*, 27-28.

sovereigns hurled at each other were often couched in an idiom of piety and heresy. The

Ottomans were at the time militarily stronger and their Sultan would not let the Safavid

Shah forget the terrible defeat his "heretical" father, Shah Isma'il, had suffered at

Ottoman hands in 1514.[343] Shah Tahmasb, in response, adopted a tone of false humility

and fatalism,[344] and recounted the cautionary tale of the Timurid king of India, Humayun

son of Babur. Easy victory and sudden wealth had affected Humayun to the degree that

he embraced divine pretensions. Soon, however, fate "tore off his robe of honor and sat

him on the sackcloth of degradation," [345] as Humayun lost his dominion to an upstart

Afghan warlord. The crestfallen Timurid had little choice but to do what his father had

done before him, and seek aid from the Safavids. Shah Tahmasb's warning to his

Ottoman rival was that he too could pay for his hubris and, like the great Humayun, end

up as a beggar at the Safavid threshold; as he put it in verse, "From Hind came Humayun,

my slave to be."[346]

This chapter is concerned with the way Humayun first became a figure of sacred

power and subsequently sank to being a slave of the Safavid Shah. It pursues the

argument that royal deification and imperial discipleship in this period were not mere

rhetorical strategies but actual social phenomena sustained by the institutionalized

knowledges and practices of Sufism. Humayun provides a particularly illuminating

specimen of sacred kingship in sixteenth century Iran and India because he experienced

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[343] Shah Tahmasb wrote a memoir which was made public and distributed during his lifetime. In this work, he discussed his correspondence with the Ottoman Sultan with reference to the battle between the Sultan's father and his own. See Safavi, *Tadhkira*, 28-29. In this memoir, Shah Tahmasb mentioned Humayun only once when stating that he had treated the Ottoman prince Bayazid, who had rebelled against his father and taken refuge at the Safavid court with the same consideration that he had shown the Timurid asylum seeker. See Safavi, *Tadhkira*, 80.

[344] This pious tone certainly comes across in the memoir Shah Tahmasb wrote. Safavi, *Tadhkira*. For an analysis, see Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*, 321-325.

[345] Islam, *Calendar of Documents*, 2:294.

[346] Ibid.

the same degree of highs as the Safavid Shah Isma'il in achieving divinity in the eyes of

his followers, and touched the same depths of lows as his father, Babur, in becoming a

Safavid subordinate and disciple. Humayun's performance as a sanctified sovereign and

his trials as a fallen prince not only provide us another case study of sacrality and

sovereignty in this period, but also open up a perspective on the Timurids' early attempts

at adapting the institutions and practices of sacred kingship they had brought with them

from Iran and Central Asia to the social milieu of early modern India.

Humayun Reconsidered

Compared with the other "great Mughals" of India, Humayun has received

relatively little scholarly attention.[347] This disregard is understandable given that during

his twenty-six year reign (1530-1556) Humayun spent fifteen years (1540-1555) on the

run from his enemies, wandering the wastelands of Sindh and Baluchistan, in exile in

Iran, and in a struggle to take Kabul from his brother with the aid of the Safavids.[348] If

Humayun was found wanting in politics, he certainly did not make up for it in cultural

life, apart from his patronage of a few artists he brought with him from Iran.[349] Unlike his

father, he did not compose a brilliant memoir or leave behind some other intellectual

artifact of note. His alleged lack of political acumen and cultural accomplishment thus

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[347] The classical period of the Mughal empire is generally narrated as the reign of the six "great Mughals": Babur, Humayun, Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan, and Aurangzeb. Of all these monarchs, there has been little recent scholarship on Humayun. The text still cited most often for the political events of Humayun's reign is Ishwari Prasad, *The Life and Times of Humayun* (Bombay: Orient Longmans, 1956).

[348] For details on Humayun's experience in Iran, see Sukumar Ray, *Humayun in Persia* (Calcutta,: Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1948). Also, see Islam, *Indo-Persian Relations*, 22-47.

[349] Humayun does receive credit, however, for bringing master artists from Iran and starting an atelier. But few art works from his time survive. An intriguing exception is a large painting from Humayun's period depicting him and his Timurid ancestors. This painting became a sacred treasure for later Mughal sovereigns, especially Jahangir, who modified and augmented it. This is discussed in more detail in chapter 5. See

Sheila R. Canby, *Humayun's Garden Party: Princes of the House of Timur and Early Mughal painting* ([Bombay]: Marg Publications, 1994).

leads to easy contrasts between him and his father: more indolent than athletic; more sentimental than pragmatic; and more of an epicure than a littérateur.[350] Humayun's greatest sin in modern eyes, it seems, was his deep interest in magic and astrology. Thus, he receives mention today mainly for two things: for losing the fledgling Mughal empire in north India to the Afghans and for the "strangeness" of his beliefs.[351]

But, as we have seen in the last chapter, Babur was also well-accustomed to astrology and the occult and also spent much of his early life on the run as a desperate prince. If one chooses to focus just on these aspects of the father's royal career and read them with a presentist bias, he can be made to appear just as inane and inept as the son. In general, the accident of extant sources can make an inquiry into the "character" of individual kings from this period an arbitrary and somewhat futile exercise. Hence, the goal of this study is a different one. It is to study the character not of kings but of kingship.

Kingship was a social institution and kings were social beings. Whatever their individual preferences and religious outlooks, rulers had to contend with a set of socially-governed norms of behavior, institutionalized knowledges, and forms of authority. Babur, whom much of modern scholarship takes to be forthright Sunni Muslim and an eminently learned Timurid prince, had little choice but to patronize astrologers, pay close attention

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[350] The following statement by Annmarie Schimmel is indicative of modern evaluations of Humayun: "Humayun was not a hero like his father. His interests lay primarily in the spheres of mysticism, magic and astrology, which played a central role in his life." Schimmel and Waghmar, *The Empire of the Great Mughals*, 27-28.

[351] Humayun's "foolish" beliefs are used by historians to explain the "irrational" slips of his otherwise level-headed and accomplished successors. For example, Robert Skelton in his analysis of the famous allegorical paintings of Jahangir's reign (1605-1626), treats the royal claims of divinity, solar symbolism, and references to astrology and magic in these works of art as exotic legacies of Humayun who had "dabbled somewhat foolishly in this type of thing." See Robert Skelton, "Imperial Symbolism in Mughal Painting," in *Content and Context of Visual Arts in the Islamic World*, ed. Priscilla Parsons Soucek, Carol Bier, and Richard Ettinghausen (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988), 180.

to local mythical lore, deploy "magical" techniques of power, and, when circumstances demanded, to submit to the sacred authority of the "heretical" Sufi-messiah turned king, Shah Isma'il. On the other hand, Shah Isma'il, who was a charismatic leader of a band of Sufi warriors with a reputation for ritual cannibalism, upon donning the mantle of kingship had to assume the "civilized" trappings of Timurid kingship. Instead of cataloguing these royal characters under different ideal types of authority, it is more useful to take their differing and contradictory aspects – charismatic and rational, transgressive and conformist, performative and doctrinal, mythical and historical – and use them to imagine a composite and multidimensional picture of sacred kingship. Such a picture helps us rise above the textual confines of "orthodoxy" and "heterodoxy" to obtain a glimpse of the practical "doxa," that is, the concrete universe of the thinkable and doable within which kings and rulers conceptualized and inhabited their sovereignty.[352]

Such a shift in emphasis away from doctrine and words towards practice and performance is productive not only in theoretical terms but also in enabling an alternative historical narrative. It directs our focus away from the differences in character between Babur and Humayun, and towards the commonalities and continuities between them. Since Babur died so soon after the conquest of Hindustan, it was Humayun who oversaw the setting up of an elaborate court with its symbolic forms and narratives of sovereignty. There is no *a priori* reason to view Humayun's articulation of sacred kingship as a magical-heretical break from Babur's rational-orthodox policies. In fact, one can argue for a considerable degree of continuity between the actions of father and son in the

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[352] For the concept of doxa, orthodoxy, and heterodoxy as it relates to culture and practice, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 164-171.

establishment of a Timurid dispensation in South Asia. An aspect of this continuity can be seen in the way both Babur and Humayun cultivated a relationship with the leaders of a popular mystical brotherhood, the Shattari Sufi order of north India. The Shattaris were famous for their spiritual abilities and thaumaturgical accomplishments; that is, for their mastery of the planets and their knowledge of local yogic idioms of power.[353] If we are to make something of Shah Tahmasb's charge that Humayun's court was riddled with "soothsayers and astrologers" and that in his army, "Shari'at was abrogated and heresy (*ilhad*) and evil prevailed" we need look no further than the Shattaris of Gwalior.[354]

The Changing of Patron Saints

The last entry in Babur's annalistic account of his life, made a few months before his death, recorded that he received a visit from Shaykh Muhammad Ghawth Shattari (d. 1562) from the region of Gwalior where the Sufi lived and ministered to his devotees. The holy man asked Babur to forgive a rebellious commander of Gwalior.[355] Babur held the Sufi in high regard and accepted his advice. In doing so, he prevented the local fortress from being handed over to the Timurid's Afghan-Rajput enemies. This was not

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[353] The Shattaris were a major Sufi order in north India at the time of Babur and Humayun. For a survey of the literature on the Shattaris, see Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, "Shattariyya," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman et al. (Brill, 2008), available at www.brillonline.nl. Abdul Muqtadir, "Muhammad Ghawth Gwaliyari," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman et al. (Brill, 2008), available at www.brillonline.nl. Rizvi, *History of Sufism*, 2: 151-173.

[354] Besides the primary sources from this period, mostly Timurid chronicles and memoirs, my analysis of the Shattaris depends on the following works which provide a good survey and analysis of the available sources of Shattari tradition, Carl W. Ernst, "Persecution and Circumspection in Shattari Sufism," in *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics*, ed. F. de Jong and Bernd Radtke (Leiden: Brill, 1999). Scott Kugle, "Heaven's Witness: The Uses and Abuses of Muhammad Ghawth's Mystical Ascension," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 14, no. 1 (2003).

[355] Babur wrote, "Events of the Year 936 (A.D. 1529-30). On Tuesday the 3rd of Muharram [Sept. 7], Shihabuddin Khusraw came from Gwalior with Shaykh Muhammad Ghaws to intercede on behalf of Rahimdad. Since [the Shaykh] was a dervish and a powerful spiritual (*'aziz*) man, I forgave Rahimdad's crime for his sake. Shaykh Guran and Nur Beg were sent to Gwalior to that Gwalior could be turned over to them…" Babur, Thackston, and Khan, *Baburnama (polyglot)*, 807.

the first time that the Shattari saint had given the new ruler of Hindustan political counsel. Two years earlier, Shaykh Ghawth had on his own initiative assisted Timurid forces in taking the fortress of Gwalior by sending a secret message from inside warning that the fortress commander, who was negotiating with the Timurids at the time, had subversive intentions. On that date, Babur noted in his diary, respectfully, that Shaykh Ghawth was a powerful (*'aziz*) Sufi leader with numerous disciples and companions.[356]

The mode of interaction between the Babur and Shaykh Ghawth indicates that the Timurids consolidated their dominion over Hindustan in much the same manner as they had ruled Khurasan and Transoxania, by engaging with established networks of spiritual authority and embracing local idioms of affective knowledge. While in their ancestral dominions they had developed a symbiotic relationship with the Naqshbandis and, briefly, a subordinate one with the invading Safavids, in their South Asian territories they began by collaborating with local influential Sufis like Muhammad Ghawth and his older brother Shaykh Phul (also Pul or Bahlul)[357] in order to establish themselves in the local political and moral economy.

The early Timurid-Shattari alliance was not accepted without criticism by those among the Timurid kin and nobility who were still closer, geographically and spiritually, to the Naqshbandis or by those who nursed rival claims of sovereignty. We know this from the chronicle of Mirza Haydar Dughlat, Babur's proud Mongol cousin, whose scathing criticism of the way Babur had become a disciple of the Safavid Shah in his third and last bid to capture Samarkand was noted in the previous chapter. Mirza Haydar

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[356] Ibid., 653.
[357] Although his real name was most likely Bahlul, in the Mughal sources he is referred to as Phul or Pul probably due to a mistake in transcribing the Hindi name into Persian. For the sake of consistency with the sources Phul or Pul will be used as appropriate.

was present during the latter part of the Timurid conquest of India and witnessed

Humayun's defeat by Sher Shah Suri in 1540, after which he sought his fortune in

Kashmir and Tibet. From his account, which provides a rougher image of early Timurid

experience in India than the more polished and revisionist chronicles of Akbar's time, we

get a sense of how Humayun's relationship with the Shattari order was viewed by some

Timurid insiders as a spiritual betrayal of the highest order that had brought ruin upon the

dynasty.

Mirza Haydar related how, in the process of establishing this new religio-political

alliance with the Shattaris, Humayun had alienated an old spiritual ally of the Timurids.

This was the eminent Naqshbandi Sufi saint of Central Asia, Khwaja Makhdumi Nura, a

grandson and successor of the famous Sufi Khwaja Baha al-Din Naqshband.[358] A learned

and well-traveled man, Khwaja Nura had read philosophy and medicine with eminent

scholars in Iran and Egypt and, traversing the Indian Ocean trade and pilgrimage routes,

visited Hijaz and Gujarat before returning to Central Asia. Most rulers and nobles of his

home region were said to be his devotees and depended upon his medicines and miracles

for their health and well being. He enjoyed, in the words of Mirza Haydar, a "hereditary

claim to their veneration."[359]

For his part, Khwaja Nura worked hard to make good on this hereditary claim. He

pursued men in power as much as they venerated him. When Babur became the ruler of

Kabul, Khwaja Nura came to this city; and when Babur went to conquer Samarkand, the

Sufi followed him there. After Babur's defeat by the Uzbeks, Khwaja Nura parted

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[358] Khwaja Nura's full name was Mahmud Shihab al-Din but was called Khwaja Khavand or Hazrat
Makhdumi Nura in respect. His spiritual genealogy is given in Haydar, *Tarikh-i-Rashidi (translation)*, 401.
Khwaja Baha al-Din Naqshband was mentioned in chapter 2. See note 244.
[359] Ibid., 399.

company with the disgraced Timurid and accepted the invitation of another ruler in Central Asia and went north. In 1531, the year after Babur's death, the Naqshbandi Sufi decided to reestablish his links with the victorious and wealthy Timurid court in Hindustan. On his way, in Lahore, Khwaja Nura met Babur's younger son Mirza Hindal who asked the holy man to stay but the latter refused, stating his desire to proceed immediately to Humayun's court: "From the first, it had been my intention to wait upon the Emperor [Babar]; therefore I must now go and condole with Humayun. Having performed this duty, should I return, I will accept your invitation."[360] However, when he arrived in Agra, the Khwaja found unexpectedly strong competition for Humayun's attention. In the words of Mirza Haydar:

> In those days a man named Shaikh Pul had appeared in Hindustan. Humayun desired to become his devotee because he had a great interest in the occult sciences (*'ulum-i ghariba*), and a passion for invoking prayer spells (*ad'iyya*) and spirits (*taskhirat*). Shaikh Pul had donned the guise of a Sufi master (*shayyukhat*) and taught that spells and invocations were the best means to obtain one's true desire (*maqsud-i haqiqi*), and even that one's true desire should be the attainment of these means. Since [Humayun] had a temperament for such things, he soon became a disciple (*murid*). Furthermore, there was Maulana Muhammad Parghari who, though a religious scholar (*mulla*), was a very unscrupulous man, and plotted relentlessly to achieve his corrupt ends. That Shaikh [Pul] managed to enlist Mulla Muhammad in his cause. The Maulana began to work his charms on the emperor who fell for his flattery.[361]

Feeling slighted, Khwaja Nura left Humayun's court and headed back to the emperor's brother Hindal, also an aspirant to the Timurid throne, in Lahore. There he described a dream that foretold the destructive end of Humayun's dominion: "I have seen in a vision, a great sea which overwhelmed all who remained behind us in Agra and

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[360] Ibid., 398.
[361] The quotation is my translation from Mirza Haydar, *Tarikh-i Rashidi*, ed. Abbas Quli Ghaffarifard (Tihran: Markaz-i Nashr-i Miras-i Maktub, 2004), 589-590. For an alternative rendering see Haydar, *Tarikh-i-Rashidi (translation)*, 398-399.

Hindustan; while we only escaped after a hundred risks."[362] According to Mirza Haydar, the scorned saint's prophecy came true three years later when Humayun's Hindustan was "devastated" and, as the dream had predicted, Khwaja Nura managed to escape safely to Transoxania.

The case of Khwaja Nura highlights how Sufis imbued with hereditary charisma would attempt to exchange their symbolic capital for more tangible forms of wealth and influence. Such Sufis pursued power and status as much as any king or warlord; and the brotherhoods they belonged to sought to add new territories to their dominion much like an imperial dynasty. While the worldly pursuits of saintly families were often portrayed in a spiritual light by their followers, their competitors, on the other hand, were not treated so generously. To this end, Mirza Haydar recorded that in contrast to Khwaja Nura Naqshbandi, who could offer sovereigns like Humayun spiritual succor and the purest of miracles, ersatz Sufis like Shaykh Phul Shattari could conjure up little more than "magic" and "sorcery." To prove his point, Mirza Haydar devoted several pages in his work to the miracles performed by the Naqshbandi saint before, during, and after his meeting with Humayun.[363] These examples of the Sufi's sacred power made it clear, from Mirza Haydar's perspective, that it was Humayun's neglect of his hereditary duty to venerate the Naqshbandi saint that led to the demise of his empire in Hindustan.

Why then did Humayun abandon his ancestral relationship with the Naqshbandis and patronize the Shattaris instead? Perhaps it was simply because the Shattaris had a large following in Humayun's new dominion while the Naqshbandis did not as yet. But would Humayun and his contemporaries have viewed the matter in terms of such

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[362] Haydar, *Tarikh-i-Rashidi (translation)*, 399.
[363] Ibid., 399-401.

realpolitik. His cousin chronicler certainly did not. Theirs was a phenomenological

setting where the cadences of social and political life were linked to the rhythms of a

cosmos kept in balance by the efforts of holy men. How then could one abandon a

spiritual counselor who was part of one's *nomos* (*namus* in Persian) with such facility?

Yet, given the evidence presented here and earlier, such switches and exchanges occurred

with a frequency that render most categories of sectarian affiliation and devotional

loyalty useless in describing the religious life of the time.

The problem cannot be dismissed by describing this religious milieu as "fluid," a

term which implies a lack of social institutions to anchor religious or communal

identities. On the contrary, the Sufi orders of this period were extremely hierarchical

entities with complex rituals of initiation, bodily markers of identity, and techniques of

disciplinary control. How could social identities be fluid in the face of such entrenched

and enforced institutions? The solution to this paradox lies in unearthing and taking

seriously the social mechanisms and cultural practices which facilitated switching back

and forth across cultural boundaries or, to put it differently, enabled a simultaneity of

multiple, conflicting bonds of moral community.

Two insights are crucial for pursuing this line of inquiry. First, it is important to

recognize that in this milieu the local and the particular had a phenomenological

precedence over the global and the universal. In other words, sacrality was grounded in

geographies and embodied in personalities that were local, concrete, and highly visible.

Engagement with such forms of sacrality could only occur via a process that was

ritualistic, tactile, and performative. This engagement, however, exposed one to charges

of irreligion, impiety, magic, and other forms of spiritual waywardness, charges made by

rivals and those who stood to lose from the establishment of new socio-moral bonds. Although these charges were made with rhetorical reference to "universal" categories of doctrinal religion, in most cases their real referent was an intense competition that was local and particular. And, as the jostling between the Shattaris and Naqshbandis during the early phase of Timurid rule in Hindustan shows, it was a struggle in which the stakes were simultaneously political and moral, territorial and spiritual, mundane and magical. It is with these observations in mind we should examine how the Shattari brothers' activities in the Timurid court and camp aided the dynasty to become one with its new dominions.

Humayun and the Shattari Brothers

The Shattari hagiographical sources claim that both Shaykh Phul and Shaykh Ghawth enjoyed the enviable position of being the Sufi master (*pir*) of Humayun. The extant Timurid sources, mostly inimical toward the Shattaris, make it clear that the relationship between the Sufis and the Timurids had less transcendental aspects to it. Babur's interaction with the younger Shattari brother, mentioned above, highlights the Sufi's active role and initiative in matters of local war and politics. In Humayun's case, we know that the older brother, Shaykh Phul, acted as an important advisor. The significance of Shaykh Phul's position at court can be gauged by the fact that when Humayun left Agra to campaign in Gujarat, he left the Shattari Shaykh behind to serve as his eyes and ears. For good reason, Humayun did not trust his younger sibling, Hindal, who had been left in charge of Agra in the emperor's absence. The Shattari saint was not a mere spy in the guise of a reclusive mystic, however. He accompanied the army on war

campaigns and gave counsel on military affairs. For instance, when faced with a serious rebellion led by Timurid cousins, Hindal became impatient to give battle but Shaykh Phul would not permit military engagement. Thus:

> For two months the armies stood opposite each other. Hindal Mirza became impatient to do battle, but Shaykh Phul would not allow it, saying, "Be patient, for I am busy invoking the Divine Names (*bi da'wat-i ismha mashgulam*). God willing, they will fall to pieces of their own accord." This placated Hindal Mirza.... [Then] the enemy grew impatient, mounted, and came to do battle. Hindal Mirza asked Shaykh Phul what should be done. "Since the enemy has mounted and come to do battle," replied the shaykh, "one must necessarily fight."[364]

While Humayun was still away from Agra, having conquered Gujarat and now campaigning in Bengal, the Afghan warlord Sher Shah Suri achieved a string of victories against the Timurids. By capturing the region of Bihar, Sher Shah was able to block Humayun's path from Bengal to Agra. Taking advantage of the situation, some Timurid rebels reached Hindal and planned a coup against Humayun. They offered Hindal the throne of Hindustan on the condition that he proved his commitment to break from Humayun with no chance of reconciliation. Hindal, the rebels stipulated, had to murder Shaykh Phul:

> "You kill Shaykh Phul so that we can be certain that you have turned against the emperor. Then we will obey you and have the khutba read in your name." Therefore Hindal Mirza said to [the rebel leader], "Come up with some ruse to have Shaykh Phul killed." They slandered Shaykh Phul by saying that he had sent weapons and letters to Sher Khan [the Afghan rival of the Timurids]. On this pretext they killed the shaykh and had the khutba read in Hindal Mirza's name.[365]

The way different Timurid sources related the event reveals the tension that the killing of Shaykh Phul had generated within the royal family. Humayun's sister, Gulbadan Banu, for example, tried to take Hindal's side in her memoir, written almost half a century later,

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[364]Jawhar Aftabchi, "Tadhkiratu 'l-Waqiat," in *Three Memoirs of Homayun*, ed. Wheeler M. Thackston (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, Inc., 2009), 79.
[365] Ibid., 85.

and stated that Shaykh Phul was caught supplying weapons to the enemy and so had to be executed; but even she did not hide the fact that this execution created a great deal of distrust between the king and his younger brother.[366]

In sum, Shaykh Phul was a key political appointee and advisor to Humayun. However, his power was based not on the control of men and material, but on his influence over the planets. Shaykh Phul was a renowned master of the Shattari procedure of invoking Divine Names, a mystical technique involving the use of prayer formulae to muster the "spirit" powers of the planets.[367] Such sacred ability could not be gained by mere incantation, however. For the prayer formulae to work, the invoker's soul had to be in the purest of states.[368] While no reliable method exists to determine the purity of sixteenth century Sufi souls, we are on relatively firmer ground when gauging the grandeur of saintly reputations.

Shaykh Phul's charismatic repute was a factor not only of his own efforts but also those of his younger brother, Shaykh Muhammad Ghawth. It was the latter who had submitted himself as a young man to twelve years of grueling asceticism in the mountains

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[366] Gulbadan Begim, "Humayunnama," in *Three Memoirs of Homayun*, ed. Wheeler M. Thackston (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, Inc., 2009), 1: 29-31.

[367] The Shattari technique for invoking "Divine Names" (*da'wat al-asma'* in Arabic and also *da'wat-i ismha* in Persian) involves commanding "spirits" or "agents" (*muwakkil*) associated with the seven planets. In its written version, it is available both in Arabic and in Persian in a work entitled "The Five Jewels" attributed to Shaykh Phul's younger brother Shaykh Muhammad Ghawth Shattari. Apparently, the author first produced the work in Arabic and then himself translated it into Persian. The Arabic version is available in a printed edition. See Muhammad ibn Khatir al-Din Ghawth al-Hindi, *Al-Jawahir al-Khams*, ed. Ahmad Ibn al-'Abbas, 2 ed., 2 vols. (al-Qahirah: Muhammad Rif'at 'Amir, 1973). It is a popular work that circulated widely as there are numerous extant manuscript copies for the Persian version. The earliest Persian manuscript I was able to locate, which corresponds closely to the Arabic edition, is thought to date from the eleventh century Hijri (sixteenth century CE). See Muhammad ibn Khatir al-Din Ghawth al-Hindi, "Jawahir-i Khamsa," Markaz-i Tahqiqat-i Farsi-i Iran va Pakistan [Iran Pakistan Institute of Persian Studies], Islamabad, MS 1458.

[368] The conditions were very stringent and involved praying, meditation, isolation, fasting, and abstinence from various types of foods, materials, and bodily pleasures. See Ghawth al-Hindi, *Al-Jawahir al-Khams*, 1:95.

of north India, staying alive for days at a time, it was said, without eating.[369] It was the younger Shattari's work, *Jawahir-i Khamsa* (The Five Jewels), available in Arabic and Persian versions, which became a key Sufi guidebook across the Islamic lands and contained a long section on how to capture the power of the planets.[370] His spiritual status became so great that he was called *ghawth* or Spiritual Succor, a title afforded to the axial saint of the age, a prophet-like entity who could intercede with the divine on humanity's behalf. Shaykh Ghawth had achieved this status on account of an unrivaled miraculous feat. Indeed, in 1526, the year Babur had ascended the throne of Delhi, Shaykh Ghawth had ascended to the throne of God.

Shaykh Ghawth's reputation rested on a miraculous trip to heaven that rivaled the ascension journey (*mi'raj*) of the Prophet himself.[371] The Shattari Shaykh was said to have physically taken by the angel Gabriel, from India, to journey through the seven heavens and witness the glory of God with his own eyes. Babur, in his memoir, did not concern himself with the source of the Shaykh Ghawth's power and glory. He simply made use of them. The Timurid, after all, had been used to dealing with this type of local charismatic figure, wielding both spiritual and earthly authority in Iran and Central Asia.

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[369] Muhammad Ghawth's life and miracles are discussed in Kugle, "Heaven's Witness."

[370] The five "jewels" have been succinctly described by Carl Ernst as follows: "The *Jawaher-e khamsa* is divided into five parts, each called a *jawhar*, addressing the following topics: (I) on the worship of devotees (ʿ*ebadat-e ʿabedan*) concerning Qurʾanic verses in supererogatory prayer, required Islamic prayers, and devotions for particular times; (II) on the practices of ascetics (*zohd-e zahedan*), dealing with internal practices that may be attempted after gaining perfection in external devotions; (III) on invocation (*daʿwat*) of the names of God, which requires the instruction of a master; (IV) on the recitations and practices (*adkar o ashghal*) that are distinctive to the mystics of the Shattari path; and (V) the legacy of divine practices belonging to those who have realized the truth….Part I is clearly aimed at the ordinary believer. The succeeding parts increasingly aim at more elite audiences." Carl W. Ernst, "Jawaher-e Khamsa," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online* (March 9, 2009), available at www.iranicaonline.org.

[371] A significant portion of Muhammad Ghawth's "Ascension Narrative" (*Mi'rajnama*) is translated and discussed in Kugle, "Heaven's Witness." The Prophet's miraculous ascension journey was an important theme for ambitious Muslim mystics who used it to articulate their own spiritual experiences. An early and famous case is the dream-ascension of the "ecstatic" mystic Bayazid Bistami (d. 874). It is notable however that Muhammad Ghawth's initial assertion was that his was not a dream experience but a bodily one.

What is notable here is the Shattari saint's age. At the time Shaykh Ghawth had first

aided Babur in capturing the fort of Gwalior, the Sufi was less than thirty years old. His

stature as a great mystic was not based on his years of experience but rather on the

rapidity with which he had acquired spiritual prowess. This was generally true of the

Shattari order which was so named (*shattar* in Arabic means sprinter) because of its

promise to provide an experience of divine rapture without undergoing the stages of self-

discipline that other mystical brotherhoods required.[372]

By achieving a physical experience of divinity at so young an age and in so

spectacular a fashion, Shaykh Ghawth had become the living proof of the efficacy of

Shattari spiritual technique. He imparted knowledge of his ascension experience as a

"seal" to his initiates and disciples to finalize their initiation into the order.[373] There are

no indications that he faced any organized religious opposition in his early career. It was

only after Humayun's defeat and exile, when Shaykh Ghawth had to escape to Gujarat,

that the Shattari saint faced religious inquiry and persecution. He was challenged by other

Sufis and 'ulama in Gujarat, possibly due to his growing influence on the ruler there, to

retract his heretical claims or face punishment. Under severe pressure, Shaykh Ghawth

recanted, agreeing that his ascension to heaven had really been a dream, and not a bodily

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[372] As a major disciple of Shaykh Ghawth, Wajih al-Din 'Alawi Gujarati explained the Shattari way:
"Repeating the essential name of Allah is the most important method of religious discipline. Recitation of
the name Allah should be directed towards your own chest, so that you come to understand that recitation
of this Divine name is actually addressing your own essential self, that this Divine name is actually your
own name, and this Divine reality is actually your own soul's ultimate reality. [To explain this further, he
said] you should consider yourself lofty and exalted, not lowly and humble… the Shattari way is painless
and effective; it requires no arduous struggle and no deference to formalities …. Through the Shattari way
Bayazid [Bistami] reached Divine realization without becoming trapped in such ascetic struggles and
external formalities….Anyone distracted by formalities and external norms will never achieve intimacy
with Allah!" Quoted in Ibid.: 11.
[373] Ibid.: 26.

event.[374] This retreat into the realm of dreams, a domain of routinized miracles, allowed

him to survive as a Sufi master in Gujarat. Shaykh Ghawth returned to Mughal Agra in

1559, in the reign of Humayun's son, Akbar (r. 1556-1605) but was unable to regain his

former status at court. The political and spiritual landscape changed so much during

Akbar's long reign that in the definitive chronicles written for him in the 1590s, the

Shattari brothers were given but brief mentions and ridiculed as "magicians" and

pretenders to sainthood.[375]

      Although the conflicting reports in later Timurid and Shattari sources limit the

degree to which we can reconstruct the history of early Timurid-Shattari interaction, it is

certain that the Shattari brothers played a brief but important role in making Humayun's

claim to sacred kingship, a role for which they received little credit in later Mughal

chronicles. In historical terms, it could be said that the Shattaris were just as marginal as

Humayun. Their project, like that of their royal ally, had a promising beginning but an

abortive end. Nevertheless, if we ignore the teleology of Mughal history and instead

focus on the years before Humayun's defeat and long exile, the Shattaris provide an

excellent lens for bringing into focus the sacred and sociological context in which the

early Timurid dominion took shape in India.

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[374] Dreaming, it should be recalled from the discussion in chapter 2, was an accepted form of miracle. But the social acceptability of this genre of miracles also reduced its spiritual efficacy and sacred power.
[375] Although he met with Akbar, and offered to become his spiritual master, the royal chronicler Abul Fazl depicted this as a wretched act from a man who could not recognize the fact that the real saint of the age was the emperor himself. Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak and Beveridge, *Akbar Nama (translation)*, 1,2: 641-642.

The "Universal" Sacrality of "Local" Holy Men

The two poles of history and hagiography around which sources from the period under study are clustered, provide us with two distinct and contradictory images of the Shattaris. Near the historical pole they appear as worldly and ambitious men who, in the guise of holiness, were deeply involved in local matters of war and politics. The hagiographical narrative, by contrast, associates with them the most universal of sacred powers and the deepest of mystical mysteries. These two images seem impossible to reconcile unless we turn to the observation that although the holiness of holy men was often memorialized in universal terms of unrelenting piety and spectacular spirituality, it was often realized by their active role in the routine life of local society.[376] Such figures had a reputation that was often based on the religious imagination and social needs of their followers; they were "arbiters of the holy" and rallying points around which a "religious commonsense" developed from multiple strands of local religious practice. More importantly, in the absence of formal political hierarchies or officialdom, these holy men could serve as crucial "hinge" figures and articulate relationships between their local followers and supralocal lords.

This insight is especially salient for sixteenth century North India where many lords were Turkish and Persian speaking Muslims – some like Babur and Humayun only recently arrived – while a majority of the populace and soldiery was not. [377] It was also a

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[376] These observations about the role of "holy men" are inspired by the detailed and subtle work of Peter Brown in his studies of Christianity in Late Antiquity. See Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971); Peter Brown, "Arbiters of the Holy: The Christian Holy Man in Late Antiquity," in *Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianisation of the Roman world* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity, 1971-1997," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6, no. 3 (1998).

[377] To get a sense of the social conditions of the time, especially of the martial traditions of the peasants of north India and their use of seasonal military service to augment their incomes in the "military labor

time where enough conversion to Islam had taken place for there to be significant communities of lay Muslims in some areas but much of the population was incorporated into structures of brahmanical religious traditions, followed anti-brahmanical devotional sects, or participated in a wide range of local spirit cults.[378] The Timurids had little choice but to engage with local intermediaries in order to establish themselves in their new dominions and, importantly, raise local allies and recruits for their army. The Shattaris were Sufis of a type that was ideally suited to play such a role. They were saints whose claims to universal sacrality were firmly grounded in local social structures and the knowledges and memories they sustained.

The Shattari brothers were not only immensely popular local saints but also experts in the Arabic, Persian, and Sanskrit learned traditions. In other words, these Sufis used elite intellectual traditions as well as popular local knowledges to demonstrate their command over Islamic and Indic idioms. This can be seen in Shaykh Ghawth's translation of the famous tantric yogic text, *Amrta Kunda*, from an earlier Arabic version into Persian, and his use of yogic formulae in his text on the invocation of Divine Names, *Jawahir-i Khamsa*.[379] Moreover, his expertise in astrology and the knowledge of the cosmos it entailed enabled him to draw correspondences between cosmologies derived from both traditions. Indeed, it has been argued that while later Shattari traditions sought

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market," from which rulers like the Mughals and their Afghan and Rajput rivals recruited. D. H. A. Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput, and Sepoy: the Ethnohistory of the Military Labour Market in Hindustan, 1450-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[378] For a sense of how Islam spread in South Asia, see Richard Maxwell Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal frontier, 1204-1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). Also, this was a period where other holy men such as the founder of the Sikh tradition, Guru Nanak, were expressing an experience of the divine that drew inspiration from the devotional practices of ordinary people while rejecting more formalized aspects of sacred traditions derived from Arabic and Sanskrit texts. See, J. S. Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[379] Ernst, "Shattari Sufism."; Carl W. Ernst, "Situating Sufism and Yoga," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 15 (2005).

to portray Shaykh Ghawth's interest in yogic spiritual knowledge as driven by a need to purify or Islamicize this knowledge, the original texts show no such attempt.[380] Rather, in his works, Shaykh Ghawth treated the two knowledge systems of Islam and Hinduism as equally valid sources of cosmological truth and demonstrated their correspondence.

The process of later Sufi traditions attempting to recast the earlier role of Indian Sufis as carriers of the "sword of Islam," who subdued "Hindu" power and dismissed "Hindu" sacred claims, is a well-documented one.[381] There certainly developed in the sixteenth and seventeenth century Sufi hagiographic traditions in Persian that sought to downplay their local roots and, instead, establish pure genealogies linking their orders to an authentic and universal Islamic past. However, this written tradition represented only one part of the social dynamic involving Islam in South Asia and, arguably, the lesser part if one takes into account the popular memory of Muslim saints and the lived experience of their vast numbers of devotees, many of whom did not profess Islam. Indeed, it has been shown that many elite Sufi writings were inspired by the oral lore and popular memories surrounding Muslim saints, which were then later sanitized and disciplined according to conventions of genre and "universal" tradition.[382] There was, in other words, a tense and productive relationship between the written Sufi orientations to the past and the popular memories of their lay devotees. However, it was the popular

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[380] Carl Ernst shows that the Shattari and Chishti orders in South Asia were adept in yogic and tantric practices, subscribing to cosmological notions that control over the world (macrocosm) was possible by controlling the body (microcosm). Furthermore, he argues that Muhammad Ghawth's works did not hide the fact that Sufism and Yoga were two distinct systems of religious thought and worship but rather showed that they had an affinity for each other. Thus, when non-Islamic provenance of ideas and texts was known, it did not necessarily entail a rejection of their truth or an "Islamicization" of their origins, but rather their correlation and translation into Islamic and Sufi ideas. See Carl W. Ernst, "Sufism and Yoga according to Muhammad Ghawth," *Sufi* 29 (1996).

[381] Carl W. Ernst, *Eternal Garden: Mysticism, History, and Politics at a South Asian Sufi Center* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 91, 158.

[382] A succinct and insightful study that compares written and oral traditions surrounding Muslim saints in medieval India is that of Shahid Amin, "On Retelling the Muslim Conquest of North India," in *History and the Present*, ed. Partha Chatterjee and Anjan Ghosh (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002).

tradition that did more to define the mold of sainthood which shaped the social personalities of holy men like the two Shattari brothers. To see why this was the case, we need to examine the social process that turned ordinary, and sometimes completely imaginary, men into saints and messiahs in the region. A vivid example in this regard is that of a legendary Muslim saint, Sayyid Salar Mas'ud Ghazi, the epitome of popular sainthood in north India.

The fact that Salar Ghazi was a figment of collective imagination was no impediment either to the popularity of his shrine, which has existed since at least the fourteenth century when Ibn Battuta visited the place and found it too crowded for comfort, or to his fame as a spiritually-gifted nephew and warrior of the first Muslim conqueror of north India, Mahmud of Ghazna (d. 1026). This imaginary warrior saint became so famous that the elite hagiographic Sufi tradition later adopted him as a bona fide saint giving him a proper pedigree and history in a text called *Mirat-i Mas'udi* (The Mirror of Mas'ud, c. 1611). Indeed, as the first saintly conqueror of Hindustan, his personality was cast in a messianic image in this Persian language hagiography, which compared his visage and attributes to that of Jesus.[383]

However, as Shahid Amin has shown, the bardic traditions surrounding Salar Ghazi portrayed him in a manner that is a great deal more concrete and complex.[384] While acknowledging his role as a founding Muslim warrior and conqueror, the bards

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[383] In his study, Shahid Amin notes several times that the elite hagiographies of Salar Ghazi gave him the attributes of Jesus. However, the interpretation that this was the use of a messianic idiom is my own. Ibid., 25, 26, 27.

[384] These traditions were collected during colonial times and are still sung in local Indian languages. Since Salar Ghazi's shrine in north India has existed at least since the fourteenth century, there is good reason to assume continuity in these narratives. Indeed, Shahid Amin points to several remarkable similarities between the recently collected oral traditions and the earlier Persian hagiography that show that these two strands of tradition were operating upon a common base of legends surrounding the mysterious saint. For details, see Ibid., 31-41.

also assigned to him the qualities of a local Indic hero, of a god descended to earth. In this popular version, the Muslim saint fights on the side of good and dies the death of an Indic epic warrior, in battle as a virgin on his wedding day. Salar Ghazi embraces martyrdom, according to the oral tales, when he goes to fight a tyrannical Hindu Raja who had attacked his devotees, the local (non-Muslim and low status) herdsmen and their cows. In other words, he fights both as a Muslim saint spreading his faith and as an epic Indic god-hero responding to the dharmic call of "save the kine" (*gao guhar*) and, thus, lays down his life for Islam/cows. As Amin has pointed out, this odd conflation of the universal and the local – that is, the Muslim saint's martyrdom involving the saving of cattle – even lived on in a muted form in the recounting of Salar Ghazi's life in the elite Persian hagiography, a work that otherwise molded the narrative of the saint's life into a more established Islamic form.[385] This correspondence between the written and the oral traditions suggests that it was the latter which served as the inspirational source for the former. It also demonstrates the limits to which elite writing could discipline popular lore. Indeed, it was popular imagination that produced the socially, as opposed to the textually, "real" version of the saint.

The hagiographical and popular narratives surrounding saintly and epic figures like Salar Ghazi were the product of collective memory and thought. As such, they can only be made sense of by appreciating the "common" sense that gave them coherence and meaning. This commonsense can be seen at work in how the Salar Ghazi was granted powers that were not only supernatural but also super-social. Among his miracles was the

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[385] This is how the Persian hagiography alluded to Salar Ghazi's role as the protector of cattle: "The next day they were preparing, when news arrived that the enemy were driving off the cattle. The Prince [Salar Ghazi] sprang like an angry lion, and beat to arms; buckling on his armour and mounting his horse, he himself put his troops into battle array, and advanced to the attack." *Mirat-i Mas'udi* quoted in Ibid., 38-39.

power to subvert, even if momentarily, social boundaries by throwing across them contradictory strands of moral community.[386] This was not, however, a "syncretism sans conflict."[387] In fact, the charisma embodied by Salar Ghazi was situated within memories of violence and predicated on acts of war.[388] The insight that Muslim saints from this period, in their social incarnations, sought neither inter-communal peace nor the uncompromising victory of orthodox Islam but rather enabled a culture of routinized war and violent coexistence is a non-intuitive one. Yet, saints and holy men have been shown to play just such a social role in "frontier" settings such as north India where social divisions, despite being strongly marked, often had to be transgressed because of the way organized violence and seasonal war structured the routines of social life.[389] It is crucial to develop an intuitive sense of this social dynamic if we are to appreciate how universal myths of sovereignty could be operationalized in such a local setting.

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[386] Since Salar Ghazi is thought to have died on his marriage day, his devotees today celebrate his death anniversary by forming a wedding procession. As Amin points out, "In a society such as India where segmentation and division into castes and sub-castes are girdled by marriage rules, to be a part of the wedding procession (*barat*) of [Salar] Ghazi Miyan is to subvert the normal barriers in the creation of community." Ibid., 38.

[387] Ibid., 30.

[388] This is a non-intuitive observation because it goes against the conventional notion that communal harmony is based on religious tolerance. Many historians of religion, however, have pointed out that more often than not, communal harmony is based on the threat of religious violence which is used to maintain communal boundaries and police transgressions and, hence, sustain intra-communal "peace." See Peter Brown, "The Limits of Intolerance," in *Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianisation of the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Also see David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[389] It has been argued that North Indian society contained many inner "frontiers" between cultivated, settled areas and uncultivated regions of forest, desert, marshes, and grasslands inhabited by nomadic and warlike societies with their own religious and social practices. Both sides of these frontiers participated and structured by seasonal warfare – what has been called the "business of empire." See Gommans, *Mughal Warfare*. For the classic account of how warfare and the "military labor market" structured religious and ethnic identity in this milieu, see Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput, and Sepoy*. For an example of how miracle-working Sufis aided Muslim armies in seventeenth century Deccan, see Mahmud Baba Shah and Simon Digby, *Sufis and Soldiers in Awrangzeb's Deccan: Malfuzat-i Naqshbandiyya* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001). In a comparative vein, it is also worth examining the argument made for the role of warrior Sufis, and narratives commemorating their deeds, in medieval Anatolia's "frontier society" involving Muslims and Christians, see Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds*.

Take, for instance, the case of the early sixteenth century north Indian messiah,

Sayyid Muhammad of Jawnpur (d. 1505) whose followers, known as the Mahdavis, were

active during Humayun's reign and played an important role in the messianic claims of

his successor, Akbar.[390] Sayyid Muhammad is said to have received his deepest religious

inspiration about Islam in a region largely populated by non-Muslims. According to

Mahdavi tradition, he had, as a youth, fought for the last Sharqi Sultan of Jawnpur, a

small kingdom in north India, against a neighboring Hindu raja. This raja had become

powerful enough to demand tax from the sultan, which the Muslim ruler would have paid

if it had not been for the exhortations of young Sayyid Muhammad who lobbied for an

armed response.[391] Interestingly, in the ensuing battle against the Hindu raja, Sayyid

Muhammad is said to have led a band of fifteen hundred young *bairagis* (Hindu ascetics).

When Sayyid Muhammad struck the Hindu raja dead, his sword cleaved the enemy's

chest open and exposed his heart. Islam's future messiah saw that on the raja's heart was

carved the image of the Hindu god he worshipped. Sayyid Muhammad was stunned by

the realization that if the power of belief in a false god could have such an effect on a

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[390] Sayyid Muhammad had made the rather strong assertion that anyone who denied his Messiah status could no longer be considered a Muslim. He preached asceticism and organized his followers, men and women, into residential communities called *da'ira* (circle) where all property and income was shared. He also declared the four dominant schools of Islamic jurisprudence to be defunct. His movement had a desultory career that took Sayyid Muhammad and his followers to Gujarat, Sind and eventually to Safavid controlled Afghanistan, where he died and was buried. His shrine was reported to have been attacked by Safavid forces but defended and saved by his followers. Sayyid Muhammad's successors kept the messianic movement alive for some generations despite facing severe persecution. The movement was politically and militarily active at the time that Humayun was in exile in Iran. Islam Shah Sur (r. 1545-54), son of Sher Shah Sur, suppressed it violently and executed the leader. Yet, the Mahdavis survived in more quietist groups and were present at the court of Akbar. Qamaruddin, *The Mahdawi Movement in India* (Delhi: Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delhi, 1985). Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *Muslim Revivalist Movements in Northern India in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Agra: Agra University, 1965), 68-106. Nizami, *Akbar & Religion*, 42-51. Derryl N. MacLean, "The Sociology of Political Engagement: The Mahdawiyah and the State," in *India's Islamic Traditions, 711-1750*, ed. Richard Maxwell Eaton (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003). Also see chapter 4, note 551

[391] The story is cited in S. M. Ikram, *Rud-i Kawsar: Islami Hind aur Pakistan ki Mazhabi aur Ruhani Tarikh: Ahd-i Mughaliyya* (Lahore: Firozsons, 1958), 27. Unfortunately, the author did not mention his source.

non-Muslim heart, then what would devotion to the true God do to a Muslim one. He went into a trance that lasted twelve years. This was the beginning of his spiritual quest which led him to Mecca where he declared himself to be the awaited Messiah at the age of forty.

This hagiographical narrative portrayed Sayyid Muhammad as a staunch Muslim, committed to advancing the cause of Islam in a radically revived form, but also the leader of an open-status warrior group in which Hindu sadhus fought alongside Muslim Sufi warriors. Moreover, it figures forth a religious imagination in which Muslims may have considered the gods of India to be false but did not doubt their sacred powers and the commitment of their brave devotees.

The living memory of great saints like Salar Ghazi and messianic figures like Sayyid Muhammad of Jawnpur was, quite plausibly, the model of aspiring holy men like the Shattari brothers. For one, the Shattaris' active and leading role in moments of war corresponds closely to the warrior saint image. Their order seems to have had even institutionalized such a role for its leaders. The founder of the order in India, Shah Abdullah (d. 1485) is said to have spread his spiritual message by touring the country in the costume of a king with his devotees in military dress carrying banners and beating martial drums.[392] Furthermore, Shattari knowledge of yogic traditions of sacred power served to root their spiritual reputation in local idioms. Even more indicative of the fact that Shaykh Ghawth had assumed the trappings of a local holy man is the fame of his herd of cattle, an Indic mark of sacredness as witnessed in the legend of Salar Mas'ud Ghazi. Shaykh Ghawth's bulls and cows were so renowned that when the Shattari saint

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[392] Nizami, "Shattariyya."

returned to Agra after his long exile in Gujarat, the young emperor Akbar went to see the animals with his own eyes.[393]

These local and concrete bases of Shaykh Ghawth's sacred authority were the foundation for his universal claims of spiritual power preserved in his textual endeavors. In his written works, he used the sacred knowledge of Indian yogis alongside Arabic prayer formulae to draw down the angelic powers of the planets. A person who invoked these powers properly would possess, he asserted, "the miraculous ability of our Lord Moses, may peace be upon him, and our Lord Jesus, may peace be upon him, and become the Guide and Messiah of his age (*wa yakun hadiyan mahdiyan fi zamanihi*)."[394] This was, most likely, the promise the Shattari saint held out to young Humayun who began to see himself as a manifestation of divinity.

With this context in mind, it is worth paying attention to the rumor that Humayun "used to cast a veil over his crown (*taj*), and when he removed it the people used to say, 'manifestation [of the Divine Light]'…and so he imposed upon the populace the requirement to prostrate before him with their foreheads touching the ground."[395] We must resist the temptation to dismiss such accusations of heresy merely on the grounds that no direct or confessional evidence such as formal decrees or royal chronicles corroborate them. Indeed, such claims of sacrality would have rarely been articulated in words and decrees. Rather, they would have been made manifest in a profusion of symbols, arranged and performed in a great theatre of sovereignty.

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[393] Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak and Beveridge, *Akbar Nama (translation)*, 1, 2: 641-642.
[394] Ghawth al-Hindi, *Al-Jawahir al-Khams*, 1: 111.
[395] Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, 1: 446. I have modified the translation somewhat from Bada'uni, *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh (translation)*, 1: 573.

The Spectacle of Empire and the Theatre of Sovereignty

In contemporary descriptions of Humayun's reign there is hardly a mention of an imperial bureaucracy, judiciary, or revenue service. In this regard, Humayun was not exceptional. Neither his Timurid predecessors nor his contemporary Safavids in Iran were much concerned with methods of "rational" administration.[396] Rather, the expectation from a great king and conqueror was that he would first and foremost perform his public role as an epitome of righteousness and awesome might. To this end, the foundational process of kingship depended less on tax collection and the establishment of a bureaucratic order and more on conquest and a patterned display of sovereignty. This process included the circulation of the sovereign through the realm with his grand entourage, hunting, conquering, and feasting, taking in the sights, sounds, and tastes of its various locales while imposing upon it a new order of color and rhythm.[397]

Consider the way how Babur, two years after his initial victory in Hindustan in 1528, had organized a royal feast. The guest list included his allies and ambassadors from Iran (Qizilbash), Central Asia (Uzbek), and India (Hindu).[398] In his memoir, Babur described in great detail the design of the royal canopy for the occasion, the arrangements made for the guests, who sat with whom, the distance between him and his noble visitors, the types of gifts received and given. The carefully choreographed affair ended with a

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[396] From the Baburnama it is evident that Babur depended on raiding and conquest to sustain his treasury and army more than on tax collection. In general, imperial bureaucracies were poorly developed in the region at the time and would remain so until the last quarter of the sixteenth century when a significant degree of administrative "rationalization" took place in the reigns of Akbar and Shah Abbas in India and Iran, respectively. For Safavid Iran, the state of bureaucracy when it developed under Shah Abbas is discussed in Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 17-18. For the administrative developments in Mughal India in late sixteenth century under Akbar, see Richards, *Mughal Empire*, 58-78.

[397] To get a sense of the itinerant nature of Mughal kings, see Gommans, *Mughal Warfare*, 99-111.

[398] Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 427. Babur, Thackston, and Khan, *Baburnama (polyglot)*, 746.

meal followed by a magnificent performance of Indian acrobats whose amazing feats, Babur admitted, were beyond the ability of Central Asian entertainers.

Local entertainment was not the only way to experience his empire, moreover. So was the local cuisine. Indeed, Babur went to great lengths to "taste" his new dominions. In his first year in India, 1526, after he had defeated the Afghan Lodi Sultan Ibrahim, Babur commissioned the dead king's cooks to prepare Hindustani food for him. This was no frivolous pursuit. Babur was well aware of the risk of poisoning he was exposing himself to. Despite strict security measures, one of the Indian cooks having been bribed by the former Queen Mother managed to mix poison in Babur's food. Fortunately for Babur, he only ingested a few morsels of the tainted dish and survived after a night of violent vomiting.[399] He dubbed the incident a "strange" affair, an indication that fortune was on his side, and reported it in detail in a letter sent to Kabul.

Babur did not only adjust himself to local taste and style, he also modified his new dominions to suit his own sensibilities. His penchant for building distinctive Timurid-style gardens with fountains and running water, and for planting melons and other fruits from his native land is well-known. Another, more somber, practice in this regard was his desire to remove any spectacle that competed with his own performance of kingship. While touring Gwalior, he saw giant statues of Hindu deities carved into the mountains near Urwahi. He remarked in his diary, "Urwahi is not a bad place. In fact, it is rather nice. Its one drawback was the idols, so I ordered them destroyed (Turkish: *buzgaylar*; Persian: *viran bikunand*)."[400] Archaeological evidence shows that these

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[399] The next morning, he had a dog eat his vomit and when the creature became sick, he ordered an investigation and uncovered the plot. Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 373.
[400] Ibid., 416. Babur, Thackston, and Khan, *Baburnama (polyglot)*, 728.

statues were not destroyed but at most their heads were removed.[401] There was more than just Islamic iconoclasm at work in Babur's actions because, on the same tour, he had sealed alliances with local Rajas and then gone off to see the Hindu temples of Gwalior. He admired these buildings, even comparing one set of temples to the design of an Islamic *madrasa*. He also noted the "lower chambers" where idols were kept but recorded no distaste or urge to destroy. Why were the idols on the mountainside "beheaded" but the idols in the temple's inner sanctum left untouched? The answer could well be that the giant statues, which loomed large over the landscape with their uncanny gaze fixed upon it, interfered with Babur's royal performance and his royal gaze. Whatever the case may be, Babur, by feasting and arranging, tasting and observing, planting and building, had begun to merge his royal self with the landscape of his new dominion. But it was Humayun who upon ascending the throne gave this ritual process a formal, cosmological shape.

Humayun showed a great deal of inventiveness in the way he organized a ritual display of kingship. In order to make visible, classify and regulate his court and realm, he commissioned a new range of material objects such as buildings, boats, drinking vessels, tents and carpets, as well as symbolic practices such as calendars, games of chance, court ceremonies, uniforms, dress codes, and naming conventions. By all accounts, the result was an impressive affair. Even his usually critical relative, Mirza Haydar, could not contain his admiration for the spectacle of the royal camp and army.

> When… I entered [Humayun's] service in Agra… it was after his defeats [by Sher Shah Suri], and when people said that compared with what it had been, there was nothing left of his pomp and magnificence. Yet when his army was arrayed for the Ganges campaign (in which the whole direction devolved upon me) there

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[401] See Finbarr Barry Flood, "Between Cult and Culture: Bamiyan, Islamic Iconoclasm, and the Museum," *The Art Bulletin* 84, no. 4 (2002): 647.

were still 17000 menials in his retinue, from which circumstance an estimate may be formed of the rest of his establishment.[402]

Mirza Haydar thus noted with praise that Humayun possessed immense "natural talent and excellence," and that the emperor was "brave in battle, gay in feast and very generous …a dignified, stately, sovereign, who observed much state and pomp."[403] The emperor's shortcoming, from Mirza Haydar's perspective, was not that he neglected imperial administration but rather that he ruined himself by keeping company with pseudo-Sufis and profligate companions like the Shattaris instead of authentic mystics and pious men like the Naqshbandis.

Fortunately, Humayun's efforts in laying the symbolic foundations of empire are preserved in a panegyric work called *Qanun-i Humayuni*[404] (Canons of Sovereignty, and a play on Humayun's name: Canons of Being a Humayun), composed by the famous Timurid historian Ghiyas ad-Din Muhammad Khwandamir (or Khvand Mir, d. c. 1537). It is significant that Khwandamir composed this work. Not only was he the greatest Persian historian of his time but he had also served both the Timurids and the Safavids, witnessing their cultural worlds up close.[405] He was, in short, well aware of the competition for sovereignty between the two dynasties and understood the messianic idiom of sacrality and the stakes involved.

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[402] Haydar, *Tarikh-i-Rashidi (translation)*, 469-470.
[403] Ibid., 469.
[404] Ghiyas al-Din ibn Humam al-Din Khvand Mir, *A Work on the Rules and Ordinances Established by the Emperor Humayun and on Some Buildings Erected by His Order: [Qanun-i Humayuni, Persian Text with Notes and Preface]*, ed. M. Hidayat Hosain (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1940).
[405] Initially, Khwandamir had served as a historian to the last Timurid sovereign in Herat, Babur's uncle Husayn Bayqara (d. 1506). After the Safavid conquest of Herat, he offered his services to the new regime and thus became an important source for early Safavid history. Later, when Babur had met with success in India, Khwandamir came to his court in 1528 and died in Humayun's reign. His grand chronicle (*Habib al-Siyar*) is an important source of early Safavid and Mughal history.

In his grand chronicle, *Habib al-Siyar* ("The Friend of Biographies"), which he wrote in part under Timurid patronage and in part under the Safavids, Khwandamir took a neutral stance, leaving out the embarrassing moments of each dynasty's past and describing them both as equally worthy. However in the Canons of Sovereignty written for Humayun, he portrayed the Timurid monarch as the greatest and most sacred sovereign of the age. Moreover, steeped in Timurid cultural forms, Khwandamir remained true to his roots. He presented Humayun's entire imperial endeavor in classical Persianate style and a universal Islamic idiom. In his description of the emperor's "inventions" (*ikhtira'at*)[406] of kingship there was no mention of the Shattari Sufis and their local knowledge. Yet, a close reading of the Khwandamir's text shows that the cosmological basis of Humayun's new order corresponded well with the "strange" teachings of the Shattaris and their locally-flavored idioms of sacrality.

The Canons of Humayun

Khwandamir's work began with a hierarchical view of the social order with Humayun at its apex. He was God's successor or caliph according to the Quranic tradition "and we made you regents (*khala'if*) on earth" (10:14). He was also a Lord of Conjunction (*Sahib Qiran*). As the head of God's ecumene on earth, Humayun's role was to provide succor to all its social constituents (See Table 3-1).[407]

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[406] Khwandamir seems to have been careful to use the word "invention" (*ikhtira'*) as opposed to "innovation" (*bida'*) as the latter term connotes deviance from orthodoxy and would have been used by those invoking "universal" Islam to describe Humayun's royal actions as heretical.

[407] This table summarizes information from Khvand Mir, *Qanun-i Humayuni*, 24-26.

Table 3-1: The Social Hierarchy under Humayun as God's Caliph and Lord of Conjunction

	Social Group	**Function/Position**
1	Nobles (*umara*) and ministers (*wuzara*)	Look after affairs of the world (*umur-i jahani*) and collect revenues (*husul-i amwal*)
3	Descendents of the Prophet (*sadat*) and Sufis (*masha'ikh*)	Fruit of the garden of sainthood (*wilayat*) and the planets of the heavens of guidance (*hidayat*)
4	Men of knowledge (*'ulama*) and distinction (*fuzala*)	Lights of gnosis (*ma'arifat*) and doors of beneficence (*ifadat*)
5	Judges (*quzzat*) and jurists (*muftiyan*)	Implement the law (*shari'at*)
6	Poets (*shu'ara*) and secretaries (*arbab-i insha'*)	Adorn the Emperor and his court
7	Farmers (*dahaqin*) and tillers (*muzari'an*)	Sustain the condition of the world through effort and organization
8	Merchants of land and sea (*tujjar-i bahar o amsar*)	Travel far and wide for commerce.
9	Craft professions (*muhtarifat*) and market traders (*ahl-i aswaq*)	Practice a variety of manufacturing techniques.

In this social hierarchy, the religious scholars of Islam, the 'ulama, were placed below both the political and spiritual aristocracy as defined by blood and kinship ties. It was these two hereditary groups – the ruling nobility and the Sufis/Alids (Shaykhs/Sayyids) – whose presence and efforts maintained order in the material and spiritual domains respectively. Accordingly, they had an ontological precedence over scholars and men of knowledge. The kinship element is worth emphasizing as these two groups intermarried in the early periods of the Mughal and Safavid empires. Humayun, for example, upon his return to power in Kabul reestablished his links with the Naqshbandis by marrying his sisters with important members of the Sufi family.[408] The

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[408] Stephen F. Dale and Alam Payind, "The Ahrari Waqf in Kabul in the Year 1546 and the Mughal Naqshbandiyyah," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 119, no. 2 (1999): 225.

Safavids too established marriage ties with leading Sufi and Sayyid lineages like the

Ni'matullahis who in turn played key religious and political roles in the empire.[409]

Furthermore, the word for religious scholars (*'alim*, pl. *'ulama*) was not limited in

this scheme to those who were masters of doctrinal or juridical knowledge. Rather, it

included those who possessed an inner knowledge (*ma'arifat*) and thus provided benefit

(*ifadat*) to the ruler. Their wisdom (*hikmat*) was considered to be broader than that of

religious law as evidenced by their higher status than that of the mere judge or jurist. This

catholic definition of knowledge (*'ilm*) was widespread in the region, especially so in

Iran, which was at this time still largely Sunni. Indeed, Arab Shi'i jurists, who were just

beginning to trickle into the Safavid realm had to compete for the title of *'alim* with an

entrenched "estate" of scholarly families.[410] These incumbents, who were mostly Sunni

but also Sayyid, not only prided themselves on their sacred genealogy but also subscribed

to a view of learning that included much more than just the study of Islamic

jurisprudence and scriptural traditions. This view included not only mathematics,

philosophy and astronomy but also the occult sciences (*'ulum-i ghariba*) and related

"wisdom" (*hikmat*) – what today would be termed divination, astrology, alchemy, and

magic.

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[409] The Safavids inter-married with the powerful Sufi family of the Ni'matullahis. See Algar and Burton-Page, "Ni'mat-allahiyya."

[410] As Said Arjomand has noted, during the first century of Safavid rule the term *'alim* (p. *ulama*) meaning 'knowledgeable' or 'learned' signified two distinct groups of men: the "estate" of broadly educated clerical notables, who were Sunni-Sufis in the pre-Safavid period and served as judges and administrators; and the group of Shi'i religious professionals. The learned notables resented the use of the term *'alim* by the Shi'i newcomers. As these two groups struggled for power, wealth and position within the emerging Safavid polity, they also began to encroach on each other's knowledge domains. Hence, eminent Sufis like the Ni'matullahis became upholders of Shi'i truth. The Shi'i jurists, in turn, incorporated in their teachings and practice the miraculous and divinatory knowledge traditionally associated with mysticism and philosophy. Arjomand, *Shadow of God*, 122.

Khwandamir certainly had such a perspective of religious knowledge in mind when he asserted that anyone familiar with the Prophet Muhammad's life and customs knows that he used to take auguries from the names of men.[411] In this view, Humayun followed the prophet's tradition from a young age. Once, when Humayun was still a prince his father left him in charge of Kabul while away on a campaign. During this time, the prince was out riding in the countryside when suddenly it occurred to him to take an augury from the names of the first three men that come his way. Although the prince's tutor, a certain *'alim* named Maulana Masihuddin Ruhullah, whose title indicated that he was also a physician,[412] suggested that one name should suffice for this exercise but Humayun was determined to pursue his original inspiration and seek out three men.

The first man the young prince met was called Murad Khwaja. Murad means goal or desire, which made this chance meeting a good omen. Soon afterwards Humayun saw another man carrying wood. His name turned out to be Dawlat Khwaja. Dawlat means fortune or dominion, another good omen. Humayun remarked that if the third person's name is Sa'adat, which means felicity and fortune, it will be a most amazing and fortunate coincidence (*ittifaq*). Within the hour, he came across a boy grazing cows whose name was indeed Sa'adat Khwaja. At this incident, all his servants were amazed and convinced that this emperor with the omen of sovereignty (*padishah-i humayun fal*) will in little time, with the help of divine fortune (*sa'adat-i azli*), will obtain the greatest ranks of dominion and fortune (*maratib-i dawlat o iqbal*).[413] Humayun was so taken by

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[411] According to Khwandamir, the Prophet found *tatayyur* or the practice of taking evil omens to be foul (*mazmum*) but *tafa'ul* or the practice of taking good omens to be praiseworthy (*mahmud*). Khvand Mir, *Qanun-i Humayuni*, 31.

[412] The label "Masih" (lit. Messiah but used to refer to Jesus) was often given to physicians because of the miraculous ability of Jesus to heal the sick.

[413] Khvand Mir, *Qanun-i Humayuni*, 34.

this augury that when he ascended the throne he used it to organize his court and

administration. He divided his entourage into three divisions, each of which was named

according to the auspicious names the emperor had come across that auspicious day (See

Table 3-2).[414]

Table 3-2: Imperial Administration Arranged According to Humayun's Augury

	Group	Membership	Function/Benefit
1	People of Government and Dominion *(Ahl-i Dawlat)*	The emperor's brothers *(ikhwan)*, relatives *(aqraba')*, nobles *(umara)*, ministers *(wuzara)* and soldiers *(sipahiyan)*	Maintain rule, authority and stability
2	People of Felicity and Fortune *(Ahl-i Sa'adat)*	Religious administrators *(sudur)*, spiritual luminaries *(masha'ikh)*, family of the Prophet *(sadat)*, men of knowledge *('ulama)*, judges *(quzzat)*, men of learning *(fuzala)*, poets *(shu'ara)*, courtiers and the imperial retine *(mawali, ashraf, ahali)*.	Increase eternal fortune *(irtiqa bi darajat-i dawlat-i sarmadi)*.
3	People of Object and Desire *(Ahl-i Murad)*	Lords of beauty and taste *(arbab-i husn o malahat)*, the young masters of loveliness *(javanan-i sahib-i sabahat)* and musicians and singers.	Satisfy the desire to meet beautiful youth and to hear the sound of the musical instruments: *chang, qanun* and *'ud*.

Each of the three groups was assigned two days for court appearance according to

the astral auspiciousness of each day (Table 3-3).[415] Thus, Humayun's schedule, which

set the rhythm of empire, was marked both by the founding royal augury as well as the

auspicious positions of the planets. Moreover, each day just before dawn the royal drums

(naqqara) announced the Time of Felicity *(nawbat-i sa'adat)*, reserved for worship and

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[414] This table summarizes information from Ibid., 34-35.
[415] This table summarizes information from Ibid., 36-37.

meditation. Then at sunrise the Time of Dominion (*nawbat-i dawlat*) would be sounded, and at sunset the Time of Desire (*nawbat-i murad*).

Table 3-3: The Schedule of Humayun's Court Arranged According to the Planets

Auspicious Group	Day of the Week	Reason
People of Felicity	Saturday and Thursday	The reason for this arrangement is that Saturday is related to the planet Saturn (*zuhal*), the protector (*murabbi*) of men of spiritual eminence (*masha'ikh*) and ancient lineages (*khandanha-yi qadim*). Also, Thursday is associated with Jupiter (*mushtari*) which is the planet of the Prophet's family (*sadat*) and scholars (*'ulama*). On these days, the monarch met with his managers of the system of knowledge and worship (*naziman-i nizam-i 'ilm o 'ibadat*).
People of Dominion	Sunday and Tuesday	The wisdom (*hikmat*) behind this is that Sunday is the day of the Sun (*aftab*) which is associated with rulers and sultans; while Tuesday is the day of Mars (*mirrikh*), the lord of able soldiers (*atrak-i jaladat a'in*). Thus the Emperor devotes himself to governance on these two days which are best suited for issuing royal edicts.
People of Desire	Monday and Wednesday	Monday is associated with the moon (*qamar*) and Wednesday with Mercury (*'atarad*). It is appropriate that in these two days one should associate with moon-like (*qamar paykar*) youths and increase beauty and adornment with a combination (*imtizaj*) of songs (*naghmat*) and melodies (*ilhan*) of instrument and voice.
Any and all	Friday	Finally, Friday (*jum'a*) as it name indicates brings together (*jami'*) of all mentioned affairs. And the assembly (*majli*s) on this day depends on the need of the moment.

In this organizational scheme the three pillars of empire consisted of what would today be translated as "politics," "religion," and "entertainment." Presiding over all three types of activities was part of kingship. Any error or imbalance in performing this royal

duty would, it would seem, lead to disorder in the realm. While it may have been an "invention" of Humayun to use an augury to name these three realms of his dominion, such a division was not merely rhetorical but rather a well-established practice of kingship. This can be gauged from the difficulty Shah Tahmasb faced when he tried to upset this balance and be overzealous in his attempts to be pious.

Shah Tahmasb was well-known for his many relapses into piety during which he pronounced a ban on alcohol, gambling, prostitution, and other vice throughout the realm.[416] In fact, in one of these moments of repentance (*tawba*), he is said to have given up painting and his atelier. In doing so, he lost his leading artists to Humayun and inadvertently launched a brilliant era of Indo-Persian art. Most of Shah Tahmasb's pious proclamations were highly symbolic as they mainly coincided with moments of war, when the Safavid realm was under threat. Moreover, the fact that these decrees were repeatedly issued throughout Tahmasb's reign also point to the lack of intention or ability of the crown to implement such prohibitions. In one case, which Tahmasb related in his memoir, the Shah had a dream in which the Prophet appeared and told him that if he wanted to be victorious, he should give up forbidden things (*manahi*). In the morning, Tahmasb discussed his dream with his chief minister and other nobility. They said "we are willing to abstain from some of these forbidden acts but others, like drinking [wine], which is necessary for governance (*saltanat*), we cannot give up."[417] Shah Tahmasb was only able to convince his courtiers, most of whom it should be remembered were also his Sufi disciples, after he brought further oneiric instructions from the Prophet the next morning. In short, the institution of sacred kingship had a strong performative and

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[416] See, Newman, *Safavid Iran*, 31-32.
[417] Safavi, *Tadhkira*, 30.

transgressive element to it. Even fastidious Sufi kings like Shah Tahmasb could only

exercise their piety within limits.

Humayun's Canons also make it clear that the auspicious form and pattern of royal

decrees was as important, if not more, than their content and execution. This can be seen

in how Humayun divided his court into twelve ranks. Khwandamir wrote that the number

twelve was chosen because of its far reaching cosmological and scriptural importance, as

follows: [418]

1. The eighth heavenly sphere is divided into twelve zodiac signs on which the movement of the sun, moon and all the planets depend, as does the calculation of months and years.
2. Some affairs of the world are dependent on time (*zaman*), that is, the hours of day and night; and day and night each are divided into twelve hours when they are in a state of balance (*hal-i i'tidal*) at the beginning of spring and fall seasons.
3. It is also mentioned in the Quran (9:36) that "the number of months according to Allah is twelve."
4. The prophet Jacob also had twelve sons which later became the twelve tribes of Israel (*asbat*) as mentioned in the Quran (7:160).
5. The Quranic verse says, Allah sent twelve chiefs (*naqib*, p. *nuqaba'*) to the people of Israel to explain his word to them.
6. The Prophet Muhammad appointed twelve men of the Ansar to chiefdom (*naqabat*) on the night of *'Aqaba*.[419]
7. The number of innocent Imams also reached twelve.
8. The written form of the two Muslim confessions of faith (*kalamatayn shahadatayn*) also depends on twelve characteristics. Anyone who calculates the letters (*huruf*) of these two expressions will obtain this truth.

In this scheme, the number twelve connected everything from the organization of

the heavens, time, calendar, the tribes of Israel, the leaders of the Ansars of Medina, the

innocent Imams and the letters constituting the Muslim profession of faith. As was

discussed in the last chapter, such "strange" connections were not merely symbolic but

indicated hidden ontological links that made up a unified cosmological plan. True

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[418] This information is summarized from Khvand Mir, *Qanun-i Humayuni*, 44-47.
[419] This refers to an incident in the Prophet Muhammad's twelfth year of prophethood.

knowledge, then, consisted of the ability to know, divine, and manipulate this plan. Such augury taking was a common ritual among kings. Not only were practices of divination and geomancy used before battle but also afterwards in moments of leisure. Humayun, for example, after his conquest of Gujarat, had played the game of chance of "divining arrows" or "lots" setting himself up against his Safavid rival, Shah Tahmasb, to determine the relative strengths of their sovereignty.[420] When Humayun was in exile at the Safavid court, this particular event was related to Shah Tahmasb, conceivably by the Timurid's enemies. The Shah was told that Humayun had written "his own name on twelve first-class arrows and that of Tahmasb on eleven low-class arrows," a pattern favorable to Humayun. The Safavid sovereign asked Humayun for an explanation and chastised him publicly for his hubris. The latter was able to assuage the anger of his royal host only after gifting a huge sum in diamonds.

To appreciate the role of such divinatory practices in the Sufi practices of the day, it is worth noting the claims of the millenarian Hurufi (Letterist) Sufi order in vogue during the classical Timurid period in Iran.[421] The Hurufi founder, Fazlallah Astarabadi had gone a step further than most mystics in claiming to decipher completely and comprehensively the order of "resemblance" in all created things and to possess divine omnipotence. The basis of Astarabadi's thaumaturgical system was the shape, diacritical markings, and numerological properties of the Arabic and Persian alphabet. Even though Khwandamir in his descriptions of Humayun's court does not explicitly invoke Hurufi conceptions, he points toward a similar form of knowledge in which the occult powers of

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[420] Aftabchi, "Tadhkiratu 'l-Waqiat," 69.
[421] See chapter 1for a brief discussion role of the Hurufis in Timur's time. Also, see Bashir, *Hurufis*.

numbers and letters were the bases of an esoteric and alchemical scheme at work behind the order of the world.

Thus each of the twelve ranks of Humayun's entourage was assigned a "golden arrow" (*tir-i mutalla*) of varying quality (see Table 3-4).[422]

Table 3-4: The Twelve "Golden Arrows" or Alchemical Ranks of Humayun's Entourage

Arrow or Lot	Imperial Group
12	The emperor
11	The relatives, brothers, and other nobles (*salatin*) who serve the emperor.
10	The greatest of the spiritual leaders (*masha'ikh*), the prophet's family (*sadat*) and men of knowledge (*'ulama*) and the People of Felicity.
9	The great nobles (*umara'-i 'azzam*).
8	The emperor's personal servants (*muqarriban*) and officers (*ichkiyan*) who hold rank (*mansab*).
7	Remaining (non rank-holding) officers (*ichkiyan*).
6	Clan leaders and elders (*sarkhilan-i qaba'il* and *yuzbigiyan*).
5	Unique young men of ability (*yakka-i javanan*).
4	Royal treasurers (*tahwildan-i sift-i ikhtisas*).[423]
3	Young men of the circle (*javanan-i jirga*), (possibly of the hunt).[424]
2	Servants in training (*shagird-i pishgan*).
1	Porters (*darban*) and camel-drivers (*sarban*).

The purity of the gold in each arrow or rank increased from one to twelve. The ranking of the imperial court and camp had, in other words, an "alchemical" basis. All men were ordered according to the purity of their being, the most pure being the emperor. The first eleven ranks or arrows are assigned to the nobility, court, army, and servants. The twelfth arrow, the highest ranking one, was reserved for Humayun since it was "equivalent (*mawafiq*) to the measure (*'iyar*) of red gold and [belonged] to the quiver of

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[422] This table summarizes information from Khvand Mir, *Qanun-i Humayuni*, 43. An arrow (*tir* or *sahm*) was a way of casting lots, doing divination, or dividing up a set of things.
[423] I am not certain about this translation.
[424] This could be a reference to hunters, as hunting was done in a circle (*jirga*).

the emperor." Red gold, it should be noted, was the purest form of gold that an alchemist could produce.[425] The number twelve also suggested both an astrological reference as well as a messianic one, as the twelfth Imam was supposed to return as the Messiah, the purest of beings who would inaugurate the last millennium.

A further alchemical reference in Humayun's scheme was the use of the four elements (fire, air, water and earth) to organize all the imperial services, each with its own function and chief functionary (Table 3-5).[426]

Table 3-5: Humayun's Imperial Services Organized According to the Four Elements

Imperial Service	Responsibility
The Service of Fire (*Sarkar-i Atish*)	All affairs in which the lighting of fire was involved such as artillery (*tupkhana*), and the production of weapons and instruments of war. The chief of this service always wore red.
The Service of Air (*Sarkar-i Hava*)	Jurisdiction over the domain of the royal kitchen (*bavarchikhana*), stables (*astabal*) and the necessities of adornment and beautification.
The Service of Water (*Sarkar-i Abi*).	All the affairs of the drink (*umuri-i sharbatkhana*), the digging of canals (*juryan-i nahr*) and ocean-going missions (*muhimmat-i bahar*)
The Service of Earth (*Sarkar-i Khaki*)	All matters pertaining to agriculture (*zira'at*) and construction (*'imarat*) and the extraction of essences (*zabt-i khulasat*)

Having divided up his court and dominion based on such cosmological principles, the emperor then assumed his role as the central being and animating force of the realm. He did so by drawing down the powers of the planets into his body. Each day of the week was known to be associated with a particular planet, and each planet with a color. Thus,

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[425] It should be noted, the production or acquisition of pure alchemical elements such as mercury, which was thought to prolong life, was a passion of many Mughals. Even the most "orthodox" Muslim of them, Aurangzeb, richly patronized a monastery belonging to an order of yogis in return for high quality mercury. See David Gordon White, *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 1.
[426] This table summarizes information from Khvand Mir, *Qanun-i Humayuni*, 48-50.

the Emperor donned clothes which suited the planet that oversaw that day (see Table

3.6).[427]

Table 3-6: The Color of Humayun's Clothes Selected According to the Planets

Day/ Planet/ Color	Cosmological Cause and Earthly Effect
Saturday Saturn Black	The wearing of black creates awe (*haybat*). This is why the Prophet wore a black hat (*'amama*) the day he conquered Mecca. Abu Muslim (the messianic leader of the eighth century Abbasid revolution in Khurasan), had at the time of his emergence (*khuruj*) ordered his followers that for a few days they should wear clothes of the same color. The day they wore black, their faces looked awesome and so this became the color of their emblems (*sha'ar*). Thus the Abbasids adopted this color for their clothes, flags and other materials of rule (*asbab-i farman farmai*).
Sunday Sun Yellow	This day, according to the Quranic verse (2:69), "yellow, intense is her color, she delights the beholders" and spreads the rays of the light of justice.
Monday Moon White or Green	If the moon is near its fullness (*sarhad-i badriyyat*), then he wears white. Otherwise, he wears green. The Quran (76:21) says that green is the color of clothes in paradise.
Tuesday Mars Red	Tuesday is associated with the blood-thirsty Mars (*bahram-i khun asham*) and its color has redness (*hamriyyat*) in it. Thus, the Emperor wears red on the throne on this day, and evil doers receive their due and the doers of good, peace and security.
Wednesday Mercury Blue	Wednesday is related to the lord of the planets, Mercury (*tir-i dabir*). Since its nature allows mixture (*imtizaj*), the Emperor sometimes wears collyrium blue (*kuhli*), sometimes azure (*lajawardi*) and sometimes "alcheh" (a Turkish word for a type of silk).[428]
Thursday Jupiter Brown	On Thursday, which is overseen by Jupiter (*birjis*), the Emperor wears beige-brown (*nakhudi,* or the color of chick-peas) and sits with the People of Felicity.
Friday Venus Green or White	On Friday, which is associated with Venus (*nahid*), the Emperor wears either green or white. Many 'ulama have commented that the color green is related to the prophets (*anbiya*) and the Prophet's family (*ahl-i bait*). The Prophet Khizr is so named (green) because wherever he sat down, the ground would break out in greenery.[429] It is said that once he sat on a white

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[427] This table summarizes information from Ibid., 72-77.

[428] Apparently a type of silk cloth, most likely dyed blue.

[429] Khizr came to be associated with many of the Zoroastrian practices previously associated with the goddess Anahita or Nahid, which is the name given to Venus. It could be more than a coincidence then that

> skin and it turned green. A green garment is considered the *khil'at* or robe of honor of Khizr. It is also related by historians that at the time when the Abbasid caliph Ma'mun made Imam Riza (the eighth Shi'i Imam) his successor in the caliphate, he changed the black dress and banners of the Abbasids to the color green. Humayun himself has said that when he sees the Prophet in a dream, the latter is dressed in green.

As the table shows, the color of Humayun's dress was not merely related to the planets but through them to a series of signs in Islamic history and mythology. On Saturday, for example, he would use black to draw upon the power of Saturn and appear as awesome as the Prophet during the conquest of Mecca in the seventh century and as fearsome as Abu Muslim when he had manifested himself as the revolutionary defender of Alid sovereignty and overthrew the Umayyad dynasty in the eighth century.[430] On Friday, Humayun would wear green, the color of the Prophet's clothes as the king himself had witnessed in his dreams. Humayun's daily routine was in effect a powerful spiritual act, similar to the Shattari technique of calling upon the power of the planets, which could revive in new earthly forms the spiritual powers of past prophets, saints and messiahs.[431]

Not all of Humayun's rituals were so somber in tone, however. As a sacred sovereign, Humayun's role was to strike a balance, between the other world and this one, between conquest and stability, between justice and mercy, and between piety and pleasure. Thus, when Humayun was in a good mood, he would gather his favorites

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Khizr and Venus are invoked together as a symbol of greenery and fertility. See Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*, 367-368.

[430] Abu Muslim, who was also mentioned in chapters 1 and 2, became a mythical hero and religious figure in Iran. For a discussion of his widespread cultural significance, especially in connection with "heterodox" ideas and practices, see Ibid., 121-160.

[431] This correlation between the planets, days and colors was well-known in Persian astrological circles and is also mentioned in the section on astrology in the encyclopedia on one hundred and twenty "sciences" presented by a scholar from Samarkand to Humayun. Muhammad Fazil Miskin Samarqandi, "Jawahir al-'Ulum Humayuni," Markaz-i Tahqiqat-i Farsi-i Iran va Pakistan [Iran Pakistan Institute of Persian Studies], Islamabad, MS 301, f. 494a.

around him on a cosmologically-patterned "carpet of mirth." Round in shape, and placed on a round wooden platform, the carpet was made of a series of concentric rings, each colored to signify one of the nine heavenly spheres and the two "elemental" spheres of fire-air and earth-water. Humayun would seat himself in the sixth circle of heaven, golden in color, associated with the Sun. His courtiers would be assigned places according to an astrological scheme, for example, India-born (*Hindi al-asl*) nobles and Sufis would sit in the sphere of Saturn, Sayyids and ulama would sit in sphere of Jupiter, etc. When everyone was seated, lots were cast. Everyone picked from a bag a piece of paper which had the figure of a person drawn on it in various poses, such as sitting, standing, and sleeping, etc. Each member of the assembly would then assume the pose that fell to his lot. Thus, "without doubt that gathering took on an exceedingly odd appearance and became a source of increased mirth and delight."[432] Even royal entertainment, it seems, was patterned on cosmological principles.

In short, the Canons justify Humayun's practices of kingship by relating them to alchemical and astrological traditions as well as prophetic and Quranic ones. The work was written in such a high literary style and panegyric tone that at first glance it appears that all these symbolic arrangements were little more than a pleasing aesthetic façade that bore little relationship to the particular facts of Humayun's royal life. However, there still remain in Khwandamir's beautifully constructed prose traces of the "practical" ends of these practices. Some of these ends were geared towards entirely local and bodily needs. For example, we learn that one of Humayun's royal inventions was a new type of vessel for pouring wine that had a uniquely long and curving spout. This newly designed vessel solved a problem particular to India; that is, the need to keep the royal drink free of the

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[432] Khvand Mir, *Qanun-i Humayuni*, 112.

dust and flies which infested Humayun's new dominions. Not all practical ends were inspired by the ecological challenges of Hindustan, however. One of the most important symbolic inventions of the emperor had a provenance in Iran. This was the special *taj* (crown) that Humayun designed for himself and his followers.

The Auspicious Taj (Crown) of Humayun

The Canons called Humayun's "crown" his chief invention (*saramad-i ikhtira'at*). Meant for the Emperor's use as well as his chosen courtiers, it consisted of several raised gores (*tark*) and a cloth (*'asaba*) wrapped around it. This sash had two openings in it, shaped in the figure of the number seven. The two sevens put together became seventy seven, the numerical value of the word *'azza* (or *'izz*, meaning honor, power, and glory). Hence Humayun called his headgear the Crown of Power and Glory (*Taj-i 'Izzat*). The Emperor's turban was produced in one color while the turban of the rest of the court was of one color inside the sash and another color outside it. Khwandamir recorded that he was one of those who had the honor of wearing it. A court poet wrote the following poem to give a chronogram for the establishment of this imperial practice:

> The head of religion-nurturing (*din parvar*) kings, Humayun,
> May his dominion increase at every moment (*har dam*).
> Among the people, the wearing of the Crown (*taj*),
> Became customary due to his good invention (*az husn-i ikhtira'ash*).
> Although it is called the Crown of Glory *(Taj-i 'Izzat)*
> Its date was given by Crown of Felicity (*Taj-i Sa'adat*) (939 AH)[433]

Humayun's new taj bore both a mimetic and a competitive relationship to the Safavid headgear, a symbol of their Sufi brotherhood. It was meant to enact a ritual of sovereignty similar to the Safavid one in which the ruler was the object of ritual devotion

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[433] Ibid., 72.

of his courtiers and soldiers. It would appear that Humayun instituted this symbolic practice in response to the loss of glory and power that his father had experienced when he became a Safavid disciple. But to become an object of ritual devotion, Humayun had to first become sacred. Thus, his keen interest in the esoteric sciences – the *'ulum-i gharība* –, especially his recourse to the thaumaturgic gifts of the powerful and charismatic Shattari saints, was a means to achieve a degree of sacrality that would surpass even that of the messianic Safavid Shah Isma'il. Shah Tahmasb recognized this when he complained that Humayun "became so vain as to claim divine powers" and began to believe that "other kings would soon have to present themselves at his (Humayun's) court and accept his service, and their tenure of sovereignty will depend on his will."[434] What the Safavid Shah did not mention was that this was precisely the heretical claim to power that his father, Shah Isma'il, had made fifty years ago, a claim which still resonated with the Qizilbash soldiers and nobility who saw Shah Tahmasb as the Messiah's heir.

Humayun at the Court of Shah Tahmasb

Shah Tahmasb was the leader of the Safavid Sufi order as well as the sovereign of Iran. Barely ten when he inherited the throne, the first decade of his reign was spent in a civil war fought amongst the rival Qizilbash lords. When he finally managed to grab the reins of power, he was still constrained by the powers of the Qizilbash elite. He tried to control them both with all means at his disposal, with his power as king and with his charisma as saint. In other words, the practices of the Safavid court still entailed the ritual of imperial discipleship. Shah Tahmasb remained for his Qizilbash followers the perfect

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[434] See note 341 above.

guide (*murshid-i kamil*) for whom they would submit themselves corporeally to the "stick of the path" (*chub-i tariq*). Similarly, there are reports that the practice of ritual cannibalism was referred to in the court of Tahmasb's son, Muhammad Khudabanda (r. 1578-88).[435] Unlike his father, however, Tahmasb seemed to have little taste for publicly playing God. Indeed, it would have been difficult to do so after his father's disastrous defeat at the hands of the Ottomans in 1514 at Chaldiran. Instead, he focused on his role as a Sufi leader. This can be seen in the way he related a series of dreams in which the prophet Muhammad, Ali, and his own ancestor and founding figure of the Sufi order, Shaykh Safi aided him in establishing a just and saintly order on earth.[436] In short, the Safavid saint-monarch knew precisely how to interpret Humayun's symbolic claims to sacred power and how to respond to them.

Defeated by the Afghan Sher Shah Suri in 1540, and abandoned by his brothers, Humayun had wandered in Sind and Baluchistan in poverty and desperation, with a shrinking band of supporters, until his request for asylum was granted by the Safavids in 1544. Most of the Mughal sources portray the moment of Humayun's arrival in Safavid territory as one in which the Timurid sovereign was treated as a great emperor, at least as an equal to the Safavids.[437] The Safavid sources treated the matter, more plausibly, as a submission of the Timurid to Safavid rule. Interestingly, we have one Timurid eye-witness account, composed by Humayun's ewer-bearer, Jawhar Aftabchi, whose narrative supports the Safavid version. Although Aftabchi describes Humayun's

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[435] See, Bashir, "Shah Isma'il and the Qizilbash," 248. For *chub-i tariq* see note 288.
[436] For a discussion of Shah Tahmasb's retreat from the open millenarianism of his father and his use of dreams to construct a more sedate aura of saintliness, see Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*, 295-334.
[437] This is certainly the case as far as the writings of Humayun's sister are concerned. See Begim, "Humayunnama."; Gulbadan and Beveridge, *Humayun-Nama (translation)*.

submission to the Safavids in a somewhat sanitized fashion, his account still provides important details of the rituals involved.

Aftabchi recorded that as Humayun neared the Safavid court, the Safavid Shah organized a grand reception at a distance from the court in which his courtiers, nobles, and princes participated according to proper protocol. The Shah's brother, Sam Mirza, then personally welcomed Humayun in ceremonious style. The two men approached each other on horseback until they were a distance of one arrow-shot away from each other. They then dismounted and came forward on foot. The Safavid prince had brought for Humayun a robe and an unbroken colt. He personally dressed the emperor in the robe but, Aftabchi was careful to mention, without the "taj." It is not clear from Aftabchi's description whether it was the Safavids who did not impose the taj on Humayun at this time or whether it was the Timurid who resisted wearing it. In any case, even if the Timurid was spared the ignominy of putting on the Safavid marker of submission at this stage, he still had to undergo another Safavid ordeal. He had to ride the unbroken horse that the Safavids had brought for him. In this endeavor, according to Aftabchi, he passed with flying colors: "The emperor got on the unbroken colt, and when he mounted the horse was calm, and so the Turcomans [Safavids] tested and found this emperor's fortune to be strong (*imtihan kardand ki dawlat-i in padishah qavi bud*)."[438] The welcoming ritual, in other words, included taking an omen or augury to gauge Humayun's cosmological status at the time.

Thus, appropriately dressed and cosmologically vetted, Humayun was presented to Shah Tahmasb, only to be immediately put on the spot. The first question the Safavid monarch put to him was, "will you wear the *taj*?" Humayun immediately replied,

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[438] Aftabchi, "Tadhkiratu 'l-Waqiat," 121.

according to Aftabchi, "it is a crown of glory (*taj-i 'izzat*), I'll certainly wear it."[439] In

Aftabchi's account Humayun referred to the Safavid crown with the same name that he

had given his own imperial headgear – *Taj-i 'Izzat*. This was perhaps Humayun's (or

Aftabchi's) way of lessening the insult that Humayun had to undergo in this ritual of

submission.[440] Humayun had little choice but to give up his own crown and instead wear

the emblem of Safavid discipleship, much like his father had before him.[441] Until now,

most scholarly accounts have treated Humayun's submission to Shah Tahmasb as a

conversion to Twelver Shi'ism. However, this interpretation is anachronistic as it ignores

the Sufi nature of Safavid court rituals and assumes a predominance of juristic Shi'ism at

the Safavid court which was still several generations away. This ritual submission,

instead, was undergirded by Sufi practices and tinged with *ghuluww* (exaggeration): the

Shah put on the Safavid *Taj-i Haydari* on Humayun's head with his own hands, at which

time all the Qizilbash nobles present in the gathering broke out in good cheer, and

"saying 'Allah, Allah' prostrated before their monarch, as was their custom."[442] For the

Qizilbash, their Sufi king had broken the power of a great rival dynast and made him a

disciple and slave.

After Humayun's submission, the Mughals abandoned Humayun's taj. It had been

symbolically superseded and negated by the Safavid Shah. Its memory was preserved in

Mughal painting, however. Whenever Humayun or one of his servants was depicted in

later Mughal paintings, they were shown wearing Humayun's cosmologically inspired

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[439] Ibid., 64.
[440] Indeed, Aftabchi's is the only account that records this ceremony. Neither the account by Humayun's sister, Gulbadan Begum, nor the later chronicles of Akbar's reign mention the incident. This silence in the sources indicates that Jawhar was describing an incident that was embarrassing for the Mughal dynasty.
[441] To refuse would be to invite death, as one of Humayun's retainers later did by insulting the Safavid crown. Aftabchi, "Tadhkiratu 'l-Waqiat," 76.
[442] Ibid., 122.

headgear. However, this did not mean that the Mughal dynasty had withdrawn from the competition. Indeed, the practice of royal deification and imperial discipleship did not end with Humayun. The cosmology and rituals of the devotional cult enacted in the grandeur of Akbar's court were a variation on the themes originally elaborated by Humayun and a direct response to the Safavid model of sacred kingship. But that is an argument for the next chapter.

Conclusion

Guru Nanak (d. 1539), an Indian mystic, poet and holy man in the Punjab whose disciples (*sishiyas* or Sikhs) and followers later gave rise to a new religious tradition, woefully described the coming of the Timurids as a "marriage party of sin."[443] Sinful or not, the party was joined by many Indians whether soldiers or commanders, mystics or saints. The Timurids, for the most part, welcomed them with open arms because their rule depended on garnering the support of local intermediaries. Although the religions and languages of Hindustan were new to the Timurids, the fact of ethnic and religious diversity and the ability to function within such a social environment was not. The Timurids had not come to India from a homogeneous "Islamic world," bringing with them a uniform conception of rule based on classical legal traditions of Islam. Nor did they simply take over such a legalistic structure from their Afghan predecessors in Hindustan. The law books of Islam certainly existed at the time – and they were copied, transmitted, and taught – but the same cannot be said for social and political institutions that would have allowed these normative texts to shape society and politics. Instead, the

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[443] Grewal, *Sikhs*, 9.

range of religious beliefs was wide and the complexity of practice bewildering. Furthermore, this was true as much in Safavid Iran as it was in Timurid India.

Despite the Safavids' strong Alid leanings, in Shah Tahmasb's time Iran had not yet become Shi'a in any juridical sense of the word. Indeed, the Shah for all his piety still had to contend with the transgressive religious practices of his Qizilbash generals who could not imagine giving up wine and still perform the role of governors. In order to control them, the Shah did not make recourse to ideals of Islamic law but to his power as a saint in regular oneiric communication with Ali, Muhammad, and Shaykh Safi al-Din, the founder of the Safavid order. Thus, when his brother challenged his power as a Sufi monarch by putting on the *taj*, Shah Tahmasb boasted that not one of his Qizilbash disciples went over to his rival because they all recognized only one master in pursuit of the Sufi way (*dar rah-i sufigari murshid yaki ra midanand*).[444] The Safavid Shah had inherited a saintly status, marked by the *taj* that his disciples wore. Humayun, on the other hand, had to work to make his own *taj* sacred.

The knowledges and institutions available to a ruler like Humayun to give himself an aura of sacrality and saintliness were rooted in both elite Perso-Arabic and Sanskrit intellectual traditions as well as in local devotional practices and competition. The fact that these traditions and practices were so elaborate, pervasive, readily available, institutionalized – some would say even "commercialized" – can be seen in the reactions of holy men like Guru Nanak who preached giving up all these trappings of the sacred – whether Islamic or Indic, Sufi or Yogi – in order to return to a simpler mode of devotion

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[444] Safavi, *Tadhkira*, 45.

without form and color, text and ritual, master and idol.[445] Strong reactions such as these

highlight, in fact, the social power of these trappings and institutions which could

transmute saints into kings and kings into saints. Such was the idiom of sacrality and

sovereignty, and it was one that was used and understood both locally and universally.

The Shattaris, known for their royal and martial style of mysticism and their local sources

of power, were ideally suited to help Humayun develop a royal cult of devotion in

Hindustan. They were not alone, however, and faced competition from the Timurids' old

spiritual allies, the Naqshbandis, who saw the Timurid conquest of Hindustan as an

opportunity to spread their networks of influence and, possibly, make up for the territory

and followers they had lost to the Safavids in Iran.

This competitive dynamic enveloping Sufis and soldiers, mystics and kings, was

the real, "practical" relationship between religion and politics, between Islam and

kingship. Yet, it is easily missed if the focus remains only on normative ideals of

scriptural religion or royal advice literature derived from Iranian and Greek thought. In

this vein, dismissing Humayun as eccentric and idiosyncratic because of his deep interest

in astrology and other occult traditions is to miss the point that these forms of knowledge

provided an important symbolic foundation for the nascent Timurid empire in India.

Unlike his Safavid rival, Humayun had not been born a Sufi leader and, despite strenuous

efforts, was not able to achieve the status of a saint or messiah in his lifetime. But his

efforts provided his successors with the sacred and mythical resources available to them

when making their claims of sacred sovereignty. Humayun's important contribution was

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[445] Guru Nanak, although today known as founder of the Sikh religion, originally propagated a message of devotion to a formless deity without intermediaries and religious functionaries. In this way he belonged to a class of religious mystics, thinkers, and poets whose words were sung and revered over much of India at this time and are often called the *sant panthis* (followers of the true path). Grewal, *Sikhs*, 28-41.

not lost on posterity.[446] Indeed, the chronicles from the court of his son, Akbar, recorded that upon seeing the horoscope of his newborn son, Humayun "fell a'dancing, and from excess of exultation, revolved with a circular motion" because he had realized that the "horoscope of this Light of Fortune [Akbar] was superior, in several respects and by sundry degrees, to that of His Majesty, the Lord of Conjunction (Timur)."[447]

To appreciate his role in the development of Mughal sacred kingship, Humayun need not be compared with his warlord father, Babur, or with his pious Safavid contemporary Shah Tahmasb. He need not even be compared with Shah Isma'il, the first successful messianic monarch of Safavid Iran. Rather Humayun's contribution mirrors closely that of Shah Isma'il's father, the Sufi Shaykh Haydar who, even though he failed in his bid for the throne of Iran, bequeathed a sacred institution to his successors in the form of a cult of devotees marked by a sacred emblem, the *Taj-i Haydari*. Much like Shaykh Haydar, it was Humayun's symbolic and sacred legacy that enabled his son to claim that he had been born the Lord of the Age and the Messiah.

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[446] For the extensive description of miracles, astrological predictions, and oneiric omens that surrounded Akbar's birth and the role of Humayun and his entourage in producing and perpetuating this lore, see Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak and Beveridge, *Akbar Nama (translation)*, 1, 2: 41-124.
[447] Ibid., 1, 2: 111.

CHAPTER 4

The Millennial Sovereign: God is Great or God is Akbar

Introduction

> Events of the year 990 AH (1582)
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> …Some shameless and ill-starred wretches also asked His Majesty [Akbar] why, since a thousand years from the Hijrah were passed, he did not bring forward, like [the Safavid] Shah Isma'il the First, some convincing proof (*burhan*)…
>
> Abd al-Qadir Badayuni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*[448]

As we saw in the last chapter, Humayun had made a concerted attempt at creating a royal cult modeled after the Sufi kingship of the Safavids of Iran. More generally, this attempt was an enactment of the style of sacred sovereignty that had taken shape in the former territories of Timur, a style inspired by emergent Sufi institutions, enshrined in elite knowledges of astrology and alchemy, and enlivened by popular memories of saints and heroes. But Humayun failed. He had little to show for his efforts except a ruined reputation as a vain heretic who dabbled in magic. His sacred order was publicly undone when as a refugee in Iran he was uncrowned at the hands of the Safavid Shah Tahmasb. This symbolic subservience of the Timurids to the Safavids haunted the Mughals for generations. Yet, it is easily missed because later Mughal history reconfigured this embarrassing memory. This reconfiguration, however, required more than an act of negation, an elision or distortion in a set of texts. It also called for an act of production, a

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[448] Bada'uni, *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh (translation)*, 2:323. Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh, 2:312.*

grand performance of sacrality. This was a burden that fell on the shoulders of Humayun's son, Jalal al-Din Muhammad Akbar (r. 1556-1605). And, as this chapter will argue, Akbar chose the sign-laden moment of the Islamic millennium to requite the wrongs inflicted by the Safavids on his dynasty and redeem the sovereignty of Timur's heirs in India.

In order to appreciate the significance of this millennial moment, we must penetrate through the thick layers of modern historiography under which Akbar's social personality lays buried. This Mughal emperor is, deservedly so, the most well-known and extensively studied figure from sixteenth century India. The administrative and cultural foundations of empire that were laid in his half century of rule gave the region a political cohesion and historical direction that were felt well into the eighteenth century. Even the early colonial administrators of the East India Company initially turned to the grand framework of Akbar's reign, recorded in the imperial manual titled "Institutes of Akbar" (*A'in-i Akbari*), for knowing the land, its peoples, its productivity, and the principles to govern it. Besides his political accomplishments, however, Akbar's name today evokes his innovative experiments with the religious traditions of his realm. At the height of his reign, he is thought to have given up Islam, his religion of birth, and instituted in its place a new sacred order centered on the figure of the monarch.

Although commonly referred to as the Divine Religion (*Din-i Ilahi*) and thought of as an amalgam of Islam and Hinduism, Akbar's cult remains an enigma, with its precise nature and purpose still open to debate.[449] The official Mughal sources do not

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[449] For a review of the literature and the sources on the topic, see Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History*, 374-417. Rizvi's review is erudite and comprehensive but his conclusion reveals his presentist bias. He saw, anachronistically, a "liberal" Akbar struggling against a powerful establishment of Sunni Muslim jurists: "[The Din-i Ilahi] was not a religion and was not even a mystic order. Akbar's religious leadership

even give it a name, simply calling it discipleship (*muridi*), while other sources refer to it

variously as Divine Religion (*Din-i Ilahi*), Divine Monism (*Tawhid-i Ilahi*), or Four

Degrees of Devotion (*Ikhlas-i Chahargana*). Nevertheless, this indeterminacy

surrounding Akbar's spiritual endeavors has not hindered their being mythologized in

popular and textbook histories. Given the rise of fractious Hindu and Muslim

nationalisms in modern South Asia, Akbar's "religion" is imagined as a precocious

attempt at social engineering to harmonize the sacred traditions of his realm. Whether

critical or laudatory, such appraisals are often made within nationalist frames of thought

based on anachronistic conceptions of "religion" and "state."[450] What they do reveal,

however, is that of all the Mughals discussed until now, Akbar's reign is seen as the dawn

of a new era in the history of India.[451] Such a strong focus on Akbar as a myth of

beginnings has led, predictably, to a neglect of the historical processes that shaped him as

a sovereign.

This chapter argues, in a deeply revisionist vein, that the religious controversy

surrounding Akbar must be reinterpreted in light of the institutions and knowledges of

sacred kingship that had developed in early modern Iran and India. It makes an effort to

move beyond the largely synchronic and South Asian evaluations of Akbar's "religion"

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was limited to preventing the orthodox Sunni 'Ulama from using the state to serve their own ends." Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History*, 415-416. The most recent essay on the subject that moves the analysis forward with new materials is Iqtidar Alam Khan, "Akbar's Personality Traits and World Outlook - A Critical Appraisal," *Social Scientist* 20, no. 9/10 (1992). Khan's article also engages with an important earlier essay by M. Athar Ali, "Akbar and Islam (1581-1605)," in *Islamic Society and Culture: Essays in Honour of Professor Aziz Ahmad*, ed. Milton Israel and N. K. Wagle (New Delhi: Manohar, 1983).

[450] Among India's liberal intelligentsia, Akbar has mainly been celebrated a great figure of history. See, for example, his portrayal as an early modern model of a "secular" ruler in Amartya Kumar Sen, *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture, and Identity*, 1st American ed. (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2005), xiii, 41, passim. In the Islamicized political atmosphere of Pakistan, however, Akbar has had a more negative reception. See Mubarak Ali, "Akbar in Pakistani Textbooks," *Social Scientist* 20, no. 9/10 (1992).

[451] Akbar is not only a staple of history books but also of popular culture. He is, for example, the only Mughal emperor with the distinction of having two Bollywood epic films based on his life and legend: *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960) and *Jodhaa Akbar* (2008).

as a sum of his spiritual quest and involvement with the Sufis orders of his realm[452], his

enthusiasm for a pantheistic metaphysics[453], and his political need to bond together a

ruling class in India that was ethnically and religiously diverse.[454] While these elements

were certainly relevant, they do not explain why Akbar's claim was made in an idiom of

messianism and enacted with rituals of sainthood similar to the ones that the Safavids of

Iran had deployed. To understand why, we must view the religious dynamic at Akbar's

court through sixteenth century eyes. We must take seriously the fact that Akbar used the

first Islamic millennium to proclaim his sacrality and, as the opening quotation shows, in

doing so was accused of mimicking the messianic project of the Safavid Sufi-king Shah

Isma'il.[455]

In terms of organization, this chapter treats the millennial episode of Mughal

history from four contemporary perspectives: the official account found in the royal

chronicle of Akbar's reign; the reports and letters of the first Jesuit mission (1580-1582)

to the Mughal court; the secret chronicles and public writings of 'Abd al-Qadir Badayuni

(d. c. 1614), a Muslim courtier deeply inimical to Akbar; and, last but not least, the

contemporary religio-political dynamic in Safavid Iran. Before delving into these sources,

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[452] This is, in broad terms, the perspective taken in the book-length study by Nizami, *Akbar & Religion*. For Akbar's involvement with Sufism, see also Gail Minault Graham, "Akbar and Aurangzeb -- Syncretism and Separatism in Mughal India: A Re-Examination," *The Muslim World* LIX, no. 2 (1969). The latest contribution on the subject is an essay by Muzaffar Alam, "The Mughals, the Sufi Shaikhs and the Formation of the Akbari Dispensation," *Modern Asian Studies* 43, no. 1 (2009).

[453] For an emphasis on the philosophical and metaphysical thought of Akbar's ideologue, Abul Fazl, see Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History*, 339-373.

[454] John F. Richards, "The Formulation of Imperial Authority under Akbar and Jahangir," in *Kingship and Authority in South Asia*, ed. John F. Richards (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[455] The millennium has been treated as a puzzling but negligible phenomenon by previous scholarship on Akbar. Nizami mentioned it only to dismiss it as an idea that is "found in all civilizations." Nizami, *Akbar & Religion*, 213. Rizvi also treated it as insignificant despite noting that "the orthodox [Muslims], like ancient Persians, believed that the religious systems preached by different religions generally last for one thousand years." Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History*, 453. Aziz Ahmad noted that Akbar's "Din-i Ilahi" was one among many millennial (*alfi*) movements of the time but did not elaborate upon this observation. Aziz Ahmad, "Din-i Ilahi," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, CD-ROM* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

however, it is necessary to get a sense of the chronology of Akbar's reign and the texture of the millennial discourse in Mughal India.

Historical Background: The Millennium in Mughal India

Made king at age thirteen, Akbar spent the first five years in the grip of powerful regents, court factions, and kin groups. Successfully breaking free of these political forces at the age of eighteen, he began the hard work of building alliances and establishing a stable equilibrium among his Turkish, Persian, and Indian nobility. Akbar also had to fight incessantly, at first to preserve his precarious patrimony, and then to subjugate rival sovereigns and warrior chiefs across north and central India. He excelled at war, deploying innovative tactics and inventing new technologies. Between 1561 and 1569 a number of important Rajput kingdoms were added to the Mughal realm. In 1573, Gujarat was conquered and in 1576, Bengal. This was not for Akbar, however, a zero-sum game of territorial conquest. Rather, it was a remarkably successful campaign to recruit participants in a long-term project of empire building that remapped the political geography of South Asia. Thus, two decades into his reign, Akbar had created under him a diverse ruling class of noblemen, warlords, clan chiefs, and minor kings who were assigned numbered ranks and made to serve as salaried servants of the expanding Mughal imperial realm. The emperor had become without doubt one of the greatest sovereigns of the time.

It was at this juncture that Akbar turned to pursuits that can be termed "cultural." Illustrated works of history, poetry, and epics were produced on a scale and in a style that had no precedent. Imperial palaces, mausoleums, and urban complexes were erected of a

size, number, and grandeur that had hitherto been unimagined. Amidst this frenzy of

cultural production and experimentation, the emperor began his inquiry into the religious

traditions of his realm. In 1575, Akbar established the House of Worship ('*Ibadat*

Khana). In this novel venue, the emperor personally supervised late night debates in

which scholars of various traditions – Islam, Christianity, Brahmanism, Jainism, and

Zoroastrianism – expatiated and defended their beliefs. [456] During these gatherings Akbar

allowed free ranging discussion on all points of doctrine and metaphysics, not excepting

even the most central tenets of Islam. As was to be expected, the discussions often

became bitter and deeply acrimonious but he continued with the project. Then, in 1579,

scandal broke and controversy began raging publicly. The emperor's rivals used

accusations of heresy to rally men to their cause. [457] In some cases, religious edicts were

issued against Akbar. None of this seriously weakened his political position, however.

The rebels were crushed and at least two of the unruly Muslim jurists reportedly put to

death. [458]

Once political order had been restored, Akbar celebrated his victories in the year

1582. In terms of the Islamic Hijri calendar, it was only the year 990. But those familiar

with astrology knew that in this year an important conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter had

reoccurred in the same celestial position that it had occurred near the birth of Islam and

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[456] For a comprehensive treatment of the 'Ibadat Khana and Akbar's interests in various religions see Nizami, *Akbar & Religion*.

[457] The Akbarnama mentions that there were rebellions but does not give details. Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak and Beveridge, *Akbar Nama (translation)*, 3: 318. Historians have used other sources such as the Jesuit accounts and Badayuni's secret chronicle to piece together a picture of these rebellions but it remains uncertain whether the religious controversy was a cause rather than an excuse for rebellion. See Makhanlal Roychoudhury, *The Din-i-Ilahi: or, the Religion of Akbar* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1941), xxxi (n. 11), 62, 90-92. It has been argued that the emperor's brother in Kabul, Mirza Hakim, also used this opportunity to push forth his imperial ambitions. See, Munis Faruqui, "The Forgotten Prince: Mirza Hakim and the Formation of the Mughal Empire in India," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 48, no. 4 (2005).

[458] These rebellious Muslim jurists were assassinated according to Badayuni, quoted in Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak and others, *The A'in-i Akbari* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2003), 173.

the end of the Sassanian-Zoroastrian dispensation – a once in a millennium event.[459]

Grand celebrations were held at court. New coins were issued with the world "thousand"

(*alf*) stamped on them. Most significantly, a thousand year history was commissioned,

called "Millennial History" (*Tarikh-i Alfi*).[460] This voluminous chronicle, written in

Persian, consumed the labors of a team of authors for more than a decade. As a work of

history, it was an unremarkable synthesis of the established Arabic and Persian chronicle

tradition. But as a symbol of the millennium, the chronicle had many notable attributes.

For one, the Millennial History began, not from the birth of the Prophet or his

famous migration (*hijra*) from Mecca to Medina but from the year of the Prophet's death.

No explanation was given for this curious choice of beginning. Universal histories at the

time usually began with the birth of Adam. Dynastic histories began with a founding

figure. Similarly, the history of an individual monarch started with the year of his birth or

ascension. The norm, in other words, was to imagine the past as beginning with the

advent of a sacred being, an embodied presence. The Millennial History, by contrast,

began with the end of a sacred being, an embodied absence. By doing so, it set up an

expectation of a new beginning and a new being, i.e., a new cycle of time. Since the

chronicle ended with the reign of Akbar, one can surmise that it was the Mughal emperor

who had filled this absence and fulfilled this expectation by inaugurating the new

millennium. This observation is supported by the fact that here Akbar was declared to be

the Renewer of the Second Millennium (*Mujaddid-i Alf-i Thani*).[461]

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[459] As was discussed in chapter 1, Ibn Khaldun cited earlier astrologers on planetary conjunctions that were interpreted as signaling the end of the Zoroastrian dispensation and the beginning of an Islamic one. See Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddima Ibn Khaldun*, 348-352.
[460] Qazi Ahmad Tattavi and Asif Khan Qazvini, *Tarikh-i Alfi*, ed. Ghulam Riza Tabatabai Mujid, 8 vols. (Tehran: 2003/1382).
[461] Ibid., 1: 241.

"Mujaddid" or Renewer was a label that had seen frequent and mostly uncontroversial usage since the early Islamic centuries.[462] According to prophetic tradition, a Mujaddid was supposed to appear at the beginning of every Islamic century to renew or revive Islam. As this scriptural tradition about the centennial Mujaddid indicated, the label carried within it a conception of cyclical time. Overall, it was a more restrained way of making a claim of sacrality than that afforded by the more openly messianic category of *mahdi*. That it carried such a messianic meaning in the case of Akbar is suggested by the evidence adduced for his status as the millennial Mujaddid: an occult calculation based on the letters of the royal name and the apocalyptic science of *jafr*.[463] In such a form, Mujaddid was a sacred title and a coveted one. Akbar was not alone to have laid claim to it. In fact, the label of "Renewer of the Second Millennium" became widely applied to one of Akbar's most acerbic contemporary critics, the famous Naqshbandi Sufi, Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1624).

Before his association with the Naqshbandis, Sirhindi had been a young scholar employed at Akbar's court. It was much later, in the reign of Akbar's son Jahangir (1605-1626), that Sirhindi became prominent as a leader of a branch of the Indian Naqshbandi Sufis. His main teachings as a Sufi master were recorded and circulated in a compilation of letters (*maktubat*) he had written to his sons, disciples, and contemporaries, some of whom were noblemen at the Mughal court.[464] In these letters, Sirhindi's charge against Akbar, whom he did not mention by name, and his corrupt ulama (*'ulama-i su'*), who also remain anonymous, is little more than a general outcry about the dismal state of

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[462] Donzel, "Mudjaddid."

[463] Tattavi and Qazvini, *Tarikh-i Alfi*, 1: 241. For a meaning of *jafr*, see notes 40 and 74.

[464] Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi, *Maktubat-i Imam-i Rabbani*, 3 vols. (Lucknow: Nawal Kishore Press, 1889). A selection of these letters is also available in Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi and Fazlur Rahman, *Intikhab-i Maktubat-i Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi*, 2 ed. (Lahore, Pakistan: Iqbal Academy, 1984).

Islam in the "previous century," i.e. Akbar's reign. Processes of modern Muslim

revivalism and nationalism later recast Sirhindi as an authoritative champion of Sunni

Islam in South Asia, portraying him as a "reformer" who single-handedly defeated

Akbar's nefarious designs against Islamic orthodoxy. However, there is little historical

evidence of such a competition between the mystic and monarch or, for that matter, of

Sirhindi's political significance.[465] What is evident is that Sirhindi had generated a storm

of a controversy by making a grand mystical claim of power that also explicitly invoked

the millennium.[466]

       Sirhindi had maintained that since a thousand years of Islam had passed, the

Muslim community had lost its connection with the divine that had initially been

established via Prophet Muhammad. He wrote that with the coming of the millennium the

first Arabic letter "mim" in Muhammad had transformed into the letter "alif,"

transforming "Muhammad" into "Ahmad."[467] It is notable that Sirhindi's own name was

Ahmad, a fact that opened the possibility that he was in fact the awaited millennial

being.[468] Nevertheless, he refrained from claiming this explicitly in his writing, however,

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[465] See, Irfan Habib, "The Political Role of Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi and Shah Waliullah," *Enquiry* V (New Delhi 1961).

[466] As Yohanan Friedmann has shown, Sirhindi's writings stirred up controversy among Muslim religious circles in India and Arabia after he passed away, and it was not until the twentieth century that with the rise of Muslim nationalist feeling in India that his image as orthodox Sunni reformer was constructed and became widely accepted. Yohanan Friedmann, *Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi: An Outline of his Thought and a Study of His Image in the Eyes of Posterity*, Oxford India paperbacks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[467] Sirhindi wrote: "A thousand odd years after the death of the Prophet a time is coming in which *haqiqat-i muhammadi* [Reality of Muhammad] will ascend from its position and unite with the position of *haqiqat-i ka'bah* [Reality of Ka'ba]. At this time *haqiqat-i muhammadi* receives the name *haqiqat-i ahmadi* and becomes the Manifestation of the Essence of God (*mazhar-i dhat-i ahad jalla sultanuhu*). Both blessed names [Muhammad and Ahmad] unite with their meaning (*musmma'*). The former position of *haqiqat-i muhammadi* will remain vacant until 'Isa [Jesus] descends and enacts the *shari'ah* of Muhammad. At that time *haqiqat-i 'isawi* [Reality of Jesus] will ascend from its position and establish itself in the position of *haqiqat-i muhammadi* that had remained vacant." Sirhindi's *Mabda' o Ma'ad* quoted in Ibid., 15.

[468] Friedman is cautious in his interpretation of Sirhindi's millennial claims, merely noting that Sirhindi's views had an "unorthodox flavor" and that the Sufi leader knew of the "explosive nature of his ideas." Friedman's cautiousness may be due to the fact that Sirhindi did not explicitly identify himself in his letters

and only hinted at the possibility. He stated that with the millennial transformation of the

Prophet into a purely spiritual being, Muslims were in need of a new spiritual mediator.

This person – the millennial Renewer – would reestablish its link with divinity for the

next thousand years, the final historical era before the end of time. Sirhindi made his bid

for the millennium, dangerous and heretical as it was, in a language that was ambiguous

and esoteric.[469] One could argue that much like the use of the divinatory science of *jafr* in

Akbar's case, Sirhindi's link with the millennium also was cast using esoteric and

mystical properties of the letters of his name.

As the examples of Sirhindi and Akbar show, "strange" knowledges that had been

so central to Humayun's sacred claims were critical for all pursuers of the millennium

whether saint or heretic, Sufi or king. Indeed, later Naqshbandi hagiographies of Sirhindi

explicitly broke down the distinction between mysticism and monarchy in describing his

sovereign status. For example, one popular text related the following apocryphal story of

how Sirhindi came to recruit Akbar's son and successor, the emperor Jahangir, as his

disciple: At first Jahangir had been advised by his powerful minister Asaf Khan to deal

severely with Sirhindi because the Naqshbandi Sufi had a hundred thousand followers

willing to fight for his cause. If Jahangir was not careful, the minister had warned the

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with the millennial Renewer. Nevertheless, given Sirhindi's many hints in his writings at his great but
hidden spiritual status and his later reputation as the millennial Renewer, Friedmann is "tempted to ponder
whether the sentence 'Muhammad came to be Ahmad' (*muhammad ahmad shud*) and the millennial
emergence of the new *haqiqat-i ahmadi* are only a reference to one of Muhammad's names appearing in
the Quran, or are also intended to hint at Ahmad Sirhindi's first name." Ibid., 31.
[469] In one of his letters Sirhindi predicted the mahdi's emergence in the year 1100 Hijri, some seventy years
into the future (discussed in chapter 5, note 678). By doing so, he seemed to deny that he was the mahdi.
Nevertheless, by delaying the mahdi's manifestation to the century after the Islamic millennium, he left
open the possibility that someone else would inaugurate the second Islamic millennium. In this regards, it is
worth noting that Sirhindi placed himself high in Islam's mystical hierarchy by claiming to be the *qayyum*.
Sirhindi asserted that the *qayyum* was a saintly being of a higher status than even the *qutb* (*axis mundi*) and
controlled the rotation of the earth. See, Schimmel and Waghmar, *The Empire of the Great Mughals*, 133.
Also, for later Naqshbandi explanations of the concept of *qayyum*, see Annemarie Schimmel, *Pain and
Grace: A Study of Two Mystical Writers of Eighteenth-Century Muslim India* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976), 34.

emperor, he would face an armed Sufi uprising much like that of Shah Isma'il and his

Qizilbash militant-devotees, which had led to the rise of Safavid power in Iran. Jahangir

followed his minister's advice and had Sirhindi imprisoned. However, soon faced with a

massive rebellion and a debilitating disease, he saw the errors of his ways and released

Sirhindi from prison. Sirhindi cured Jahangir's illness and made the emperor his disciple.

In doing so, this legendary narrative implied, Sirhindi saved Islam and Jahangir his

empire.[470] In short, the messianic path to sovereignty was a well-known and well-trodden

one, used by warrior saints and kings in real life as well as in imaginative narratives of

their lives and deeds.

Moreover, this way of making a sovereign claim was based on a highly embodied

notion of sacrality.[471] This can be seen in the way both Akbar and Sirhindi were cast in

the cosmological mold of a millennial "being." In other words, their claim to inaugurate a

new era of history pivoted not on a new "doctrine" or interpretation of "law" but on

taking the place – bodily and spiritually – of a sacred entity that had existed in the

previous era or cycle of time.[472] Such a religious imagination is also evident in the case

of another "messiah," the founder of the Mahdavi movement mentioned in the previous

chapter, Sayyid Muhammad of Jawnpur (d. 1505), whose followers were active in

Gujarat in Akbar's time and were also invited to the Mughal court for religious

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[470] The source is *Rauzat al-Qayyumiyya* by Kamal al-Din Muhammad Ihsan, quoted and discussed in Rizvi, *Muslim Revivalist Movements*, 293 and passim. It is worth noting that this tale may be considered apocryphal by modern historians but to contemporary admirers of Sirhindi in South Asia, it is historical fact.

[471] See chapter 2 for an argument that there was a "corporeal" religious imagination at work in claims like these. Also refer to note 287

[472] For example, in his discussion of Sirhindi's views on Islamic jurisprudence, Friedmann notes that "Discussion of juridical problems are extremely rare in the *Maktubat* and in the other works by Sirhindi. It is noteworthy that while Sirhindi never wearies of describing the minutest details of Sufi experience, his exhortations to comply with the *shari'ah* remain general to an extreme. We rarely find in the *Maktubat* a warning against a concrete infraction of Islamic law common in Sirhindi's time or a reference to a specific legal question." Friedmann, *Sirhindi*, 42.

discussions.[473] A Chishti Sufi and learned scholar of Islam, Sayyid Muhammad had declared himself the expected *mahdi* in the year 1495. Although, he had declared his interpretation of Islam as superseding and annulling the existing schools of Islamic jurisprudence – making, in effect, everyone outside of the Mahdavi fold to be non-Muslim –, his messianic claim had also been based on a corporeal omen: the prophetic tradition (*hadith*) that the body of Prophet Muhammad will no longer remain in its earthly abode after a thousand years, and thus necessitate the rise of the *mahdi*.[474] No wonder that Sirhindi was accused by his contemporaries of claiming prophetic status and making heretical assertions like those of the Mahdi of Jawnpur.[475]

There was no shortage, in other words, of sacred beings in a thaumaturgical competition for the millennium. Thus, when Badayuni accused Akbar of trying to mimic the messianic claims of the Safavid Shah Isma'il, this was not merely a rhetorical reference to a distant historical figure.[476] Indeed, one of the Safavid founder's descendents was present at the Mughal court to provide powerful evidence of his sacral lineage. This was Shaykh 'Arif-i Husayni, referred to respectfully as "Shah," whose miracles were famous across India. Even Badayuni narrated his spiritual feats (*khawariq*) with awe and admiration: Shaykh 'Arif could throw round pieces of paper into a burning fire and take out gold coins in their stead, distributing them to all present. He could walk out of locked rooms and transport himself across time and space. He was known to distribute summer fruits from distant lands in winter time and winter fruits in the

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[473] See notes 390 and 551.
[474] This tradition is discussed further below.
[475] Friedmann, *Sirhindi*, 89.
[476] See note 448 above for Badayuni's statement in which he accused Akbar of modeling himself after Shah Isma'il.

summer. Most importantly he was, as Badayuni put it mysteriously, a man of many

sacred claims (*sahib-i da'iyya ast*).[477]

One of these claims was that of being the messiah.[478] Intriguingly, Shaykh 'Arif

had the habit of going around with his face veiled and would not lift it even in the

company of high-ranking officials. The veiling of the face, as we have seen earlier in

accounts of Shah Isma'il and Humayun, was a mark of the awaited savior who had yet to

manifest his true nature.[479] Ali, it is also worth noting, was often described in epics and

depicted in painting with his face veiled.[480] Shaykh 'Arif took his veiling with the utmost

seriousness. Once, when Akbar's courtier Shaykh Abul Fath tried to pull of his veil,

Shaykh 'Arif became incensed and cursed the transgressor. Then he revealed his face but

warned Shaykh Abul Fath that he would have to pay the price in a fortnight. Shaykh Abul

Fath, Badayuni reported, died of severe diarrhea exactly fifteen days later. It is worth

noting, then, Badayuni's description of the way Akbar expressed his envy for Shaykh

'Arif's sacred status: one day the emperor exclaimed to the descendent of Shah Isma'il,

"Shah, either become like me, or make me like yourself" (*shah ya khud chun ma shavid

ya ma ra chun khud sazid*).[481]

Such embodied notions of sacrality, in which one sacred being replaced another in

space and across cycles of time, was also at work in the narrative of Akbar's birth in his

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[477] Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, 59-61; Bada'uni, *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh (translation)*, 98-101.
[478] As the translator notes, "This vague statement may mean that the Shaikh was following the fashion of the time and setting up as Mahdi." Bada'uni, *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh (translation)*, 99, n. 3. Generally, *sahib-i da'iyya* means "master of claims" or "possessor of desires." It is based on the word *da'wat*, meaning a claim, invitation, or invocation. It was used to describe a number of spiritual and political acts all of which we have seen in previous chapters: a political claim of territory and sovereignty (Chinggis Khan), a spiritual claim and attempt to recruit disciples or devotees to one's cause (the Safavids), and, last but not least, an act of calling upon planetary spirits and capturing *jinns* to do one's bidding (the Shattaris).
[479] For reports on Shah Isma'il's act of veiling his face, see note 282. For similar accounts of Humayun, see note 395
[480] See note 281.
[481] Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, 61; Bada'uni, *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh (translation)*, 101.

chronicle, the Akbarnama (Book of Akbar). The chronicle asserted that the emperor had

been born – or more precisely, reborn – to inaugurate the millennium. It maintained that

the divine light that had impregnated the Mongol princess Alanquva "in the same way as

did her Majesty (*Hazrat*) Miryam (Mary) the daughter of 'Imran (Amram)" found its

perfection in Akbar after being reincarnated through the ages in different sovereign

bodies. This divine light:

> which took shape, without human instrumentality (*wasila-yi bashari*) or a father's
> loins (*rabita-yi sulbi*), in the pure womb of her Majesty Alanqua, after having, in
> order to arrive at perfection (*istikmal*), occupied during several ages the holy
> bodily wrappings of other holy manifestations (*malabis-i qudsi-yi mazahir-i
> digaran*), is manifesting itself at the present day, in the pure entity of this unique
> God-knower and God-worshipper (Akbar).

> > How many ages (*zaman*) have passed away!
> > How many planetary conjunctions (*qiran*) occurred,
> > That this happy star might come forth from heaven! [482]

In preparation for this holy birth, the royal chronicle portrayed Akbar's father

Humayun as bequeathing a rich legacy of omens and sacred premonitions to his heir. It

was Humayun who first recognized that his son's astrological status was greater than that

of Timur Lord of Conjunction.[483] In addition, the chronicle related the royal father's

dreams, miraculous events surrounding the expectant mother (given the honorific title of

Maryam Makani or "Mary's Surrogate"), and the infant Akbar's ability to speak Jesus-

like in the cradle.[484] Since much of this material was compiled in the mature years of

Akbar's reign, it can be argued that it was invented to create a hagiographical picture of

the saint king's birth. What we do know for certain is that the chronicle celebrated

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[482] I have modified the translation slightly from Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak and Beveridge, *Akbar Nama
(translation)*, 1-2: 45. Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak and Ghulam Riza Tabatabai'i Majd, *Akbarnamah: Tarikh-i
Gurakaniyan-i Hindi*, 2 ed. (Tehran: Mu'assasah-'i Mutala'at va Tahqiat-i Farhangi (Pizhuhishgah), 1372
[1993 or 1994]), 1: 26.
[483] See note 447.
[484] The long description of the miracles surrounding Akbar's birth and infancy is given in Abu al-Fazl ibn
Mubarak and Beveridge, *Akbar Nama (translation)*, 1-2: 518-525.

Humayun's knowledge of the occult, giving weight to his foresights regarding his heir's future greatness. In this vein, Humayun's cosmological "inventions" of kingship were listed with pride.

Notably, however, Humayun's crown (*taj*) received only brief mention, and only as a novel artifact from his days as a prince and not as a symbol of sovereignty. Akbar's chronicle gave an earlier date for the invention of Humayun's crown than that given by the contemporary writings of Khwandamir. [485] Furthermore, it did not describe how Humayun had adorned his entourage with the crown, and how he had lost it at the hands of the Safavid Shah Tahmasb who had him put on his head, instead, the turban of the Safavid disciple.[486] Akbar had certainly known about the *taj*, and in fact had worn it himself as a boy. This is evident from one of the few extant miniature paintings from Humayun's reign in which the young Akbar stands by his father, both wearing the *taj*.[487] Rather than highlight the ignoble end of Humayun's royal cult and its iconic headgear, the chronicle's focus remained, instead, on Akbar's program of imperial discipleship. What it did not hide was that this royal endeavor unveiled at the turn of the Islamic millennium had also run into trouble. It is to this millennial inauguration of Akbar's sacred cult as described in the royal chronicle that the next section turns.

The Akbarnama: The Troubled Unveiling of the Saint King

The official chronicle of Akbar's reign was commissioned in 1589 and completed in 1598, the fifth and final decade of Akbar's reign (1556-1605). By this time, the

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[485] The taj was described in the Akbarnama as something that Humayun had designed in Badakhshan as a prince and shown to his father Babur in India, who was bemused. Ibid., 1-2: 524.
[486] In the Akbarnama, Humayun's exile in Iran at the court of Shah Tahmasb was depicted as a meeting of two great sovereigns. Ibid., 1-2: 343-372.
[487] Canby, *Humayun's Garden Party*, 20.

millennium and the accompanying controversy (1579-1582) had passed. The chronicle contained a detailed and reflective account of the entire episode. In general, the Akbarnama was a massive effort of remembering, commemorating, and synthesizing history, which had taken an army of collaborators across the realm to complete.[488] The emperor had been personally involved in the project, helping to resolve conflicting historical reports and even selecting which episodes to depict in painting. By one estimate, the chief author Abul Fazl produced five drafts before he was satisfied with the outcome.[489] From what survives of the original manuscript presented to the emperor in two parts in 1596 and 1598, it can be seen that some written pages accompanying the paintings were pasted over existing pages of writing, suggesting a reordering of images and text even in the final version. This strenuous and deliberate collective endeavor was not, even though it may appear at first glance, merely or even primarily an exercise in public relations or imperial propaganda. Rather, it is better understood as an effort at making whole the meaning of a long and turbulent life that not only saw the creation of a vast empire of unprecedented sophistication, power, and wealth but also experienced in the process an inordinate amount of violence, strife, and criticism. This introspectiveness and self-reflexivity of the royal chronicle has to be kept in mind as we read a long section in it that referred to the troubled unveiling of Akbar's sacred cult.[490]

The Akbarnama related how in 1579 an imperial decree was issued, signed by eminent scholars of Islam, in which Akbar was declared the Imam and Mujtahid of the

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[488] For a detailed account of the process by which the first imperial manuscript for the Akbarnama was put together, see Susan Stronge, *Painting for the Mughal Emperor: The Art of the Book, 1560-1660* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 2002), 36-57.

[489] Ibid., 42.

[490] Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak and Beveridge, *Akbar Nama (translation)*, 3:313-321.

Age.[491] These were unusual titles for a monarch, especially the technical category of

mujtahid, which implied an authority to decide matters of religious doctrine. This term

was normally reserved for an eminent scholar of Islamic jurisprudence qualified to use

reasoned judgment or *ijtihad* to resolve thorny questions of law that had no obvious

solution in scripture or legal precedent.[492] What made the use of this label in Akbar's

case especially baffling was the well-known fact that the emperor was unable to read and

write.[493] What may have puzzled others was, however, a mark of the emperor's holiness

according to the chronicle. Indeed, it quoted Akbar as declaring illiteracy as a trait of the

prophets: "The prophets were all illiterate. Believers should therefore retain one of their

sons in that condition." [494]

Thus, the Akbarnama presented a spirited defense of Akbar's ability as chief

Mujtahid. It asserted that holding this status did not require the learning of "paper-

worshipping scholiasts" mired in the blind imitation of tradition (*taqlid*) handed down in

worthless texts; rather, it required someone with innate intelligence and supreme spiritual

[491] For a discussion of this decree, called the *mahzar*, which is not given in official Mughal sources but is found in the secret chronicle of Badayuni, see Nizami, *Akbar & Religion*, 127-129.

[492] For a review of the juridical concept of *ijtihad*, its changing meaning over time, and the role of a *mujtahid* in the Islamic legal tradition, see Wael B. Hallaq, "'Ifta' and Ijithad in Sunni Legal Theory: A Developmental Account," in *Islamic Legal Interpretation: Muftis and Their Fatwas*, ed. Muhammad Khalid Masud, Brinkley Morris Messick, and David Stephan Powers (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2005). To claim the status of a mujtahid was a particularly daring thing to do for Akbar. The last time a Muslim sovereign had tried to usurp such authority in matters of Islamic jurisprudence was in the infamous case of Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun (r. 813-833) in Baghdad, who had launched the so-called inquisition (*mihna*) in an attempt to coerce leading Muslim jurists to recognize him as the ultimate authority in matters of Islamic doctrine and law. For a discussion of the literature on this topic see Michael Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography: The Heirs of the Prophets in the Age of al-Ma'mun* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Akbar's court scholar, Badayuni, explicitly compared Akbar to Ma'mun when he observed that "the emperor [Akbar] examined people about the creation of the Qur'an." This metaphysical question of whether the Quran was eternal or created in time had been central to Ma'mun's "inquisition." See Badayuni quoted in Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak and others, *A'in-i Akbari (translation)*, 173.

[493] It has been suggested that Akbar had some form of dyslexia, making him unsuitable for the types of literary accomplishments that his predecessors and successors were known for. Richards, *Mughal Empire*, 35.

[494] Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak and others, *A'in-i Akbari (translation)*, 1147. For a discussion of Akbar's "illiteracy" see Vincent Arthur Smith, *Akbar the Great Mogul, 1542-1605*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1919), 41, 337-338.

potential – pointing, in effect, towards the embodied nature of the emperor's sacrality.[495]

Indeed, according to the chronicle, the emperor had only a year ago experienced an episode of divine rapture (*jazaba*) while hunting, which was witnessed publicly by all present.[496] Thus, the rank of a Mujtahid, the chronicle asserted, was surely lower than that of a holy soul (*nafs-i qudsi*).[497] Recognizing Akbar as the embodiment of spirituality and saintliness, many of the wise and learned of the time approached him to come forth and play his due role in matters of religion and end the "confusion of religions and creeds."[498] Akbar at first declined because he had chosen to throw a "veil over his world-illuminating spiritual beauty."[499] However, he changed his mind when he realized that even in his role as Mujtahid – a position lower than that of the true leader of the spiritual world – he would still be able to remain behind a veil and a screen:

> When their ideas were brought to the sacred hearing, the world's lord [Akbar] for a while, from his love for a veil, did not accept the proposal, and the enlightened body had to have recourse to entreaty. Inasmuch as the granting of desires forms a part of the laudable character of that circumspect Seer (Akbar) and his profession is that of a Healer, it flashed upon the vision-portico of the farsighted one, the understander of beginnings, the attainer of ends, that to come forth from the position of commander-in-chief of the spiritual world to this office and to apply his mind to it, was, in reality, an adorning of the veil and a choosing of a screen.[500]

The chronicle emphasized the emperor's hesitancy to make manifest his full spiritual potential. It was only out of a strong sense of duty to the realm he accepted the role of Mujtahid. In doing so, Akbar made it his goal, according to the chronicle, to end the unquestioned following of tradition (*taqlid*) which had only caused dissension and

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[495] Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak and Beveridge, *Akbar Nama (translation)*, 3: 313.
[496] This spiritual experience of Akbar occurred in 1578, the year before the "Mujtahid" proclamation. Ibid., 3: 279.
[497] Ibid., 3: 315.
[498] Ibid., 3: 316.
[499] Ibid., 3: 313.
[500] Ibid., 3: 316.

confusion and in its place offer reasoned judgment (*ijtihad*). In accordance with his new responsibilities as both religious and temporal leader, the emperor decided to personally deliver a Friday sermon (*khutba*) at the royal mosque.

The emperor's decision to partially unveil his saintly self on the pulpit, however, caused some unexpected problems. According to the chronicle, lies and calumnies began to spread through the realm.[501] The accusations against Akbar were many and contradictory. Some accused him of claiming to be divine. This charge arose because, the chronicle suggested, there were people at court who were inclined towards treating their spiritual guide as divine (*ghulat*); it was they who spoke of Akbar as the Manifestation of Truth (*mazhar-i haqq*).[502] The emperor's only fault in the matter was that he had tolerated these groups and their beliefs according to his policy of "universal peace" (*sulh-i kull*).[503] Similarly, the chronicle dismissed another accusation that Akbar was claiming to be a prophet of God. This misunderstanding occurred because the emperor had introduced new laws and publicly pointed out discrepancies in some received Islamic traditions. In the same vein, Akbar's decision to receive "all classes of mankind with

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[501] Notably, Badayuni, the emperor's courtier and critic whose list of charges against Akbar will be discussed later, compared this act of combining both temporal and spiritual authority in one's person to that of the Prophet Muhammad and Timur Sahib Qiran: "As [Akbar] had heard that the prophet, his lawful successors, and some of the most powerful kings, as Amir Timur Sahibqiran, and Mirza Ulugh Beg-i Gurgan, and several others, had themselves read the *Khutbah* (the Friday prayer), he resolved to do the same, apparently in order to imitate their example, but in reality to appear in public as the Mujtahid of the age." Badayuni quoted in a translator's note in Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak and others, *A'in-i Akbari (translation)*, 171.

[502] The chronicle does not either give the names of these men or their group identity but simply refers to them as "of the school of Nosair," meaning that they had a tendency toward *ghulat* (exaggeration) since the Nosairis were known as a group that revered Ali as divine. The chronicle also compares the spiritual enthusiasm of these men to that of Hallaj (Husain ibn Mansur) who is well-known for having made the claim that "I am Truth" (*ana al-haqq*). See Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak and Beveridge, *Akbar Nama (translation)*, 3: 319, nn. 2, 3.

[503] *Sulh-i kull*, a unique expression used in the Akbarnama to indicate an accommodative attitude toward all religious traditions, is commonly translated idiomatically as "peace with all" but a literal and more appropriate translation would be "total peace" or "universal peace" where *kull* means total or universal as opposed to *juzw* meaning component or particular. Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, "Dimensions of *Sulh-i kul* (Universal Peace) in Akbar's Reign and the Sufi Theory of Perfect Man," in *Akbar and His Age*, ed. Iqtidar Alam Khan (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 1999).

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affection" and his search "for evidence in religious matters from the sages of every religion and the ascetics of all faiths" was misconstrued by some as his stance against Islam (*din-i Ahmadi*). This particular accusation, the chronicle maintained, came from those who had been unable to defend the truth of their doctrines in open debate with the "Christian philosophers."

None of these accusations were valid, the chronicle asserted. In fact, the emperor was surprised when told that he was accused of claiming to be divine, and that he was against Islam. How could this be the case, the chronicle implored, when Akbar had always cared for the Prophet's family and raised many Sayyids to high office, even waiving the requirement for them to prostrate before him. But the accusations did not stop here. He was accused by Sunnis of being a Shi'a. This was because he had shown favor to Persians, many of whom belonged to the latter sect. The chronicle noted the absurdity of this complaint in light of the fact that the emperor had also promoted Sunni Turks. But the bigotry of his enemies knew no bounds. Thus, when the emperor increased the rank of the Hindus, he was accused of adopting the religion of the Brahmans. In the end, the chronicle sums up three reasons for these "failed" accusations:

> First—The sages of different religions assembled at court, and as every religion has some good in it, each received some praise. From a spirit of justice, the badness of any sect could not weave a veil over its merits.
>
> Second—The season of "Peace with all" (s*ulh-i kull*) was honoured at the court of the Caliphate [i.e., Akbar's court], and various tribes of mankind of various natures obtained spiritual and material success.
>
> Third—The evil nature and crooked ways of the base ones of the age.[504]

In effect, the chronicle depicted Akbar as hurt at being misunderstood for taking a stance that was reasonable, equitable, and practical: patronize all classes of men who

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[504] Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak and Beveridge, *Akbar Nama (translation)*, 3: 321.

were loyal to the empire; inquire about the truth of all the sacred traditions of the world; and encourage debate to resolve matters of doctrinal difference among them. For all his efforts, however, he was branded variously as apostate, heretic, schismatic, and an enemy of Islam. He was, the chronicle maintained, none of the above. He was simply the supreme spiritual being of the age, the *peshwa* of the spiritual world who had been beseeched by many of his subjects to become their earthly guide as well as spiritual master.

Setting aside for the moment the question of the truth value of this apologia, it is worth noting that even two decades after the controversial edict of 1579, the emperor did not retreat from his position as supreme spiritual guide of the realm. His authority in matters of Islam was held to be greater than that of any scholar. This stance was propounded even more clearly in the third volume of the chronicle which laid out the "institutes" or "regulations" of Akbar's imperial administration. It contained "regulations for providing guidance" (*a'in-i rahnamuni*), placed right after "regulations for the muster of people" (*a'in-i didan-i mardum*), which stated in unambiguous terms that Akbar was both the temporal and spiritual leader of the realm. It was so, the chronicle maintained, that men and women came to him from all walks of life and religious traditions to obtain guidance, blessing, and miraculous cures:

> Many sincere enquirers, from the mere light of his wisdom, or his holy breath, obtain a degree of awakening which other spiritual doctors could not produce by repeated fasting and prayers for forty days. Numbers of those who have renounced the world (*arbab-i tajrid*), as *Sanyasis*, *Jogis*, *Sevras*, *Qalandars*, *Hakims*, and *Sufis*, and groups upon groups (*guruha guruh*) of such as follow worldly pursuits, as soldiers, tradespeople, mechanics, and husbandmen, have daily their eyes opened to insight, or have the light of their knowledge increased. Turk and Persian, young and old, friends and strangers, the far and the near, look upon offering a vow to His Majesty as the means of solving all their difficulties, and bend down in worship on obtaining their desire. Others again, from the

distance of their homes, or to avoid the crowds gathering at Court, offer their vows in secret, and pass their lives in grateful praises. But when His Majesty leaves Court, in order to settle the affairs of a province, to conquer a kingdom, or to enjoy the pleasures of the chase, there is not a hamlet, a town, or a city, that does not send forth crowds of men and women with vow-offerings in their hands, and prayers on their lips, touching the ground with their foreheads, praising the efficacy of their vows, or proclaiming the accounts of the spiritual assistance received. Other multitudes ask for lasting bliss, for an upright heart, for advice how best to act, for strength of the body, for enlightenment, for the birth of a son, the reunion of friends, a long life, increase of wealth, elevation in rank, and many other things. His Majesty, who knows what is really good, gives satisfactory answers to everyone, and applies remedies to their religious perplexities. Not a day passes but people bring cups of water to him, beseeching him to breathe upon it. He who reads the letters of the divine orders in the book of fate, on seeing the tidings of hope, takes the water with his blessed hands, places it in the rays of the world-illuminating sun, and fulfils the desire of the suppliant. Many sick people of broken hopes, whose diseases the most eminent physicians pronounced incurable, have been restored to health by this divine talisman (*ilahi tilism*).[505]

The chronicle maintained that it was this popular and widespread recognition of Akbar's spiritual status, and the efficacy of his royal touch, which compelled him, despite his hesitation ("why should I claim to guide men, before I myself am guided?"), to enroll disciples. People of all classes became the emperor's followers in droves. Accordingly, a proper ceremony was organized to bestow imperial discipleship on those whom the emperor saw fit. In this ritual, a novice supplicant took an oath and was awarded a special seal (*shast*) that had inscribed on it that "greatest of names" (*ism-i a'zam*) and "holiest of talismans" (*tilism-i aqdas*) "Allah Akbar." This iconic utterance, *Allah Akbar*, served as the key emblem for the emperor's disciples, stamped on their seal rings as well as used by them to greet each other. This greeting was the first item listing in the "regulations for disciples" outlined out in the Institutes of Akbar (see Table 4-1).

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[505] I have modified the translation somewhat from Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak and others, *A'in-i Akbari (translation)*, 159. For the Persian original, see Abu al-Fazl 'Allami and Sir Sayyid Ahmad, *A'in-i Akbari* (Aligarh: Sir Sayyid Academy, Aligarh Muslim University, 2005), 146-147.

Table 4-1: Recommendations for the Members of Akbar's Imperial Order of Disciples

Regulations for Disciples (*A'in-i iradat guzinan*)[506]
1. The members…, on seeing each other, observe the following custom. One says, "*Allahu Akbar;*" and the other responds, "*Jalla Jalaluhu.*" The motive of His Majesty, in laying down this mode of salutation, is to remind men to think of the origin of their existence, and to keep the Deity in fresh, lively, and grateful remembrance.
2. It is also ordered by His Majesty that, instead of the dinner usually given in remembrance of a man after his death, each member should prepare a dinner during his lifetime, and thus gather provisions for his last journey.
3. Each member is to give a party on the anniversary of his birth-day, and arrange a sumptuous feast. He is to bestow alms, and thus prepare provisions for the long journey.
4. His Majesty has also ordered that members should endeavour to abstain from eating flesh. They may allow others to eat flesh, without touching it themselves; but during the month of their birth they are not even to approach meat. Nor shall members go near anything that they have them-selves slain; nor eat of it. Neither shall they make use of the same vessels with butchers, fishers, and birdcatchers.
5. Members should not cohabit with pregnant, old, and barren women; nor with girls under the age of puberty.

The disciples were advised to salute each other in the following manner: "One says, '*Allahu Akbar*', and the other responds, '*Jalla Jallaluhu*'." Both these Arabic salutations were, on the surface, in praise of Allah but they also contained the emperor's name (Jalal al-din Akbar) within them. Thus, while their surface meaning was "God is Great/May His Glory be ever Glorious," their inner or hidden meaning could be, as the emperor's critics pointed out, a declaration of the emperor's divinity: "Akbar is God/May His Glory be ever Glorious."

It is worth noting that the regulations for disciples were set forth more as recommendations rather than strictures, and consisted of bodily practices rather than doctrines. Moreover, a common thread connecting these practices seems to be the notion

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[506] Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak and others, *A'in-i Akbari (translation)*, 160. For the Persian, see Abu al-Fazl 'Allami and Ahmad, *A'in-i Akbari*, 148.

of rebirth or reincarnation, i.e., the transmigration of the soul. This is indicated by the regulations' emphasis on celebrating moments of birth and death, abstaining from meat during these celebrations, and avoiding men who had taken life and women who were unable to give life. All of these ritual acts and taboos seem to be based on a symbolic scheme designed to assist the recycling of the soul. This metaphysical concept was an important component not only of Indic religious traditions but also of the radical mystical traditions of Islam known as *ghulat*.[507]

This, then, was the official description and justification of Akbar's sacred status and his devotional cult. It openly acknowledged his patronage of radical and antinomian Sufi groups who venerated him as divine; his support for the arguments of the Jesuit priests against their Muslim adversaries; his impatience with traditional Islamic law; his need to recruit and patronize men from all creeds and castes across India, Iran, and Transoxania; and, finally, his thinly-veiled performance as the saintly guide and spiritual master of all humanity. Yet, despite all this, the chronicle maintained that Akbar had not turned away from Islam; that he was neither prophet nor deity. Taken together, these conflicting assertions seemed to say that Akbar was not against Islam or any other religious tradition but rather, as the most sacred sovereign on earth, he was simply above them all.

In official terms, Akbar's cultic scheme was not presented as a "religion" meant to replace Islam. It did not have a centered theology or coherent doctrine. Yet, it was founded upon the insistence that Akbar was the saint of the age. And this was an

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[507] The seventeenth century encyclopedia on "comparative religions" written in Mughal India by a Zoroastrian scholar, the *Dabistan-i Mazahib* (School of Religions), also noted that many such practices were followed by certain Ghulat Alid sects. See Muhsin Fani, *Dabistan-i Mazahib*, ed. Kaykhusraw Isfandiyar, 2 vols. (Tihran: Kitabkhanah-i Tahuri, 1362 (1983)), 1: 266-267. For *ghulat*, see notes 93, 154, and 265 above.

insistence coupled with a disdain for established textual traditions and scholasticism. One gets the sense that Akbar's sense of his own sacrality was highly imagistic, acted out with the help of visible and vocalized symbols (seals, talismans, and utterances) and tactile practices (breathing upon water, placing water in the sun, avoiding meat and barren women). [508] This way of engaging the sacred was consistent with saintly norms of comportment at the time. It also seemed particular suitable for an emperor who was a supremely capable organizer of men and materials but did so without recourse to reading and writing.

Akbar's "illiteracy," which had been given a prophetic cast in his lifetime, has already been mentioned. [509] Moreover, the emperor was known to have loved working with his hands, making things and inventing mechanical devices. He also possessed a prodigious memory, accurately remembering "the contents of books read to him, the details of departmental business, and even names of hundreds of individual birds, horses, and elephants." [510] All this evidence supports the notion that Akbar was uncomfortable with abstract thought but was a master of its concrete variety. The vast collection of books in his library, the large number and variety of texts produced at his court, and his alleged interest in religious "doctrines" belie the fact that Akbar was a *bricoleur extraordinaire*. [511] He was a dexterous intellectual handyman, imbibing and manipulating knowledge in a form that could be visualized, touched, embodied, and performed. Thus, Akbar's sense of the sacred was closer to that of the antinomian mystic and local "holy

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[508] For a discussion of an "imagistic" mode of religiosity and its importance in transmission of knowledge and social memory, see Harvey Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity: A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004).
[509] See note 493.
[510] Smith, *Akbar*, 337.
[511] For the concept of *bricolage* as it applies to a specific mode of thought and practice see the chapter on "The Science of the Concrete" in Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 1-34. Also see note 137.

man"[512] than to the scholastic theologian and ordained cleric. Indeed, this was what the

Jesuit priests who had come to convert him to Christianity discovered to their dismay.

The Jesuits' Ordeal at Akbar's Court

In 1579, the year Akbar was proclaimed the Mujtahid of the Age, the Chief

Fathers of the Order of St. Paul in Goa received a royal edict requesting them to send

Christian priests to his court:

> I…ask you to send me two learned priests, who should bring with them the
> principal books of the law and the Gospel, so that I may learn the Law and what is
> most perfect in it…And when I shall know about the Law and its perfection as I
> desire, they may go whenever they like.[513]

The message caused quite a stir among the Portuguese. The prospect of bringing

such a great ruler into the folds of Christianity was certainly an exciting one for the

devout Jesuits.[514] Jesuit missions aimed at converting monarchs and notables in the

Indian subcontinent had neither been uncommon nor unsuccessful. The kings of Maldives

and Ceylon – even a relation of the king of Bijapur – had been fruitfully converted. The

Portuguese Viceroy, however, was concerned about the missionaries being held as

political hostages by the Mughals.[515] However, the decision was left to the bishops and

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[512] See the discussion on the political and social role of "holy men" in chapter 3.

[513] John Correia-Afonso, *Letters from the Mughal Court: The First Jesuit Mission to Akbar, 1580-1583* (Bombay: Published for the Heras Institute of Indian History and Culture by Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, Anand, 1980), 1. In spite of being written with an obvious partiality, the Jesuit letters are considered to have a high historiographical value. See John Correia-Afonso, *Jesuit Letters and Indian History, 1542-1773*, 2d ed. (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1969), 71-99.

[514] Nizami, *Akbar & Religion*, 27.

[515] In the sixteenth century the Portuguese had established, chiefly through the means of armed naval aggression, a monopoly on the Indian Ocean and the lucrative spice-trade across it. While Akbar ruled a vast land empire ranging from Kabul in the northwest to Bengal in the east and the Deccan in the south, the Portuguese controlled the Indian Ocean through strategic coastal fortresses and settlements in Goa (western India), Malacca (Indonesia), and Hormuz (an island in the Persian Gulf). Although Akbar never openly challenged the Portuguese domination of the seas, he was an extremely powerful monarch whose interests frequently overlapped with those of the Portuguese and whose politics they could not ignore. For the

religious fervor overcame political cautiousness. It was decided that three volunteers

would be sent to the Mughal court in Fatehpur Sikri.

The three priests of the first Jesuit mission arrived at the Mughal court in

February 1580.[516] Anthony Monserrate, forty three years old, was considered the most

mature and wise. Francis Henriquez, a couple of years younger than Monserrate, was of

Persian descent – he had been converted to Christianity as a child in the Portuguese

stronghold of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf – and was meant to serve as translator. Rudolf

Acquaviva, only twenty nine years old, was of high social standing and the most ascetic

of the three. [517] From the Jesuits' own accounts, Akbar treated them with great respect

and trust.[518] He had them tutor his son.[519] He visited their chapel, paid respect to the

Gospel and even prayed in their manner.[520] The Jesuits were initially so surprised at their

warm reception and Akbar's hands-on approach to Christianity that they felt that the

emperor, in his search for the one true faith, was more inclined towards their faith than

any other.[521] Thus, when he asked them to participate in religious debate with his Muslim

scholars, they did so with the utmost zeal and intellectual vigor.

Portuguese experience in South Asia, see M. N. Pearson, *The Portuguese in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[516] Correia-Afonso, *Letters*, 8. There is a discrepancy in the dates of the mission between the Akbarnama and the Jesuit account. Most likely the Akbarnama dates are incorrect. See note on this issue in Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak and Beveridge, *Akbar Nama (translation)*, 296, n. 4.

[517] For a detailed description of the priests of the first mission see Edward Maclagan, *The Jesuits and the Great Mogul* (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1932), 25-26.

[518] The Jesuit letters are full of detail about how Akbar always treated the Jesuits and their traditions with the greatest of respect and made his sons and courtiers do the same. For example, see Acquaviva's letter in Correia-Afonso, *Letters*, 26-41.

[519] Ibid., 83-84.

[520] Ibid., 58. He also granted the Jesuits many public favors: he let them openly convert anyone to Christianity, allowed them to conduct a Christian funeral in public and even promised to build a charity hospital for the priests to run (he did not keep this particular pledge). Correia-Afonso, *Letters*, 63-70.

[521] They wrote to their superiors that the emperor had led them in private to believe that once convinced of the truth of Christianity, no worldly possession would stand between him and the true faith. Correia-Afonso, *Letters*, 64.

The Jesuits claimed to be better prepared than their Muslim rivals. They had brought with them a Greek translation of the Quran and quoted from it to support many of their arguments.[522] Acquaviva took the lead in proving, according to him, the validity of the Christian scriptures and the fallacy of the Quran:

> We [the Jesuits] demonstrate all that we say of Christ by the testimony of the prophets of the past, thus their own book itself says many good things of Christ, but of Mahomet [Muhammad] none of the prophets that have gone have spoken….And because we have here a translation of their book [the Quran], we cause them a lot of bother, and they cannot bear this, because the King tells them this many times to confound them.[523]

Since the Muslim scholars did not have a copy of the Gospel, they were at a disadvantage according to the Jesuits. Thus a suggestion emerged that the question of truth between Islam and Christianity should be settled, not by reasoned debate but via an ordeal by fire.[524] The sources are not in agreement, however, about who made this suggestion.

The Jesuits initially wrote in their letters that that the challenge came from their Muslim rivals and, although they were not afraid to die, they declined the ordeal because it was not the proper thing to do. Akbar's chronicle also recorded the incident, but gave an account that contradicted the Jesuit's story. In the Mughal version, it was Acquaviva, praised as being "singular for his understanding and ability," who threw out the challenge to his Muslim adversaries:

> The Padre quietly and with an air of conviction said "…! In fact, if this faction [Muslims] have such an opinion of our Book [the Gospel], and regard the Furqan (the Qoran) as the pure word of God, it is proper that a heaped fire be lighted. We shall take the Gospels in our hands, and the 'Ulama of that faith shall take their

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[522] Ibid., 43.
[523] Ibid., 57-58.
[524] Ibid., 44.

book, and then let us enter that testing-place of truth. The escape of any one will be a sign of his truthfulness."[525]

The royal chronicle also recorded that the ordeal never came to pass as the "liverless and black-hearted" Muslims refused to take up the challenge. This official Mughal version of events was contradicted by another eyewitness account written secretly by Badayuni, the emperor's critical courtier. Badayuni recorded that during the debates Akbar sent for a Muslim ascetic (*faqir*) with a reputation for spiritual enthusiasm. This man challenged the Christians to the ordeal, but it was the Jesuits' cowardice that prevented them from accepting the Muslim's challenge.[526] While all three accounts maintained that the rational debate between Islam and Christianity devolved into a challenge of ordeal by fire, they do not agree on who offered the challenge and who declined it. While the divergence among these narratives may be put down to spite, malice, and deceit, it may also be explained by another less obvious aspect of the episode: that the Mughal emperor himself had been the chief proponent of this deadly competition.

Akbar had apparently harbored a desire to witness the ordeal by fire since he had heard about this practice from a lone Jesuit priest a few years ago. Monserrate, writing much later in life, revealed that the Christian practice of trial by ordeal had been described to Akbar by Julian Pereira, a Jesuit priest who had come from Bengal in 1578.[527] The fact that Pereira, a man "of more virtue than learning,"[528] had proposed an

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[525] Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak and Beveridge, *Akbar Nama (translation)*, 3: 296.
[526] Badayuni wrote, "His Majesty sent Shaikh Jamal Bakhtyar to bring Shaikh Qutbuddin of Jalesar who, though a wicked man, pretended to be 'attracted by God.' When Qutbuddin came, the emperor brought him to a conference with some Christian priests, and rationalists, and some other great authorities of the age. After a discussion, the Shaikh exclaimed, 'Let us make a great fire, and in the presence of His Majesty I shall pass through it. And if any one else gets safely through, he proves by it the truth of his religion." The fire was made. The Shaikh pulled one of the Christian priests by the coat, and said to him, "Come on, in the name of God!" But none of the priests had the courage to go." Badayuni quoted in Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak and others, *A'in-i Akbari (translation)*, 175.
[527] Maclagan, *Jesuits and the Great Mogul*, 31.

ordeal by fire may explain why Akbar had hoped that the Jesuits of the first mission would hold a practical demonstration of the truth of their sacred tradition. However, when the Christians demurred, he told them that his main motive in proceeding with the ordeal was to convince a "Mullah," whom the emperor severely disliked, to end his own life "…in order not to arouse the people."[529] He wanted the Jesuits to go along with him in this scheme at least until the annoying man entered the fire. When the Jesuits still refused to cooperate, Akbar suggested other tactics. He proposed that they simply nod their heads at the appropriate time in public instead of verbally accepting the challenge. They still refused, so he suggested that they simply keep their silence and let him interpret it as a tacit agreement to go ahead with the ordeal. When the Jesuits remained unwilling to oblige, Akbar asked that they let him declare, in their absence, that they had accepted the challenge. The Jesuits, however, did not yield and Akbar abandoned the scheme. From the Jesuit's account it appears that it was Akbar who kept inciting them to accept the deadly challenge or at least pretend to until their adversaries entered the fire.

Even if the Jesuit account is discounted as biased – keeping in mind though that the other two Mughal sources were quite as embellished – there is no denying the fact that the ordeal by fire was proposed and encouraged at the House of Worship where the emperor set the rules of the game. Why would Akbar, the most powerful sovereign of his age, go to such lengths to manipulate invited guests and eminent courtiers, asking them to die such grotesque and spectacular deaths? Clues to an answer lie in the complex relationship revealed by the Jesuits' ordeal between violent spectacle and sacred authority at Akbar's court. The episode of the ordeal by fire unsettles both the spiritual-theological

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[528] Ibid., 24.
[529] Correia-Afonso, *Letters*, 52-53.

and political-ideological interpretations of Akbar's "religious policy." It also forces us to reevaluate the official proclamations from Akbar's court about promoting "universal peace" (*sulh-i kull*), ending the "confusion of caste and creed," and privileging reason (*ijtihad*) over tradition (*taqlid*). This is not to say that there was no positive intent behind Akbar's quest to encourage peace among his subjects and impose order upon his realm. Rather, it is to argue that any interpretation of the pronouncements made in the emperor's name must be grounded in the practices and attitudes that underlay his mode of religiosity and notions of sacrality. To make sense of these practices and attitudes, it is worth examining the emperor's activities in a broader social context.

Akbar's embrace of the ordeal by fire is consistent with his pastimes outside the House of Worship in the more public arenas of the life of the camp. Here too, we find evidence of the emperor's fondness for "hands on" knowledge and public spectacle. As Monserrate recorded in one of his letters from the Mughal court:

> The King is considered by some to be mad, because he is very dexterous in all jobs, because I have even seen him making ribbons like a lace-maker, and filing, sawing, working very hard; he is the whole day with deer, pigeons, cocks, birds, cages, dances, fights of wild elephants, wild buffaloes, fights among men, mock quarrels and claims, and other pastimes….I hold him to be astute and prudent, but a little excessive in the things I have related above.[530]

Indeed, the Jesuits had found Akbar's excessive fondness for *gladiatorii ludi* to be a roadblock to conversion. Akbar's zest for such spectacle is also recorded in the royal chronicle. It described an incident, lavishly illustrated in a magnificent two-folio painting, in which a deadly fight between two *Sanyasi* (Hindu warrior ascetic) groups broke out at an encampment and many men were killed.[531] Even though Akbar eventually tried to stop

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[530] Ibid., 81-82.
[531] For the warrior ascetic tradition in Hinduism, see William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

the fighting, the chronicle reported that he was "highly delighted with this sport."[532] Incidences such as these were not random occurrences in the public life of a sovereign. It was, as was suggested earlier, the sovereign's role to gaze and impose order upon the realm.[533] Moreover, seen from the pedestal of sacred kingship, this was a realm contiguous across culture and nature, court and camp, humans and animals. Both these aspects of the realm had to be brought under the sway of sovereign order. In this vein, it is worth examining how the regulations regarding man and beast were arranged in the imperial guidebook, the "Institutes of Akbar" (see Table 4-2).

Table 4-2: The Arrangement of Akbar's Imperial Regulations Concerning Court and Camp

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Regulations for Admission to Court
Regulations for Making Obeisance
Regulations for Standing and Sitting
Regulations for the Muster of Men
Regulations for Providing Guidance
Regulations for Disciples and Devotees
Regulations for the Muster of Elephants
Regulations for the Muster of Horses
Regulations for the Muster of Camels
Regulations for the Muster of Cattle
Regulations for the Muster of Mules
Regulations for the Maintenance of Animal Health
Regulations for Animal Fights and for Betting
Deer Fights
...

It was in the "Regulations for Providing Guidance" (*a'in-i rahnamuni*) that Akbar was declared the spiritual and temporal guide of all peoples regardless of caste, creed, or profession, who were encouraged to become his disciples and devotees. Immediately

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[532] Abul Fazl quoted in Nizami, *Akbar & Religion*, 103-104.
[533] See the section entitled, "The Spectacle of Empire and the Theatre of Sovereignty" in the chapter 3.

after this regulation came those for managing the affairs of elephants, horses, camels, cattle, mules and for arranging animal fights and public spectacles. These regulations were based on the detailed advice of the emperor who routinely inspected, classified, and cared for his animals – and also enjoyed seeing them fight.

We get a similar picture from the classificatory zeal that the emperor showed in organizing his court and camp. Much as Akbar had arranged his nobility in dozens of numbered ranks (*mansabs*) based on merit and service, he had also organized his animals into groups by weight and food consumed; there existed thirteen weight ranges for elephants and six for other animals.[534] Finally, it is worth noting that in this milieu slavery served as another bridge across the culture/nature divide. Akbar is reported to have exchanged groups of heretics and rebels (exiles from culture) for horses and colts (exiles from nature).[535] Many of these aspects of Akbar's sovereign persona are also discernible in the religious debates that went on late into the nights in the House of Worship where he alone served as spectator, referee and judge.[536] It may explain why he brought from afar learned men of all stripes, to compete with each other in an arena specially built for this purpose; and why he goaded them to enter the ultimate contest, to fight to the death to uphold the truth of their beliefs.

Monserrate, a "sadder and wiser man,"[537] writing many years after his return from Fatehpur Sikri, lamented that Akbar's invitation to the Jesuits may have been motivated by something other than divine inspiration:

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[534] Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak and others, *A'in-i Akbari (translation)*, 190.
[535] Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, 2:299; Bada'uni, *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh (translation)*, 2: 308-309.
[536] Akbar was not unique in overseeing religious competition which sometimes turned deadly. See the example of his Safavid contemporary Shah Abbas given below.
[537] Correia-Afonso, *Letters*, 126.

It may be suspected that Jalal-ud-din Akbar was moved to summon the Christian priests, not by any divine inspiration, but by a certain curiosity, and excessive eagerness to hear some new thing, or a design to devise something novel for the destruction of souls.[538]

His bitterness at the failure of the Jesuit mission notwithstanding, Monserrate may have been correct to suspect that the Jesuits were invited to the Mughal court not to inform the emperor about the finer points of Christian doctrine. They were there to embody and perform their faith for his pleasure.

But, importantly, the argument above is not meant to dismiss Akbar's religious endeavors as mere spectator sport. Rather, it is to take seriously the sensuous and performative way in which the king preferred to "know" both the sacred and the profane. Akbar was not simply a detached observer of the sacred theatre he had organized. He participated in it bodily. He not only prayed with the Jesuit priests, touched their holy relics, and meditated upon their sacred icons. He also performed similar participatory acts with other invitees to his court. For example, The Zoroastrian Parsis from Gujarat recorded that the emperor had put on their sacred chord and garb. The list of such reports is long: Akbar had memorized one thousand and one names of the Sun in Sanskrit; he had, like his father Humayun, matched the color of his clothes to the planet of the day; he had practiced rites of "fire worship" in Brahmanical and Zoroastrian style; he had modified his diet according to tantric principles to prolong his life; he had shaved his head in preparation for letting his soul escape in so it could enter the body of another great sovereign.[539]

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[538] Ibid.
[539] These reports about Akbar are found in multiple sources, often in eyewitness accounts of those who had seen the emperor participate in their religious rites. These are also well-documented and analyzed in Nizami, *Akbar & Religion*. Many of these accounts are corroborated by the critical, accusatory, and defamatory chronicle of Badayuni – discussed in detail below. Badayuni's accusations Akbar are quoted

These reports bring us back to an earlier point made about Akbar's embodied notions of sacrality. Unable to read or write, the emperor had a preference for concrete thought and tactile knowledge. His understanding of the world was constructed more via the medium of things and sensuous signs and less from abstract concepts and ideas.[540] Akin to a *bricoleur*, he assembled practical solutions from the materials at hand. These materials, as far as his subjects were concerned, were their religious identities expressed in acts and symbols, emblems and relics. Thus, Akbar's cult was built up from elements of the religious traditions he had experienced, arranged in new combinations and permutations. But these cultic elements must be understood primarily, not as doctrinal or ideological, but as somatic and talismanic. That is to say, they were not meant to be projected outward and imposed on his subjects. Rather, they were designed to be reflected inward and embodied by the saint king. Thus made sacred, he would become the ultimate holy man, venerated by his disciple-subjects throughout the realm, and so would end the "confusion of caste and creed." And the most importune and efficacious time for this ritual enactment was, as any good astrologer would have known, the millennium.

Badayuni's Critique: The Millennial "Madness" of King Akbar

The first Jesuit mission ended in 1582 but not before the Christian priests had seen the millennial celebrations at court. Acquaviva described them as follows:

> The court is much perplexed over the novelties introduced by the King each day, because among other things he seems to pay homage to creatures like the sun and the moon, and abstains from meat on Saturday night and entire Sunday.…In

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extensively in a translator's note in Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak and others, *A'in-i Akbari (translation)*, 160-187.
[540] See note 511.

addition…he instituted a new festival called the Merjan [The Persian feast of the autumnal equinox] and commanded that all captains should appear in festive attire, and there was music and dancing.[541]

The Jesuits were not the only ones to remark on the bewilderment caused by Akbar's actions. Akbar's courtier Badayuni also described it with relish in his secret chronicle, the *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh* (Selected Histories). Made public after the author's death (c. 1614), this book proved so scandalous that Jahangir banned it and had the late author's sons arrested to answer for their father's deed. The imperial ban, of course, had the opposite effect. According to the eighteenth century chronicler Khafi Khan, the book sellers in the capital soon sold out their copies of Badayuni's work, which contained anecdotes about Akbar that were "unmentionable" (*na guftani*).[542] This is not to say that the entire text was slanderous. In fact, much of Badayuni's work was a conventional chronicle, and most of its mentions of Akbar were positive and respectful. The scandalous parts, however, were concentrated in the year of the millennium.

Badayuni began his description of the "millennial" year 990 AH (1582), with Akbar proclaiming, "We have found out proofs for part of the reality of metempsychosis."[543] Metempsychosis or transmigration of the soul, as was discussed in previous chapters, was both a central tenet of both Indic cosmology and *ghulat* Sufi groups. It was used by the latter to deny Islamic eschatology and provide a metaphysical mechanism for the messianic soul to be reincarnated on earth. Having identified Akbar with this deeply heretical but powerful messianic concept, Badayuni reported that as the New Year according to the Persian calendar came up, Akbar believed that the period of

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[541] Correia-Afonso, *Letters*, 114-115.
[542] Muhammad Hashim Khafi Khan and T. Wolsely Haig, *Muntakhab al-Lubab*, Bibliotheca Indica, v. 60 (Calcutta: Printed at the Urdoo Guide Press, 1874), 197.
[543] Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, 2: 300; Bada'uni, *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh (translation)*, 2: 309.

the faith of Islam was now completed and "felt at liberty to embark fearlessly on his design of annulling the statutes and ordinances of Islam and of establishing his own cherished pernicious belief."[544] The emperor began to issue a series of decrees, which are only found in Badayuni's account.

First, the emperor decreed that everyone perform the *sijda* (prostration) in front of the king, implying divinity for the monarch. Then he allowed wine to be sold officially near the palace. Even though the wine was meant only for medicinal purposes, according to Badayuni, in point of fact, "a shop for the benefit of drunkards was opened."[545] He quoted reports that "swine-flesh formed a component part of that wine, but God knows." He said that Akbar also tried to officially manage access to prostitutes just as he had tried to legalize wine-selling, but all his efforts failed and "drunkenness and debauchery" prevailed:

> …prostitutes of the imperial dominions…had gathered together in the Capital in such swarms as to defy counting or numbering. These he made to live outside the city, and called the place 'Shaitanpurah' [Devilsville].[546]

The rest of Badayuni's chronicle consisted of a list of similar actions of the emperor and his courtiers that would shock any pious person's sensibilities. For example, Akbar encouraged the shaving of beard because since "the beard drew its nourishment from the testicles…what could be the virtue and distinction of preserving it?"[547] He started to keep swine and dogs in the harem in order to look at them every morning as a religious service. Some of his courtiers started taking dogs – an animal considered impure by Muslims – to their dining tables and a few even started "taking the dog's tongues into

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[544] Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, 2: 301; Bada'uni, *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh (translation)*, 2: 310.
[545] Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, 2: 302; Bada'uni, *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh (translation)*, 2: 311.
[546] Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, 2: 302; Bada'uni, *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh (translation)*, 2: 311.
[547] Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, 2: 303; Bada'uni, *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh (translation)*, 2:313.

their mouths." Instead of performing ablution after having sex as is normative Islamic

practice, Akbar suggested that ablution be performed before having sex. Instead of

avoiding silk and gold as Muslim men are supposed to, he made the wearing of gold and

silk mandatory. He forbade Islamic prayers, fasting and the pilgrimage and allowed the

day of resurrection and judgment to be openly doubted and ridiculed at court. He

replaced the Islamic calendar with a Persian solar one and introduced Zoroastrian

festivals at the court. He disapproved of the study of the religious sciences and promoted,

instead, the study of philosophy. In short, according to Badayuni Akbar abandoned the

entire normative order of Islam and instead institutes its diametric opposite in its place –

all in the year of the millennium:

> The era of the Hijra was now abolished [in 990 AH/1582 AD]….Reading and
> learning Arabic was looked on as a crime; and Muhammadan law, and the
> exegesis of the Quran, and the Tradition, as also those who studied them, were
> considered bad and deserving of disapproval. Astronomy, philosophy, medicine,
> mathematics, poetry, history, and epics were cultivated and thought necessary.
> Even the letters which are peculiar to the Arabic language…were avoided. Thus
> in pronouncing 'Abdullah, people ignored the initial letter *'ayn* [specific to
> Arabic]; and for Ahadi they ignored the letter *ha* [specific to Arabic], etc. [548]

Badayuni was deeply biased against the emperor and no doubt wrote to cause

shock and revulsion. But there is no reason to dismiss his description of Akbar's

millennial celebrations outright. Badayuni's narrative contained most of the accusations

that the official chronicle vehemently denied. It reflected what was widely believed about

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[548] I have modified the translation somewhat for readability. Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, 2: 307;
Bada'uni, *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh (translation)*, 2:316-317. Also, according to Badayuni the following two
versus for Firdausi's Shahnama, which derided Arabs and lamented their ascendancy over the Persians with
the coming of Islam, were frequently quoted at court:
> Through the tasting of the milk of camels and lizards
> The Arabs have made such progress,
> That they now wish to get hold of the kingdom of Persia.
> Fie upon Fate! Fie upon Fate!
See, Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, 2: 307; Bada'uni, *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh (translation)*, 2: 317.

the emperor; that he had acted to end the order of Islam by inverting its symbolic order, even supplanting the signs and sounds of the Arabic alphabet. Also, the manner in which Badayuni described the emperor's millennial celebrations resonated with the Jesuit's observations that some "believed the king to be mad" and that the "court is much perplexed over the novelties introduced by the King each day." Taken together, these two eye witness accounts which were poles apart ideologically – one of Akbar's Muslim scholar and the other of the Jesuit missionaries – both suggest that Akbar's actions confounded many and indicated an unhinged mind to others.

But it would not do to dismiss the emperor's behavior as pathological. There are two reasons for this caution. First, in the milieu under study there existed no sharp social distinctions between being absorbed in divinity and being neurotically engrossed in oneself. In fact, as evidenced by the antinomian traditions of Sufism at the time, madness was a socially recognized station on the way to sainthood. Thus, there is no contradiction in saying that Akbar may have appeared an unbalanced fool to some and a saintly monarch to others.[549] Secondly, and more importantly, those who knew the cosmological significance of the millennium perceived a method in this "madness." If Akbar's transgressions followed a certain cultural logic, so did the accusations against him. The millennium was supposed to do away with the old symbolic order and usher in a new one. A sign of its coming was an inversion of social categories and annulment of taboos. Badayuni's critique of Akbar was meant to invoke these signs of the time. As an expert in

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[549] The category of the holy man absorbed in God (*majzub*) is a well-known one. In previous chapters, we have seen how such men played a public role, giving omens and blessings to great sovereigns such as Timur. For a later case study of a "holy fool" in India, see Nile Green, "Transgressions of a Holy Fool: A Majzub in Colonial India," in *Islam in South Asia in Practice* ed. Barbara Metcalf (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). Also, as far as Akbar's saintly status is concerned, note that his tomb was considered by many to have the same spiritual protective powers that shrines of saints possessed. See, Z. A. Desai, "A Foreign Dignitary's Ceremonial Visit to Akbar's Tomb: A First Hand Account," in *Akbar and his Age*, ed. Iqtidar Alam Khan (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 1999).

astrology and a firm believer in the millennium, he portrayed Akbar not merely as a

deranged king, but as the Antichrist; as he said in verse:

> I see in 990 two conjunctions,
> I see the sign of Mahdi and that of Antichrist;
> Either politics or religion must change,
> I clearly see the hidden secret.[550]

Indeed, Badayuni's only difference with the emperor over the millennium was

that he had given his allegiance to another messiah – or two!

Badayuni's Many Messiahs

Badayuni is generally thought to provide a conservative Sunni perspective on

Akbar. This interpretation is in need of significant revision given his millennial beliefs

and writings. It is well known that Badayuni spent most of his adult life as a courtier of

Akbar but could not compete with Abul Fazl and his brother Fayzi, the poet laureate

(*malik al-shu'ara*), for the emperor's favor. It is less well-acknowledged, however, that

Badayuni had deep sympathies for the Mahdavis, the messianic group discussed earlier,

which had had enjoyed a popular following in north India in the first half of the sixteenth

century, and still had a presence in Gujarat in Akbar's time.[551]

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[550] Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, 2: 313; Bada'uni, *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh (translation)*, 2: 323.
[551] For more on the Mahdavis and their founder Sayyid Muhammad of Jawnpur, see note 390. An eminent courtier of Akbar, the scholar Shaykh Mubarak, father of the emperor's favorite Abul Fazl, was said to have been a Mahdavi. Qamaruddin, *Mahdawi Movement*, 169. However, there is no indication that Mubarak's son Abul Fazl – Badayuni's courtly rival – had an inclination towards the movement. In fact, Abul Fazl denied Sayyid Muhammad Jawnpuri's claim to mahdiship but accepted him as a learned scholar and accomplished mystic. See Qamaruddin, *Mahdawi Movement*, 54. For Badayuni's connection to the Mahdavis, see below, and also Fauzia Zareen Abbas, *Abdul Qadir Badauni, as a Man and Historiographer* (Delhi: Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli, 1987), 6-10.

By the time Akbar conquered Gujarat in 1572-73, the Mahdavi movement there had entered a quietist phase.[552] After some initial tension, the emperor developed good relations with Mahdavis and even invited a leader of the group Shaykh Mustafa Gujarati to his court. Derryl MacLean has suggested that Akbar was evaluating Mahdavi millenarian ideology for his own political ends and that Shaykh Mustafa tried his best to convince Akbar to adopt the Mahdavi faith but failed. [553] If so, the Mahdavi's experience at Akbar's court was not that different from that of Jesuits and Zoroastrians, who had also thought for a time that Akbar had accepted their faith or was close to doing so. But, notably, the Mahdavis were the only "heterodox" Muslim group at the Mughal court which had enjoyed the "orthodox" Badayuni's firm support.

In his chronicle, Badayuni wrote respectful biographical accounts of the four second generation Mahdavi leaders that he had personally met: Shaykh 'Alai, Shaykh 'Abdullah Niyazi, Shaykh Abul Fath, and Shaykh Mustafa Gujarati. His account of the martyred Shaykh 'Alai was by far the most detailed and hagiographical one. In it Shaykh 'Alai appeared as a pious Mahdavi who had organized his followers into an armed vigilante group in order to impose their version of Islamic law. Badayuni had been ten when he met Shaykh 'Alai in 1550. This was the year the Shaykh was killed by the Afghan ruler Islam Shah Sur (r. 1545-54). Badayuni wrote about his memory of this dream-like moment of meeting a living saint.[554] He then described the Shaykh's defiant and fatal encounter with Islam Shah in emotionally charged detail: Shaykh 'Alai is

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[552] MacLean, "Mahdawiyah and the State."

[553] By the time of emperor Aurangzeb (r. 1658-1707), MacLean argues, the Mahdavis were generally perceived as Sunni Muslims whose only difference from the mainstream community was their belief that the *mahdi* had come and gone.

[554] Badayuni described his experience thus: "At the time of his [Shaykh 'Alai's] arrival at the township of Basawar from Baiana, my late father took me, the writer of these pages, to do homage to him. In consequence of my tender years, his form remained fixed in my memory as a dream or a vision." Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, 1: 399; Bada'uni, *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh (translation)*, 1:512.

whipped and dies under the scourge; his body is trampled to pieces by elephants; Islam Shah forbids the Mahdavis to bury the broken body of their leader and appoints guards to this effect; however, these orders are countermanded by divine providence as follows:

> At that very time a vehement whirlwind arose and blew with so great violence, that people thought that the last day [*qayam-i qayamat*] had arrived, and great lamentation and mourning was heard throughout the whole camp, and men were in expectation of the early downfall of the power of Islam Shah. And they say that in the course of the night such a wealth of flowers was scattered over the body of the Shaikh that he was completely hidden beneath them and was so to speak entombed in flowers.[555]

After this event, the child Badayuni composed his first set of chronograms to commemorate the martyred Mahdavi Shaykh.[556] These chronograms were short phrases that, when converted to a number using numerology, gave the year of the event. The chronograms Badayuni composed to record the year of this Mahdavi saint's death were "Mindful of God" (*Zakirullah*) and "their Lord quenched their thirst with a drink" (*saqahum rabbuhum sharaban*), an extract from the Quran (76:21). Significantly, while Badayuni praised this Mahdavi for his martyrdom, he criticized another member of the group, Shaykh Niyazi for his moral weakness. Shaykh Niyazi had been unable to endure the torture and had recanted his Mahdavi beliefs.[557]

In 1574, as a courtier, Badayuni met the Mahdavi Shaykh Mustafa Gujarati after the conquest of Gujarat and discussed Mahdavi beliefs with him in front of the emperor. He asked the Mahdavi Shaykh about the messianic claims of another man, Sayyid Muhammad Nurbakhsh (d. 1464) who "also, in his time, had set up a claim to being the Mahdi, and had brought various troubles on himself thereby."[558] The Shaykh was obviously upset about such questions which implied that the Mahdavi founder may have

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[555] Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, 1: 408; Bada'uni, *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh (translation)*, 1:524.
[556] Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, 1:409; Bada'uni, *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh (translation)*, 1: 525.
[557] Badayuni inserted a sarcastic report about Shaykh Niyazi's cowardice under torture: "Miyan 'Abd allah [Niyazi] did wonderfully well in sending the unfortunate Shaikh 'Ala'i to his death, while he himself withdrew his steps from the circle." Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, 3: 46; Bada'uni, *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh (translation)*, 3: 77.
[558] Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, 3: 51; Bada'uni, *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh (translation)*, 3: 84.

made a false claim. Badayuni assuaged the Shaykh in private later that day: "To make amends for my fault I waited on him with my apologies, and asked him for forgiveness."[559]

To summarize, Badayuni treated the Mahdavis with deep reverence in his chronicle. He did not hide the fact that he received mystical instruction from Mahdavis and that his father was a devotee as well.[560] Unlike the other Sunni 'ulama in Islam Shah's and Akbar's courts, Badayuni did not condemn Sayyid Muhammad's claim to being the messiah but on the other hand treated his followers as upholders of the Sunni tradition. It is not surprising that at least one scholar believes Badayuni to be a Mahdavi.[561] Given Badayuni's sympathetic depiction of the Mahdavis in his chronicles, it is worth analyzing his writings about the Mahdavi movement in another work entitled, *Najat al-Rashid* (Salvation of the Rightly Guided). This book's name was a chronogram that gave its year of completion: 999 AH.[562]

In this long and rambling work, written at the end of the Islamic millennium, Badayuni gave the early history of two messianic movements, the Mahdavis of India and the Nurbakhshis of Iran. Note that it was the competing messianic claims of the Mahdavi and Nurbakhshi founders that had interested him in 1574 during his discussions with the

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[559] Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, 3: 51; Bada'uni, *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh (translation)*, 3: 85.

[560] When Badayuni turned twenty, he was sent to study Sufi mysticism and esoteric knowledge with Shaykh Abul Fath Gujarati. It was under this Mahdavi's tutelage that he had his first intense mystical experience: "…I received instructions in the ecstatic worship [*zikr*] of the Sufis, and was employed for some time therein, and the (inner) meaning of the Qur'an was disclosed to me, and for some time my condition was such that I believed every sound and voice which fell upon my ears to be the mystic chanting of the Sufis." Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, 3: 47; Bada'uni, *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh (translation)*, 3: 78.

[561] Qamaruddin, *Mahdawi Movement*, 53-54.

[562] Badayuni's treatise has been described as a "Sufi ethical manual." This categorization, however, does not fully express its diverse and wide-ranging content. The work is divided into hundreds of small sections that treat a wide ranging mix of practical and spiritual subjects: descriptions of sins such as polytheism and wine drinking; proper conduct such as in a mosque; heresies related to groups of Shi'a, *ghulat*, and philosophers; rules for appropriate sexual relations; and even the danger of relieving oneself over a hole in a rock lest there be a snake or scorpion hidden inside it. Badayuni wrote that he composed much of this work while on the road where he did not have access to references and had to rely on memory for most of the quotes. Moreover, he admitted that part of the material of the book came from a draft left behind by his fellow courtier and friend Mirza Nizam al-Din. Badayuni did not specify, however, which parts of the book were original and which were borrowed, taking full responsibility for its authorship.

Mahdavi Shaykh Mustafa Gujarati. Writing in 1591, it seems that Badayuni had found the answer which allowed him to accept both the Mahdavi and the Nurbakhshi founders as divinely blessed saints whose messianic assertions were, according to him, beyond question or rebuke. This answer was based on a reinterpretation of the concept of metempsychosis or transmigration of the soul (*tanasukh*).[563]

In his discussion of metempsychosis, Badayuni compared heretical (*malahida*) Muslim groups who subscribed to this phenomenon to Hindus and Buddhists whom he referred to collectively as transmigrationists (*tanasukhiyya*). He condemned all these groups and presented an alternative – and "orthodox" – explanation of this phenomenon. He said that proper Sufi masters believe in "projection" of the soul (*buruz*), not in metempsychosis (*tanasukh*).[564] The concept of *buruz* had first been put forth by Nurbakhsh, the fifteenth century Sufi and messianic claimant of Timurid Iran mentioned earlier.[565] Following Nurbakhsh, Badayuni asserted that the two spiritual mechanisms are distinct: in metempsychosis, the soul leaves a body that is dead in order to enter one that is ready to receive life; by contrast, in projection of the soul, the perfecting (*mukammil*) soul irradiates (*tajalli*) itself along with the perfect (*kamil*) soul and thus makes its existence complete (*mukammal*); moreover, in projection, a soul never leaves a body to enter another, but instead it simply overpowers another soul in much the same way that the rays of a powerful lamp overcome the light of a weak lamp.

Badayuni wrote that many saints (*auliya'*) have performed projection on other complete souls in their own lifetimes; for if one believes that jinns (invisible spirits mentioned in the Quran) can have the ability to control a weak soul, how can one deny that prophets (*anbiya'*) and the pure ones (*asfiya'*) have a lesser ability than *jinns*. As an

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[563] Badayuni's writings on the subject have been translated and commented upon in Moin, "Badayuni." The section below is based on this publication.

[564] The discussion below is based on Abd al-Qadir ibn Muluk Shah Bada'uni, *Najat al-Rashid* (Lahore: Idarah-i Tahqiqat-i Pakistan, Danishgah-i Panjab, 1972), 70-83.For an English translation, see Moin, "Badayuni."

[565] See notes 155, 156.

example, he relates the story of an acquaintance of his, an Ottoman (*rumi*) nobleman, who once asked Badayuni about the difference between projection and metempsychosis. He told Badayuni that he had met and grown attached to a Sufi master in Egypt. When the Sufi was about to die, he promised to return after death in the form of a dervish in order to look after his disciple. His master's claim of metempsychosis upset him very much for it implied he was beyond the pale of Islam. However, after listening to Badayuni, he was content and happy to know that his master's beliefs were well within the boundaries of Islam and the realms of possibility.

According to Badayuni, the mechanism of soul projection explained why many saints, having reached a certain mystical stage, made claims of messianism (*'iswiyyat*, literally, "being Jesus") and brought down calamities upon themselves. According to him, men who made such claims were justified (*ma'zur*) and in the right (*muhiqq*), and Sayyid Mahmud Nurbakhsh of Badakhshan (of the Nurbakhshi movement) and Sayyid Muhammad of Jawnpur (of the Mahdavi movement) were two such men. He wrote that one must not be quick to judge such mystics who have followed the mystical path all their lives and have discovered secrets that are unknown to ordinary men. Instead one must worry about one's own inner state.

In his explication of the messianic claims made by the Mahdavi and Nurbakhshi leaders, Badayuni turned to a mixture of conjunction astrology and scriptural lore. In the case of Nurbakhsh, he noted that when the conjunction of the two farthest planets (Saturn and Jupiter) was in the sign of Scorpio, which was an omen for the religion of the nation, the lord of the age (*sahib-i zaman*) came forward. Immediately after relating the messianic career of Nurbakhsh, he began the story of the Mahdavi leader. Badayuni said that Sayyid Muhammad Jawnpuri declared himself the *mahdi* when he reached Mecca. He related that the people had asked the ulama of that region for a *fatwa* (responsa) on the truth of the hadith that

…the honorable Prophet may peace be upon him has said, I will not remain in the pure and enlightened tomb [*marqad*] for more than one thousand years, and before the passing of one thousand years major signs of which the rise of the Mahdi is one must indeed be revealed.

In response, according to Badayuni, most of the hadith scholars of the region signed off on the worthiness of this hadith tradition; however, one scholar, Shaykh Jalal Suyuti (d. 1505) wrote against the validity of this hadith mainly because he wanted to declare himself the *mujaddid* of the tenth century. Suyuti argued instead that the *mahdi* will appear somewhere in the fourth and fifth century after the millennium. Regardless, Jawnpuri made his claim on the basis of this hadith and upon doing so, he was asked to leave Mecca.

Badayuni mentioned Suyuti and his critique of the millennial hadith in his chapter on "the rise and fall of nations" which began with the following observation:

> At the beginning of every few centuries, the affair [*kar o bar*] of religion has a peak and decline and thus the nation [*ummat*] of a prophet would exist for a thousand years. Such is what one may beneficially gather from some exegeses [*tafasir*].[566]

Badayuni wrote that going beyond Suyuti's answer about the timing of the millennium, he wants to quote from memory a fragment from the writings of the famous Andalusian mystic and metaphysician, Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240).[567] He related that Ibn 'Arabi once saw a group of people performing circumambulation of the Ka'ba. One of these people saw Ibn 'Arabi and said to him that they were his ancestors. Ibn 'Arabi asked the man how long ago he had departed from this world? The man replied that it was some forty thousand years ago. Ibn 'Arabi was surprised and told him that even Adam was created less than seven thousand years ago. The man answered that you are talking about the Adam who passed away near your time and was born at the beginning of these seven thousand years. Upon hearing this, Ibn 'Arabi suddenly recalled the Prophet's saying that

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[566] Bada'uni, *Najat al-Rashid*, 327.
[567] The argument below quotes, paraphrases, and translates from Ibid., 326-329.

"the Lord almighty has created a hundred thousand Adams and despite this the world is created and there is no escaping its destruction."

Badayuni did not critically examine the validity of the prophetic tradition quoted by Ibn 'Arabi. Instead, he simply juxtaposed Ibn 'Arabi's cyclical view of time to Suyuti's eschatological claims that the end of the world was going to occur between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries of Islam.[568] In effect, he used Ibn 'Arabi's vast metaphysical authority to dilute the claims of Suyuti whose well-known writings did not suit the messianic claims of the men that Badayuni supported. Furthermore, the way Badayuni used Ibn 'Arabi as a source of authority on the cyclical creation of the universe placed him against "traditional" Sunni doctrine. In this cyclical view of creation, a new Adam was born in every "cycle" of existence. As mentioned earlier, this was a well known claim made by radical Sufi groups (*ghulat*) to deny traditional Islamic eschatology and was used to support the notion of the transmigration of the soul. Moreover, this view of time was based on the astrological theories of Abu Ma'shar, the famous proponent of conjunction astrology, who promoted Indic notions of cycles of time in Islamic astrology[569], and whose Arabic prayers to the Sun were quoted in Akbar's Millennial History.[570] In short, Badayuni may have depicted the emperor as deviating from Islam, but he built his arguments for the millennium from the very same conceptual bases – conjunction astrology, repeating cycles of time, and reincarnation of the soul – with the help of which Akbar's millennial status had been formulated.

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[568] For a discussion of Ibn 'Arabi's complex millennial views, in which he indirectly claimed to be the awaited messiah, see Gerald T. Elmore, "The 'Millennial' Motif in Ibn al-ʿArabi's 'Book of the Fabulous Gryphon'," *The Journal of Religion* 81, no. 3 (2001).

[569] The twelfth century polymath and expert on India, Al-Biruni, critiqued Abu Ma'shar for promoting Indic concepts of time as Islamic. Muhammad ibn Ahmad Biruni and Ainslie Thomas Embree, *Alberuni's India*, Abridged ed. (New York: Norton, 1971), 325. Regardless of this critique, Abu Ma'shar's astrological theories became the mainstay of pre-modern astrology across Asia and Europe. See Ja'far ibn Muhammad Abu Ma'shar, *On Historical Astrology: The Book of Religions and Dynasties (On the Great Conjunctions)*, trans., Keiji Yamamoto and Charles Burnett, 2 vols. (Boston: Brill, 2000), xiv.

[570] Tattavi and Qazvini, *Tarikh-i Alfi*, 1: 381-383.

To summarize, the "strange" millennial worldview in which saints and monarchs competed for the status of divinely incarnated saviors was invented neither by Akbar nor his staunch critic Badayuni. Nor, for that matter, was it a happenstance of the sixteenth century "syncretistic" Indo-Islamic environment. As the previous three chapters have shown, this view of temporality and sovereignty was part of the institutions of sacred kingship that had been in use since the age of Timur. It resonated not only in the Indian empire of his successors but also in the territories of Safavid Iran where, at the end of the sixteenth century, there was another millennial movement gathering strength that sought to end the dominance of the "Arab" order of Islam down to the very letters of the Arabic alphabet, and resurrect in its place a "Persian" millennium.

The Millennium in Safavid Iran

As described in chapter 2, in the beginning of the sixteenth century the Safavids had risen to power in Iran on the back of a messianic movement organized around a core of "exaggerated" Sufi beliefs in which the spiritual guide was treated as an Alid messiah and a reincarnation of divinity. By the end of the century, however, the Safavids began to move away from their radical Alid stance and publicly adopted Imami Shi'ism. This shift, it has been argued, was part of a move to break the power of the unruly Qizilbash devotees of the Safavid saint king, famous for their messianic fervor, belief in metempsychosis, and red iconic headgear. Shah Tahmasb had spent most of his reign trying to achieve this objective but had been unsuccessful. It was Shah Abbas I (r. 1588-1629) who successfully launched a well-coordinated and large scale effort to reorient the moral economy and political geography of empire. As part of this process, he took

significant steps toward abandoning the Safavids' messianic image in favor of a more routinized Imami Shi'ism.[571]

However, this transition was neither smooth nor unidirectional. The antinomian ethos of "exaggeration" (*ghuluww*) survived in cultural sites and forms that were ambiguous and difficult to police.[572] In fact, the Safavids themselves kept alive, in tightly constrained forms, aspects of the millenarian cult that had brought them to power. For example, the new Safavid imperial complex built by Shah Abbas in Isfahan had a special chamber called the *Tawhid Khana* (House of Monism) that served as a retreat for Safavid devotees. It also served as a place of refuge and repentance for the Qizilbash. Those who had offended the king would seek refuge here and ask for forgiveness, invoking in the process the affective bonds between disciple and master. But the extent to which the traditional disciples of the Safavid shah had been marginalized in the emergent imperial configuration at the end of the sixteenth century can be seen by how they served in the special corps of executioners at the court of Shah Abbas.[573] Of a distinctive and terrorizing appearance, magnified by the tall hats they wore, these men were trained and deputed to perform public execution by eating alive the condemned enemies of their monarch. This was, perhaps, a ritualized commemoration of the transgressive practices that had made Shah Isma'il's soldier-devotees notorious a century earlier.

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[571] Shah Abbas built a loyal military of Caucasian slave soldiers, captured from neighboring Georgia, converted to Shi'ism, and trained by European military advisors. He abandoned the old imperial center of Qazvin for the new Safavid capital of Isfahan. He shifted focus away from the Safavid shrine-city of Ardabil toward the Shi'i spiritual center of Mashhad. During his reign Safavid princes married the daughters of newly established Imami Shi'i ulama instead of marrying into the leading Qizilbash families as had been the precedent. Overall, these strategic moves enabled him to reduce his dependence on the traditional tribal-warrior military groups of the Qizilbash. Even the Qizilbash headgear began to be referred to as the *Taj-i Ithna 'Ashari* (Crown of the Twelve Shi'is). Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*, 349.

[572] Ibid., 443-449.

[573] Bashir, "Shah Isma'il and the Qizilbash," 249.

In general, violent spectacles that combined the sacred and the grotesque were an important aspect of public life in Safavid Iran. Like Akbar, Shah Abbas enjoyed watching violent fights. Most famous of these are the ritualistic – and fatal – stick battles organized between urban neighborhood and artisanal factions in which two sides would assume the names of defunct Sufi formations such as "Haydariyya" and "Ni'matiyya." [574] These popular rituals were part of a large number of performative practices that came to inform the "passion plays" and Shi'i commemorations of Husayn's martyrdom as they became institutionalized in Safavid times. In short, the performative culture of sacred kingship was intimately linked with popular religiosity and life of the city and military camps. Safavid attempts to change the former produced repercussions in the latter.

Thus, new millenarian tendencies arose to fill the gap left behind by the Safavid suppression of their messianic legacy. The most pronounced of these tendencies was the Sufi group known as the Nuqtavis who nursed a deep enthusiasm for the millennium. The Nuqtavi movement had originally been founded in Iran during the generation after Timur. The founder of the movement Mahmud Pasikhani (d. 1427) was a native of Gilan who termed himself the Millennial King (*Padishah Hizara*). The movement was a breakaway faction of the cabbalistic Hurufis who were well-known for their esoteric interpretations of letters of the alphabet, both Arabic and Persian. The Nuqtavis were unique, however, in their exclusive focus upon the Persian alphabet, or more precisely, the difference between the letters of the Persian and Arabic alphabets. The Nuqtavis (pointilists) were called so because of their emphasis on the *nuqta* (point). A key significance of the *nuqta* in their doctrine was the disparity in the total number of diacritical points between the Arabic and Persian alphabet (calculated to be twelve, an astrologically significant

[574] Calmard, "Shi'i Rituals and Power II," 145-147.

number). In short, they derived much of their messianic metaphysics from Persianate

astrological theories and the "strange" and "Hermetical" knowledge of *'ilm al-huruf* (the

science of letters).[575]

At the end of the sixteenth century, the Nuqtavis were loosely organized and

displayed antinomian tendencies, perhaps reacting against the rigid "commercialization"

of Sufi orders of the time.[576] Their membership also reflected a blurring of ethnic and

social barriers. Even though the Nuqtavis had a following amongst the urban craftsmen

and the warrior Qizilbash, they also attracted many of the learned elite including

physicians and eminent poets. What links them to earlier *ghulat* groups is their belief in

metempsychosis and cyclical time.[577] In Nuqtavi cosmology, historical time was divided

into four cycles of 16000 years. In each cycle there were 8000 years of Arab rule and

8000 years of Persian rule, with the final cycle belonging to the Persians.[578] The Nuqtavis

also subscribed to conjunction astrology and expected the "greatest conjunction," was

going to occur in the year 1582 AD (990 AH).[579] They expected that the era of Islam was

coming to an end, opening the way for the dominance of the Persians and their religion

under the guidance of a messiah.

The Nuqtavis had attempted but failed to proclaim the Safavid Shah Tahmasb as

their *mahdi*. When the Safavids broke with their messianic legacy and led a campaign

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[575] It is not surprising that due to their focus on the mystical properties of letters, the Nuqtavis were perceived by some as "Hermetics" (followers of Hermes) and as followers of Pythagoras, who had also believed in the occult properties of numbers and in the transmigration of the soul. See Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*, 68-78. Also see Toufic Fahd, "Huruf," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, CD-ROM* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

[576] Hamid Algar, "Nuktawiyya," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, CD-ROM* (Leiden: Brill, 1999). Also, the Safavid court chronicles depict the Nuqtavis as part of a chain of heresies beginning with the two "gnostic reformers" of Zoroastrianism, Mani and Mazdak. Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*, 48.

[577] Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*, 103.

[578] Ibid., xxxiv.

[579] Ibid., lii.

(1571-90) to bring unruly Qizilbash tribes under control, some warriors from these tribes began to follow the Nuqtavis. After Tahmasb's death, the Nuqtavis tried and initially succeeded in developing a positive relationship with Shah Abbas. He frequented their hospice in Qazvin and began to associate closely with a Nuqtavi named Dervish Khursaw.[580] Even though the court chroniclers later claimed that this association was for the purpose of surveillance, it is more likely that the Shah was genuinely interested in the millennial doctrine of this increasingly popular group.

However, the growing popularity and temerity of the Nuqtavis alarmed Shah Abbas and he acted to suppress the Nuqtavis. Much of the confrontation between the Safavid Shah and the Nuqtavis was expressed in competing interpretations of conjunction astrology. The Nuqtavis were expecting the Safavid dynasty to fall and in its place the rise of a Persian sovereign and messiah. The court astronomer also did his calculations and predicted that a conjunction of inauspicious planets indicated the imminent death of a royal personage. It was a sign that Shah Abbas could not ignore. His court astrologer suggested a way out of the cosmological predicament, a way to make both the Nuqtavi prediction come true and also to save the Safavids' sovereignty. He recommended that the Shah appointed a Nuqtavi devotee, a condemned man, to the throne of Iran for the three ill-fated days. [581]

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[580] Ibid., 104-105.

[581] As Shah Abbas's chronicler, Iskandar Beg Munshi, related how in The Year of the Serpent, 1002 AH/1593-94 AD: "Astrologers had declared that the stars predicted the death this year of an eminent personage, probably in Iran, and the signs further indicated that this personage would be a royal one…. Mowlana Jala al-Din Mohammad Yazdi, who was the outstanding astrologer of his age, suggested to the Shah the following plan: during the three days when the influence of the conjunction and quadrature of the two inauspicious planets was at its height, the Shah [Abbas I] should divest himself of his kingly status and raise to the throne some criminal under sentence of death….At the end of the three days, the temporary monarch should be executed. Munshi, *History of Shah 'Abbas*, 648.

The entire ceremony ware carried out with the utmost seriousness. The Shah himself prostrated in front of the Nuqtavi king, and stood guard at the throne as master of ceremonies. All the grandees of the realm came to pay their respect to the newly enthroned monarch. It is worth comparing this ritual theatre enacted by the Safavid Shah and his nobility to the millennial celebrations at the court of Akbar. The former would have appeared no less perplexing and baffling – not to say tinged with madness – for outside observers than the latter. In any case, the royal astrologer's advice proved correct and the three-day reign of the Nuqtavi monarch ended inauspiciously. He was dethroned, shot by firing squad, and strung up in public view. Returning to his throne at the start of the new millennium, Shah Abbas launched an armed campaign against the Nuqtavis and extirpated the movement in Iran by the year 1593. As the Shah's chronicler noted: "if anyone escaped punishment, they either fled to India or found themselves a corner and remained anonymous, so that in Iran the way of metempsychosis [*shivah-yi tanasukh*] was abolished." [582]

The Nuqtavis who escaped to India found refuge at the Mughal court where some of their compatriots already led a comfortable existence. Akbar had for many years taken a deep interest in this radical Sufi group. The Safavid chronicler even suggested that both the Mughal emperor and his advisor, Abul Fazl, had been converted to the Persian millennial creed.

> Travelers to India reported that it [the Nuqtavi heresy] existed there too, and that Shaikh Abu'l-Fazl, the son of Shaikh Mobarak, a learned man in the service of the Mogul emperor Jalal al-Din Mohammad Akbar and esteemed by him, as a member of it. He had converted the Emperor to his latitudinarian ideas and seduced him from the path of the religious law. [583]

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[582] For a description of the entire episode and this quote from Iskandar Beg Munshi's chronicle, See Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*, 3-6.
[583] Munshi, *History of Shah 'Abbas*, 650.

It is not certain, however, who converted whom. In a letter to an important Nuqtavi, Akbar assumed the role of their spiritual patron, offering his guidance and blessings.[584] Written in 1584, two years after Akbar's millennial celebrations, it was composed in the form of an edict (*farman*) and addressed the Nuqtavi, Mir Ahmad Kashi, as Akbar's disciple and agent in Iran. The letter used terminology specific to the Nuqtavis and asked Kashi to convince more of the group to become Akbar's devotees and to send regular reports on his progress. Most notably, the Mughal emperor told Kashi to send his greetings to Dervish Khusraw, mentioned earlier as a onetime confidant of Shah Abbas and popular leader of the Nuqtavis in Qazvin.

After the Nuqtavi purge in 1594, in which Kashi met his end by being cleaved in two by Shah Abbas's sword, Akbar wrote to the Safavid Shah advising him to practice the policy of *sulh-i kull* (universal peace). The Shah was asked to show more tolerance towards those of different faith, even if they are believed to be in the wrong, and to exercise supreme caution before putting anyone to death because it was akin to "demolishing a divinely built edifice" (*hadm-i bunyan-i rabbani*).[585] The Safavid monarch did not receive the advice well because Iskandar Munshi, the Safavid chronicler, explained the Mughal interest in the Nuqtavis by observing that Abul Fazl had made Akbar into a libertine (*wasi' al-mashrab*) in matters of religion.[586] Akbar and Abul Fazl's communiqués to the Nuqtavis as well as the protection and patronage the group received in India certainly point towards a long and active relationship between the Mughal court and the Iranian *ghulat* movement. This was a partnership built upon a shared adoration of pre-Islamic Persianate symbols. Both Akbar and the Nuqtavis privileged the use of the

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[584] This letter is available in Persian in the appendix of Nizami, *Akbar & Religion*, 379-380. It is also translated in summary and commented upon in Islam, *Calendar of Documents*, 1: 101-102.

[585] This letter from Akbar to Shah Abbas is summarized in Islam, *Calendar of Documents*, 1: 123-124. It is given in full in Akbar's chronicle, Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak and Beveridge, *Akbar Nama (translation)*, 785-790.

[586] Iskandar Beg Munshi quoted in Islam, *Calendar of Documents*, 1: 124.

Iranian solar calendar, believed in the reincarnation of the soul, and advocated a ritual veneration of the Sun.

It was Badayuni who provided details of the Mughal-Nuqtavi relationship in India. He reported that in the year 984 AH (1576 AD) a man named Sharif Amuli, a Nuqtavi, came from Iran to India because "it is a wide place, where there is an open field for all licentiousness, and no one interferes with another's business."[587] Amuli declared himself a *mujaddid* (renewer) and gathered around himself some followers. When granted an audience with the emperor, he explained to Akbar the writings of the founder of the Nuqtavis, Mahmud Pasikhani, which according to Badayuni were "full of such droppings of heresy as no religion or sect would suffer."[588] Amuli impressed Akbar enough to be awarded a high rank and made an officiant for the cult of imperial discipleship. Specifically, Badayuni reported that he became "one of the apostles of His Majesty's religion in Bengal, possessor of the four degrees of Faith [i.e., imperial discipleship], and in his turn summoning faithful disciples to these degrees."[589] Three years later, Badayuni related, Sharif Amuli was a key contributor to the theories that proclaimed Akbar as the Messiah (*sahib-i zaman*) at the turn of the Islamic millennium. The Nuqtavi:

> …brought proofs from the writings of Mahmud of Basakhwan [Mahmud Pasikhani, the Nuqtavi founder], that he had said that in the year 990 [AH] a certain person would abolish lies, and how he had specified all sorts of interpretations of the expression 'Professor of the true Religion,' which came to the sum-total of 990.[590]

Interestingly, Badayuni also narrated that Amuli was not alone in his predictions. Rather these were corroborated by a certain Khwaja Maulana of Shiraz, a "heretic" and a

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[587] Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, 2:246; Bada'uni, *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh (translation)*, 2:253. While the official chronicle of Akbar's reign does not identify Mir Sharif Amuli as a Nuqtavi, he is mentioned several times as a nobleman and appointee to various administrative positions. He was well-known to be a Nuqtavi and as "heretic of the age" in other Mughal sources. See translator's note in Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak and others, *A'in-i Akbari (translation)*, 386-387.
[588] Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, 2:247; Bada'uni, *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh (translation)*, 2:254.
[589] Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, 2:248; Bada'uni, *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh (translation)*, 2:255.
[590] Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, 2:287; Bada'uni, *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh (translation)*, 2:295.

"*jafrdan*" (expert in *jafr*).[591] According to him, some Shi'as at court also supported this claim by quoting the following verses, which were said to have been composed by Nasir-i Khusraw, a tenth century Isma'ili writer and poet:

> In 989, according to the decree of fate,
> The stars from all sides shall meet together.
> In the year of Leo, the month of Leo, the day of Leo,
> The Lion of God [Ali] will stand forth from behind the veil.[592]

The Alid theories of the millennium that had once been at the core of Safavid sacral self-fashioning were now used to celebrate the resurrection of Timurid might, glory, and sovereignty under Akbar.

Conclusion

Akbar like his ancestor Timur had created an empire with a great diversity of sacred traditions and forms of moral community. This meant that he too had to inhabit a mold of sacred authority that drew upon multiple cosmologies often at variance with each other. Timur had performed the role of an heir of Chinggis Khan as well as of Ali. He had done so using a category that could encompass both these figures. This was the astrological concept of Lord of Conjunction, signifying a savior-conqueror marked by the planets, someone who would inaugurate a new era on earth. This was also, however, a saintly category claimed by those with mystical rather than physical powers. Timur was assumed to have both. In many ways, Akbar's claim of sacred sovereignty was enacted in a form similar to that of Timur. It drew upon conjunction astrology, messianic and millennial myths, and claims of royal and saintly authority combined in the person of the monarch.

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[591] On *jafr* see notes 40, 74
[592] Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, 2:287; Bada'uni, *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh (translation)*, 2:295.

There were important differences between the two Lords of Conjunction, though. Timur had performed this role but had been careful not to put it in words. It was only after his death that he was called Sahib Qiran and a sacred genealogy created linking him miraculously to Ali. He had in other words followed the norms of saintliness by not allowing his oral lore to be congealed in a written hagiography during his lifetime. Akbar, on the other hand, had done the opposite. He had personally supervised the composition and illustration of his hagiography, the Akbarnama. It was this hubris to make explicit claims of sacred authority – in words rather than in acts – such as calling himself the Mujtahid of the Age, which allowed Akbar's rivals to use accusations of heresy to attack him. They may have harmed his reputation but did not dent his power. The norms of kingship he laid out were followed for more than two centuries.[593] More of his successors emulated him than not. Even after Akbar, the imperial chancellery marked all edicts and epistles with the condensed talismanic proclamation "Allah Akbar" and paintings from the imperial atelier were signed by artists declaring themselves to be the disciples of the king.

The goal of this chapter was to show that Akbar's style of sacred kingship was a variation on a historical theme. This is not to deny its inventive form and Indian content and context. Rather, it is to assert that this inventiveness built upon received institutional and narrative forms that were part of Timurid and Safavid legacies inherited by the Mughals. Moreover, these forms of sacred sovereignty were flexible enough to adapt to the requirements of Indian society and polity. The gift of Alid messianism offered by the likes of the Nuqtavis was important for the Mughals in their competition with the

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[593] For some very interesting evidence on how some of Akbar's edicts were interpreted, enacted, or resisted during and after his reign, see Khan, "Akbar's Personality."

Safavids of Iran, but it made up only a part of the Mughal myth of sovereignty. India, unlike Iran, was not a land of Ali. It was the land of Rama. It was the story of this god-king descended to earth to rid it of evil and initiate a new utopian cycle of time that circulated in the streets and camps of the Mughal dominion. Like Ali and Chinggis Khan in Iran, in India it was Rama whom kings emulated and claimed to be embodiments of.[594]

No wonder then that the story of Rama, the *Ramayana*, was translated into Persian and exquisitely illustrated in Akbar's atelier, and that the Mughal emperor was called an avatar of Rama.[595] But what is striking is the degree to which the themes, plots, and imagery of this story matched those of the epics of Iran. Akbar's master artists, many of them from Iran, painted the Indian *rakshasas* (demons) fought by Rama in the same style as the Iranian *devs* (demons) destroyed by the Iranian hero Rustam in the Shahnama. Even Badayuni, who had to bear the agony of translating the Ramayana into Persian verse for Akbar, could not resist equating these Indian and Iranian tales of sovereignty:

> And the opinion of this set of people [Brahmans] is that the world is very old, and that no age has been devoid of the human race, and that from that event 100 thousand thousand years have passed. And yet for all that they make no mention of Adam whose creation took place only 7,000 years ago. Hence it is evident that these events [of the Ramayana] are not true at all, and are nothing but pure invention, and simple imagination, like the Shahnamah, and the stories of Amir Hamzah, or else it must have happened in the time of the dominion of the beasts and the jinns – but God alone knows the truth of the matter.[596]

Intriguingly, Badayuni left open the possibility that these stories may have been true in another cycle of time. His conviction in a linear structure of time in which the birth of Adam had occurred "only 7,000 years ago" was quite feeble, as evidenced by his

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[594] Sheldon Pollock, "Ramayana and Political Imagination in India," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 52, no. 2 (1993).
[595] Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, 2:326. Bada'uni, *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh (translation)*, 2: 336.
[596] Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, 2:337. Bada'uni, *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh (translation)*, 2: 347.

explanation of the transmigration of souls. In broad terms, then, whether it was the notion of the returning soul or the conception of recurring time cycles, there was much in common between the Iranian heritage of the Mughals and that of their Indian polity. The two cultural systems were cemented further in the reign of Akbar who began the practice of marrying Rajput princesses. It was such a Rajput queen, mentioned in the Akbarnama only by her title Mary of the Age (Maryam Zamani), who produced Akbar's heir. The queen – who despite being named after mother of Jesus remained a Hindu – gave birth to the prince in the house of a local holy man, a reclusive Chishti saint of Sikri. This prince, the future emperor Jahangir, was a child of the millennium and, as the next chapter shows, he too staked his claim of sovereignty in a messianic idiom that could be understood in both Iran and India.

CHAPTER 5

The Throne of Time: The Sacred Image of Jahangir

Introduction

In his half-century of rule, Akbar transformed the conquest state of Babur and Humayun into a wealthy, stable, and well knit-together empire. More than two generations witnessed the rise of a new social, political, and economic order that stretched from Kabul to Bengal and from Kashmir to Gujarat. The symbol of this new order was the Mughal emperor. When he died in 1605, Akbar was the greatest sovereign in living memory. This can be seen in the emotive reaction of Banarasidas, a Jain merchant who was nineteen at the time, to the news of the emperor's demise. In an account written in his later years, he reported that he had fainted, fallen down the stairs he had been sitting on, and injured his head. This sense of anomie was not merely the private emotion of a young man. It was collectively felt as bazaars shut down, people buried their jewels, put on old clothes, and expected the worst. As Banarasidas recounted, "The people felt suddenly orphaned and insecure without their sire. Terror raged everywhere; the hearts of men trembled with dire apprehension; their faces became drained of colour."[597] However, the transition of power to Akbar's son, Salim – who took the title of

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[597] Banarasidas quoted in Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Witnessing Transition: Views on the End of the Akbari Dispensation," in *The Making of History: Essays Presented to Irfan Habib*, ed. K. N. Panikkar, T. J. Byres, and Utsa Patnaik (London: Anthem, 2002), 106-107. Banarasidas's account has been translated along with a gloss and commentary in Mukunda Latha, *Ardhakathanaka, Half a Tale: A Study in the Interrelationship between Autobiography and History* (Jaipur: Rajasthan Prakrit Bharati Sansthan, 1981).

Jahangir (r. 1605-1627) –, was a relatively smooth and non-violent affair. An attempt to place Jahangir's seventeen year old son Khusraw on the throne was rejected by a majority of nobles and the matter settled within palace precincts in a matter of days. Even when Khusraw fled to Punjab six months later, the new emperor was able to muster enough support to quickly defeat and capture the rebellious prince.

Jahangir was thirty-six years old at the time of his accession. He was already adept at maintaining an independent army and retinue as well as negotiating complex political situations. In this respect, he had an advantage over his three predecessors – Babur, Humayun, and Akbar – who had all assumed the mantle of sovereignty at a young age with little skill or authority in handling a formidable array of male and female kin, court nobility, and other kingmakers. The problem facing Jahangir was of a different nature. In the last few years of Akbar's reign, he had been less than patient in waiting for the throne, openly rebelling and posturing against his "heretical" father's policies. Now, on the throne, Jahangir had to decide how much of Akbar's sacred legacy to embrace as a model for fashioning his own sovereign self.

As we saw in the last chapter, Akbar's foundational claim of sacrality, enunciated at the moment of the millennium, had embroiled the emperor in controversy. He was accused of attempting to undo the order of Islam and replace it with his own religion. These accusations occurred in the wake of Akbar's attempts to seal his conquests and administrative accomplishments with a new set of courtly rituals and symbols. Despite this resistance, he went ahead with his project and instituted an order of disciples in which initiates swore to sacrifice their life, family, honor, and religion in the service of the emperor. Furthermore, this imperial cult was inaugurated at the moment of the first

Islamic millennium, or more precisely in 990 Hijri (1582 CE) when a conjunction (*qiran*) of Saturn and Jupiter took place indicating a great change in world affairs. In essence, Akbar celebrated his imperial achievements as a millennial being who had ushered in a new world order; as a Lord of the Conjunction (*Sahib Qiran*) like his ancestor Timur; as a Savior (*mahdi*) like the expected heir of Ali; as an avatar like Rama; as a Messiah like Jesus; as a Renewer of the Second Millennium (*Mujaddid-i Alf-i Thani*) of Islam. This was the millennial-messianic dispensation that Jahangir inherited in which the monarch was a sacred being, towering above the religious and sectarian differences of his subjects. The question taken up here is how Jahangir dealt with his father's sovereign legacy. Did he reject it or make it his own?

Jahangir and Akbar: From Opposition to Mimesis

In the last five years of his reign, Akbar's political energies had mainly been consumed by attempts to rein in his rebellious heir.[598] In 1599, he had given Jahangir the assignment of dealing with the recalcitrant Rana of Mewar, while he ventured south to the Deccan to expand the Mughal realm. Taking advantage of Akbar's absence from the capital, Jahangir abandoned his mission and ignoring the entreaties of his grandmother – the Empress mother, Hamida Banu Begum, the head of the dynasty in Akbar's absence – he assumed independent control of an imperial treasury and rich agricultural territories in Bihar. In order to contain the crisis, Akbar left the Deccan campaign to his generals and hurried back. However, instead of directly confronting Jahangir, the emperor used trusted servants and family members as intermediaries to bring the wayward prince to heel. On

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[598] For an account of Jahangir during his days as a prince that follows contemporary Mughal sources closely see Francis Gladwin, *The History of Jahangir*, ed. K. V. Rangaswami Aiyangar (Madras: B. G. Paul & Co., 1930), 1-19.

the other hand, as Akbar's sole surviving son – the other two having succumbed to wine and good living earlier[599] – Jahangir's transgressions knew no bounds. When Akbar called his old confidante and advisor Abul Fazl back from Deccan to help him manage the situation, Jahangir had him waylaid and beheaded.

A later chronicler noted that by having Akbar's favorite minister murdered, "His Highness's [Jahangir's] bravery and manliness were noticed."[600] It was well known that Abul Fazl was at the center of Akbar's innovative policies concerning the symbolic role of Islam – or lack thereof – in formulating imperial policies. Accordingly, the assassination of Akbar's chief ideologue signaled to those opposed to the old emperor to see in his son a willingness to break from the tenor and style of the Akbari dispensation. This observation is corroborated by other evidence that Jahangir had set himself up against Akbar as a defender of Islam. Specifically, there exists a copy of an edict (*farman*) of 1601 in the prince's name in which he announced his opposition to his father's policies to "convert mosques into stables" and vowed to make every effort to reverse it:

> At the instigation of some mischievous persons, my father [Akbar] has…prohibited the performance of *namaz* (Muslim prayers) in congregation. He has converted many mosques into store-houses and stables. It was improper on his part to have acted in this manner.[601]

Whether Akbar had in fact desecrated mosques or forbidden Muslim prayers is debatable but, as was shown in the previous chapter, he was widely accused of having

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[599] Akbar's other two sons were Sultan Murad and Sultan Daniyal, both of whom reportedly died of alcoholism in 1598 and 1604, respectively.

[600] This comment is found in the preface added to Jahangir's memoirs by the eighteenth century historian Muhammad Hadi. See Muhammad-Hadi, "Preface to the Jahangirnama by Muhammad-Hadi," in *The Jahangirnama: Memoirs of Jahangir, Emperor of India*, ed. W. M. Thackston (Washington, D.C.: Freer Gallery of Art, 1999), 11.

[601] This edict was copied in a chronicle titled *Tazkirat al-Muluk* by Rafiuddin Ibrahim Shirazi (d. 1626) who wrote it in Bijapur in Jahangir's reign. This passage is quoted in Khan, "Akbar's Personality," 26.

harbored such ambitions against Islam. The Jesuit reports of the time also noted with

cynicism, and more than a hint of disappointment, Jahangir's sudden turn towards Islam.

This is how a contemporary Jesuit historian summed up the letters received from the third

Jesuit mission (1595-1773) at the time of Jahangir's accession:

> All men hoped much from the new King [Jahangir], and especially the [Jesuit]
> Fathers, who believed that his accession would lead many to embrace the
> Christian faith. For up to that time he had been looked upon almost as a Christian,
> and had been openly spoken of as such by his adherents. But these hopes were
> disappointed; for he had sworn an oath to the Moors to uphold the law of
> Mafamede [Muhammad], and being anxious at the commencement of his reign to
> secure their good will, he gave orders for the cleansing of the mosques, restored
> the fasts [*ramesas*] and prayers of the Moors…. Of the Fathers he took no more
> notice than if he had never seen them before. [602]

The Jesuits had been close to Jahangir ever since the first mission to the Mughal

court in 1580. In his days as a rebellious prince, Jahangir had shown a deep fondness for

Catholic art and commissioned many copies from the artists in his independent atelier.

Notably, he paid greater attention than his father, according to one art historian, to the

iconic and talismanic qualities of Catholic images. [603] Jahangir's stance changed towards

the Jesuits when, as was mentioned earlier, at the time of Akbar's death he faced an

opposing court faction that tried to put his son Khusraw on the throne. Khusraw's party

was led by the Rajput Raja Man Singh, the prince's maternal uncle and the brother of

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[602] See Fernao Guerreiro, *Jahangir and the Jesuits: With an Account of the Travels of Benedict Goes and the Mission to Pegu, from the Relations of Father Fernao Guerreiro, S. J*, trans., Charles Herbert Payne (New York: R.M. McBride & co., 1930), 3. The Jesuit letter dated September 1606 that formed the basis of this report is extensively quoted in Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Frank Disputations: Catholics and Muslims in the Court of Jahangir," *Indian Economic Social History Review* 45, no. 4 (2009): 476.

[603] This is how Gauvin Bailey compares the differences in Akbar and Jahangir's approach toward Christian art: "Whereas Akbar allowed Christian figures to populate his eclectic artistic landscape – at times in a religious context and at times in a more secular setting – Salim [i.e., Jahangir] consistently demanded that the works' devotional meanings and stylistic integrity be kept intact. His seems to have been a concern of the iconic and talismanic – for the power of images as embodiments of the divine – and he showed less and less interest in their narrative aspect." Gauvin Alexander Bailey, *The Jesuits and the Grand Mogul: Renaissance Art at the Imperial Court of India, 1580-1630*, Occasional Papers (Washington, DC: Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, 1998), 30.

Jahangir's first wife, Man Bai. The Raja had been the most powerful general under Akbar and symbolized the eminence of Rajput kings in the Mughal Empire.[604] According to the Jesuits, it was Jahangir's need to drum up support against such powerful "Gentile", i.e., Hindu, noblemen that led Jahangir to reassure Muslims that he would undo many of the policies of Akbar that had benefited Rajputs and hence styled himself as a champion of Islam.[605]

The early part of Jahangir's own memoir, the *Jahangirnama* (Book of Jahangir), written in the informal and colloquial style of a diary (*ruznamcha*), corroborated the view of the Jesuits. Jahangir had begun his memoir according to the Islamic lunar calendar rather than the Divine (*ilahi*) solar calendar of Akbar. He noted in the opening pages how his birth had been predicted by a renowned saint of the popular Chishti order, and how upon ascending the throne, he had molded himself according to the wisdom of sages who had foretold that Akbar's reign would be followed by the rise of a "Light of Religion [Nur al-Din]":

> While a prince I heard from the sages of India (*danayan-i Hind*) that when the time of Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar Padishah's rule was over, one named Nuruddin [Light of Religion] would succeed to the rule. This had also remained in my mind, and therefore I named myself Nuruddin Muhammad Jahangir.[606]

While most of these sages remained anonymous in Jahangir's writings, he mentioned one Naqshbandi Sufi, Shaykh Husayn Jami, who had given him the following "good news" a few months before his accession: "I dreamed that the great saints have

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[604] For a sense of Raja Man Singh's position in the empire, see Catherine B. Asher, "The Architecture of Raja Man Singh: A Study of Sub-Imperial Patronage," in *Architecture in Medieval India: Forms, Contexts, Histories*, ed. Monica Juneja (Delhi: Permanent Black 2001).

[605] For a detailed account of the Jesuit's view on the moment of Jahangir's accession, see Alam and Subrahmanyam, "Witnessing Transition," 108-112.

[606] Jahangir and W. M. Thackston, *The Jahangirnama: Memoirs of Jahangir, Emperor of India* (Washington, D.C.: Freer Gallery of Art, 1999), 22. Jahangir and Muhammad Hashim, *Jahangirnamah, Tuzuk-i Jahangiri*, Intisharat-i Bunyad-i Farhang-i Iran ([Tehran]: Bunyad-i Farhang-i Iran, 1980 [1359]), 2.

transferred the rule to that divinely chosen one [i.e., Jahangir]. Armed with this good

news, be ready for such an occurrence."[607] The Jesuits had also reported rumors

circulating at time that eminent Sufis and astrologers had sent Jahangir omens, dreams,

and prognostications that sovereignty was shortly to be his. These omens represented

much more than sycophancy. Rather, they carried substantial symbolic capital and, as

was discussed in chapter 2, constituted cosmological gifts in an exchange economy which

created obligations for the sovereign. From this perspective, these prophecies formed a

strand of public opinion and political communication; they offered loyalty but also

imposed certain demands on the ruler.[608] To gauge the social import and political weight

of such "strange" gifts, it is worth examining Jahangir's reactions to those that were not

given to him.

There was, for example, the dire prediction of a Jain holy man named Man Singh.

He was a leader of the Sewra sect, described by Jahangir as "a group of Hindu heretics

[*malahida-yi hunud*] who always go about stark naked" and took sexual liberties (*fasad o*

bibaki) with the wives and daughters of their followers.[609] This antinomian sage had been

close to Akbar and "considered himself an expert in astrology and predictions [*'ilm-i*

nujum o taskhirat]." Jahangir related how at the time of Khusraw's rebellion, Man Singh

had been asked by an important Hindu general and landlord of Bikaner, Rai Singh

Bhurtiya, about the new emperor's chances of survival. The holy man had opined that

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[607] Jahangir and Hashim, *Jahangirnamah*, 18. Jahangir and Thackston, *Jahangirnama (translation)*, 35. The eighteenth century historian Muhammad-Hadi quoted a slightly different variant of the same dream: "I have seen His Holiness Khwaja Baha'uddin [Naqshband] in a dream…and he said, 'Soon Sultan Salim [i.e., Jahangir] will mount he throne, causing the world to flourish in justice and equity and giving the grief-stricken cause for rejoicing with his generosity and liberality." Muhammad-Hadi, "Preface to the Jahangirnama," 15.
[608] Shaykh Husayn Jami, for example, was amply rewarded in cash by Jahangir when his prophecy came true. Jahangir and Thackston, *Jahangirnama (translation)*, 59. Jahangir and Hashim, *Jahangirnamah*, 42.
[609] Jahangir and Thackston, *Jahangirnama (translation)*, 250-251. Jahangir and Hashim, *Jahangirnamah*, 249-250.

Jahangir's rule would last no longer than two years. Upon hearing this, the general

abandoned his post and returned home to await the outcome of the struggle between

father and son. Upon victory, Jahangir forgave and reinstated his nobleman but cursed the

Jain mendicant as "black tongued" (*siyah zaban*). He noted that within three or four

months of issuing this ill-omened statement, the man's limbs fell off from leprosy,

making his life so miserable that "death would have been preferable." When ordered to

appear before the emperor, the leprosy-stricken Man Singh took his own life by poison.

Men like Man Singh were, by dint of their spiritual status, masters of affective knowledge

and controllers of local nodes of political communication. Their fate shows that the

predictions of holy men had important consequences for their patrons and audience as

well as for themselves.

An important case of a spiritual leader throwing his political weight against

Jahangir occurred at the time of Khusraw's rebellion. In the province of Punjab, the

young prince had come across the leader of the Sikh community, Arjan, fifth in the line

the Sikh Gurus and compiler of the Sikh scriptures, the *Adi Granth*. Jahangir wrote:

> Khusraw happened to halt at the place where [Arjan] was, and he came out and
> did homage to him. He behaved to Khusraw in certain special ways, and made on
> his forehead a fingermark in saffron, which the Indians (*Hinduvan*) call *qashqa*,
> and is considered propitious (*shugun*). When this came to my ears I clearly
> understood his folly (*butlan*).[610]

When the prince lost his bid for the throne, the Sikh Guru had to pay for this "folly" with

his life.[611] His death too became a subject of circulating prophecies, used by some to

celebrate Jahangir's defense of Islam. For example, Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi – a

Naqshbandi Sufi whose enthusiasm for the millennium was mentioned in the last chapter

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[610] Jahangir and Thackston, *Jahangirnama (translation)*, 59. Jahangir and Hashim, *Jahangirnamah*, 42.
[611] For a historical treatment of the circumstances surrounding the death of Guru Arjan, see Louis E.
Fenech, "Martyrdom and the Sikh Tradition," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 117, no. 4 (1997).

– wrote to the Mughal governor of Punjab rejoicing at the news of the Sikh leader's death. In this letter, he also offered an oneiric omen in Jahangir's favor: "Before this infidel was killed, this humble one [Sirhindi] had seen a dream that the emperor (*badshah-i waqt*), has broken the wretched head of polytheism (*shirk*) and, truth be told, that Gentile (*gabr*) was the chief of the polytheists and the leader of the infidels." [612]

From the discussion above it may seem that Khusraw was to Hindus, Jains, and Sikhs what Jahangir was to Muslims. But it is important to note that these were more the expectations of ambitious holy men like Jami, Sirhindi, Man Singh, and Arjan rather than firmly held policies of either Jahangir or Khusraw. Clad in omens and blessings, these expectations structured the religio-political field within which the competition for sovereignty took place. The actions taken and alliances made by the Mughal father and son show how they formulated complex strategies within this field. For example, Jahangir as the "champion of Islam" had finished off his father's "heretic" ideologue Abul Fazl with the help of a Hindu Raja. Later in his reign, he indicted for heresy the same Naqshbandi Sufi, Sirhindi, who had praised the emperor for the death of Guru Arjan. It is significant that the emperor did not turn over Sirhindi to a Muslim judge (*qazi*) to be prosecuted according to the *shari'at*. Rather, he handed the Sufi over to his fearsome Hindu hunting companion Ani Rai Singhdalan (Commander Lion-Crusher) to be imprisoned. [613]

Conversely, at the time of Khusraw's rebellion a troop of Turkish soldiers on their way from Kabul to offer their services to Jahangir had, upon meeting Khusraw, thrown in

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[612] See letter 193 in Sirhindi, *Maktubat*, 1:11-13. The Persian text is also quoted in Rizvi, *Muslim Revivalist Movements*, 249-50.

[613] Jahangir and Thackston, *Jahangirnama (translation)*, 304. Jahangir and Hashim, *Jahangirnamah*, 309. Jahangir had given his servant Anup Rai, the hindi title of Ani Rai Singhdalan (Commander Lion Crusher) after the man had fought off a huge lion with his bare hands during a royal hunt.

their lot with the rebelling prince.[614] Thus, it would be hasty to assume a simple or stable

dichotomy between "Muslim" father and "Gentile" son. Rather, it is more feasible to

conclude that, once made emperor, Jahangir learned his lesson quickly and abandoned the

anti-Akbar stance he had cultivated during his days as a rebellious prince.[615] Perhaps

sitting on Akbar's throne had shown him the practical wisdom of his father in casting the

net of sovereignty as wide as possible. Jahangir's embrace of a more "Akbari" attitude is

also evident from the early pages of his memoir where, alongside declaring himself the

embodiment of Muslim prophecies, Jahangir proudly praised Akbar's personal qualities,

his "universal" patronage of all systems of belief, his veneration of the "Great

Luminaries" the Sun and the Moon, and last but not least his tradition of taking on

imperial disciples.[616]

Jahangir's use of the institution of imperial discipleship is well-attested in

contemporary sources and well-studied in modern scholarship. In his memoir, the

emperor noted how he had charged his "chief justice" (*mir-i 'adl*) Shaykh Ahmad Lahori

with the duty of vetting and initiating his disciples.[617] One of his generals, Mirza Nathan

described in his writings how as a young officer he had been inspired to become

Jahangir's devotee.[618] Nathan had been seriously ill with a fever and unable to take part in

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[614] Many of these soldiers were from Badakhshan, Babur's hereditary territory in Central Asia. Jahangir and Thackston, *Jahangirnama (translation)*, 50. Jahangir and Hashim, *Jahangirnamah*, 32.

[615] Even the Jesuits recorded this turn of affairs: "the King is now not as much of a Moor as he showed himself to be at the start, rather he has clearly said that he will follow the path of his father, and he shows this clearly through his works. This is far less bad (*menos mal he isto*)." Quoted in Alam and Subrahmanyam, "Frank Disputations," 477.

[616] Jahangir and Thackston, *Jahangirnama (translation)*, 36-44, 53. Jahangir and Hashim, *Jahangirnamah*, 19-20, 35-36.

[617] Jahangir and Thackston, *Jahangirnama (translation)*, 53. Jahangir and Hashim, *Jahangirnamah*, 36.

[618] Although born of Persian stock, the Mirza was called Nathan probably because of the very Indian practice of wearing a "nath" or nose-ring as a symbol of a votive offering that may have warded off childhood illness. See the translator's introduction to Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi, A History of the Mughal wars in Assam, Cooch Behar, Bengal*, trans., Moayyidul Islam Borah and Suryya Kumar Bhuyan (Gauhati: The Government of Assam Dept. of Historical and Antiquarian Studies Narayani Handiqui

battle when the emperor appeared to him in a dream, cured his serious illness, and enjoined him to fight. We also know that Jahangir enrolled as disciples eminent men of all backgrounds, granting this favor even to Sir Thomas Roe, the English Ambassador from the court of King James I.[619] In effect, Akbar's millennial scheme was continued as an important royal institution by his son. Moreover, Jahangir was not the only one to use this ritual mode of binding men to the sovereign. When the rebellious Khusraw made his bid for sovereignty, he too had his officers swear oaths of discipleship. These were no lightly taken oaths. When Jahangir caught the rebels, he had them publicly impaled.[620]

Overall, the Sufi practice of inculcating loyalty and marking fealty that had been inflicted upon Babur by Shah Isma'il had, over the course of a century, become an institutional scaffolding of the Mughal imperial system. This had occurred gradually but deliberately. Babur had witnessed how the Safavids acted as both kings and saints, first absorbing his Timurid cousins and then him as their subordinates and disciples. However, having become a sovereign of import only towards the end of his life, Babur's sacred legacy was modest; limited to a few "ordinary" miracles remembered posthumously or inserted into his memoir. His son Humayun, on the other hand, had inherited a great conquest state. Subsequently, he had used his wealth and expertise in the occult to create a Safavid-like circle of devotees complete with cosmologically marked headgear. But Humayun lost his empire and had his royal cult dismantled by Shah Tahmasb. The project did not die with Humayun's uncrowning, however. His son Akbar had successfully revived the scheme at the moment of the first Islamic millennium. In the

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Historical Institute, 1936). This dream incident involving Nathan and Jahangir is discussed in detail in Richards, *Mughal Empire*, 107.

[619]For a discussion of how Sir Thomas Roe was inducted as the king's disciple, see Richards, "Imperial Authority."

[620] Richards, *Mughal Empire*, 94-95.

process, he had claimed an unrivalled spiritual status and organized a cult of discipleship. Despite resistance from certain quarters, Akbar succeeded in institutionalizing his sacrality using the norms of sainthood. Thus among the Mughals, Jahangir was the first to inherit a fully functioning system of sacred kingship in which the sovereign was both the political leader and spiritual chief of the realm. Upon ascending the throne he became both the king of kings and the saint of saints.

A Sufi treatise from the period related how Jahangir jealously guarded his saintly preeminence. A prominent Sufi of the Naqshbandi order, Khwaja Khawand Mahmud, had gotten into trouble with the emperor for trying to recruit one of his noblemen as disciple. When the nobleman complained that he was being unduly pressured by the Sufi leader, the emperor asked Khwaja Khawand for an explanation. The Sufi was only able to avoid Jahangir's wrath by declaring himself an imperial disciple:

> The *faqir* [this humble one] is also your Majesty's murid, for there are two types of murids, i.e., *murid-i anabati* [a disciple to whom repentance (*tawba*) is administered]…and *murid-i shar'i* [disciples according to Islamic doctrine]. The former are these days rare; the latter discipleship relates to the obedience of the God's command, 'Obey God and obey the Prophet and those who are in command among you.' Since your Majesty is the emperor and is in command, I am your Majesty's *murid* [disciple].[621]

This account is from a hagiography of Khwaja Khawand written by his son. Its aim was to highlight the Khwaja's wisdom in making Jahangir believe that the Sufi master had become his disciple while, in reality, only following the Quranic injunction to obey the sovereign. Whatever the factual validity of the anecdote, it gives us a sense of how being the disciple of the emperor could overlap and compete with being the devotee of another politically ambitious saint.

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[621] This passage is from the hagiography of Khwaja Khawand Mahmud entitled *Mirat-i Tayyiba*, written by his son Muhammad Mu'inuddin, quoted and translated in Rizvi, *Muslim Revivalist Movements*, 184.

Jahangir's assumption of his father's style of sacred kingship can be seen most vividly in accounts of the religious debates he presided over between his Muslim scholars and the Christian priests of the third Jesuit mission. Much as they had with Akbar, the Jesuits believed they had a good chance at converting Jahangir to the Christian faith. Their letters from the time narrated how a year after his accession, the emperor had abandoned his exclusively Islamic stance and again developed an attitude towards Christianity that was reminiscent of his father's views – though there was no report of another ordeal by fire.[622] Jesuit accounts on the matter are corroborated by another Mughal account, that of the Muslim scholar and courtier 'Abdus Sattar.

During Akbar's reign, 'Abdus Sattar had been assigned to learn Latin and study the science, religion, and politics of the "Franks." He had worked with the Jesuits and translated several works on Christianity into Persian. He had continued this work under Jahangir who mentioned him in his memoir, noting with pleasure that 'Abdus Sattar had presented him with a collection of works in Humayun's own hand on astrology and the occult – works that 'Abdus Sattar had tried and found to be effective![623] Fortunately, 'Abdus Sattar also composed an account of the religious disputations at court in a text called *Majalis-i Jahangiri* (The Assemblies of Jahangir).[624]

'Abdus Sattar's "Assemblies of Jahangir," it has been suggested, was a work in the mold of Sufi texts known as *malfuzat* (utterances) that recorded the sayings of the

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[622]Alam and Subrahmanyam, "Frank Disputations," 477.

[623] Jahangir and Thackston, *Jahangirnama (translation)*, 299. Jahangir and Hashim, *Jahangirnamah*, 302.

[624] The Majalis-i Jahangiri is available in a published edition. Abd al-Sattar ibn Qasim Lahuri, Riza Allah Shah Arif Nawshahi, and Muin Nizami, *Majalis-i Jahangiri: Majlisha-yi Shabanah-i Darbar-i Nur al-Din Jahangir* (Tehran: Markaz-i Pizhuhishi-i Miras-i Maktub, 1385). At the time of writing, however, I was unable to obtain a copy of this text. Accordingly, my account is based on the detailed analysis and selected translations of this work found in Alam and Subrahmanyam, "Frank Disputations." I would like to thank Barbara Metcalf for pointing me to this study.

saint.[625] It was most likely meant for a close circle of courtiers. In it, 'Abdus Sattar called

himself a disciple of the emperor whom he referred to as spiritual master (*pir o murshid*),

guide (*rahnuma*), and miracle-worker. He described how Jahangir had ordered him to be

present during religious disputations with the Jesuits since he had knowledge of their

language and texts. Once during these discussions, he had read his translation of the Bible

with such enthusiasm that the emperor thought he had become a secret convert to

Christianity. Jahangir's reaction is worth noting. He did not condemn 'Abdus Sattar but

rather stated that if the court scholar indeed had changed his religion, he should not be

afraid to declare it for fear of punishment. This was because "Jahangir was a Universal

Manifestation (*Mazhar-i Kull*); and that just as God was concerned with all his slaves, the

emperor too was concerned with all of God's slaves."[626] Jahangir repeated his position at

another point in the discussions, again declaring himself the Universal Manifestation and

giving 'Abdus Sattar permission to change his religious affiliation, from Islam to

Christianity, if he so desired.[627] The term Universal Manifestation (*Mazhar-i Kull*) had a

resonance with Akbar's famous policy of Universal Peace (*Sulh-i Kull*). Its use shows

that Jahangir had assumed the same "universal" spiritual status as his father, a status that

placed him above all religious traditions and made him the ultimate arbiter of religious

truth.

However, not all of our sources are in agreement on the matter of the emperor's

grand sacred status as a saint of saints or Universal Manifestation. Most significantly,

Jahangir affected no such pretensions in his memoir. In fact, he did quite the opposite. In

the Jahangirnama, which in the twelfth year of his reign was distributed across the empire

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[625] Alam and Subrahmanyam, "Frank Disputations," 487.
[626] Ibid.: 492.
[627] Ibid.: 496.

and beyond as a model of royal behavior, the emperor offered a pious and humble image of himself. Jahangir's royal diary did not contain a single assertion that even came close to Akbar's claim of being the greatest spiritual being of the age. While Akbar's chronicles had described his every act as miraculous, Jahangir's writings did not contain even a few meager dream miracles of his own. If the Jahangirnama was meant to be a public account of how he performed his sacred sovereignty, it provides a jarringly subdued contrast to the grand claims of his father preserved in the Akbarnama. We know from the account of ʿAbdus Sattar and the Jesuit missionaries that Jahangir had not retreated from the millennial and messianic sacrality his father had so assiduously instituted. But then why did he present such a modest and profane self-image in his memoir?

The Case of Jahangir's Modesty

Jahangir's memoirs are often taken to be the official chronicle of his reign. This is understandable, given that he did not commission a formal chronicle like the Akbarnama, choosing instead to have his own diary completed, polished, and illustrated as a record of his rule.[628] This work was similar in many ways to a court chronicle. It followed an annalistic organization. It recorded the emperor's routine in the manner of a court diarist or news writer (*waqiʿa navis*): promotions, grants, rewards, gifts given and received, types and number of animals hunted, etc. Yet, for all these similarities, the Book of Jahangir did not belong to the same genre as the Book of Akbar.

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[628] The first version of the Jahangirnama was publicly distributed in Jahangir's twelfth year to his nobles and imperial neighbors to serve as a model of royal behavior. The final version continued the narrative up to the nineteenth year. See the discussion in Jahangir and Thackston, *Jahangirnama (translation)*, ix.

The Akbarnama epitomized a style of writing in which historiography and hagiography were fused together to describe the life of a sovereign who possessed both royal and mystical qualities. Unsurprisingly, it was modeled after Timur's Book of Victory (Zafarnama).[629] The author of such a text was more than a courtier of the king or a historian of the dynasty. He was also a devotee and disciple of the patron and his family.[630] Thus Akbar's closest disciple and the officiant of his sacred order, Abul Fazl, took it upon himself to describe in the Book of Akbar the cosmological significance and hidden truth of nearly every word and deed of his monarch cum messiah. The Book of Jahangir, on the other hand, was a first person narrative. This was a rare form of self-expression. While kings and aristocrats were known to compose poetry, perform calligraphy, and paint, it was uncommon for a sovereign to keep his own diary or describe his own feelings in candid prose. Before Jahangir, we only know of Babur and Shah Tahmasb who wrote about themselves in such a manner.

That the "memoir" was not quite yet a genre in its own right – that is to say, it had no canon of its own – is evident from the fact that such rare works continued to be classified under other better established forms of writing like "chronicle" or "epic" (*nama*), "remembrances" (*tazkira*), "annals" (*waqia'*), "daily affairs" (*ruznamcha*), "regulations" or "norms of behavior" (*tuzuk*), all of which typically dealt with the life or deeds of someone other than the author. Furthermore, while there was no dearth of works containing elements of autobiography – letters, travelogues, pilgrimage narratives, eye-

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[629] Early in his reign, Akbar had commissioned an illustrated version of the Zafarnama. The paintings executed for this project later on provided a model for those of the Akbarnama. Milo C. Beach, "Jahangir's Jahangir-Nama," in *The Powers of Art: Patronage in Indian Culture*, ed. Barbara Stoler Miller (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 228.

[630] Even if the label of disciple does not apply to Sharaf Ali Yazdi, who composed the chronicle *Zafarnama* two decades after Timur's death, it is nevertheless notable that Yazdi had used his expertise in the occult sciences along with his rhetorical skills to paint a hagiographical and saintly picture his patron, Timur's son Shahrukh. Specifically, Yazdi called Shahrukh a centennial *mujaddid* or renewer of Islam. See note 102.

witness accounts in chronicles, professions of devotion in hagiographies of saints, personal confessions in works of ethics, etc. – texts nakedly devoted to one's own life were unusual. A reason for the rarity of self-referential writing was, plausibly, that it was considered bad form to discuss one's own life and accomplishments. Social etiquette dictated the use of profuse praise for others and abject humility for oneself. Thus, it was common to use expressions such as slave (*banda*) and worthless (*haqir*) for oneself and master (*mawla*) and icon or altar (*qibla*) for one's superiors. Overall, then, writing about oneself required the author to affect a high degree of modesty. When undertaken by a great sovereign, such a literary endeavor produced an effect that contrasted sharply with the hagiographic tone of a royal chronicle.

There is no doubt that Jahangir followed the "modest" conventions of the "memoir" and maintained, to the degree he could, an air of being ordinary. At times, he used a humble expression to refer to himself: a petitioner at the divine court (*niyazmand-i dargah-i ilahi*).[631] He appeared subject to the same whims of nature and fortune as the common man, and used the same remedies and protections against disease and danger that were available to everyone else. Once, when seriously ill, he wrote how it was his prayers at the Chishti shrine at Ajmer that cured him – a blessing he repaid by wearing a pearl earring as a sign of devotion to his patron saint buried there, Mu'inuddin Chishti.[632] Similarly, when during a hunt a lion charged at his group, Jahangir described how his servants pushed him over in their panic and trampled him: "I know for certain that two or

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[631] Jahangir and Hashim, *Jahangirnamah*, 137; Jahangir and Thackston, *Jahangirnama (translation)*, 144. This humble formula was often used, however, when he was hinting at his greatness. See below.
[632] Jahangir and Hashim, *Jahangirnamah*, 151-152; Jahangir and Thackston, *Jahangirnama (translation)*, 161.

three of them stepped on my chest getting over me."[633] He did not punish anyone but instead rewarded all those who helped subdue and slay the beast. Even when Jahangir's accomplishments were truly extraordinary, he clearly stopped himself from offering too great a detail or too high a praise. When, for example, a ferocious lioness jumped onto the back of his elephant, he swung around and, using his gun as a club, killed it with a single blow. This famous incident was depicted in multiple paintings over the next century by his descendants but, in his own memoir, Jahangir gave it but a brief mention stating, "Since it is not seemly to write such things of myself (*chun az khud navishtan khushnuma nist*), I will cut these reports short."[634] In effect, Jahangir's humble voice in the text traced the conventional grooves of genre and society.

Here, the important question to ask is why did Jahangir, a great sovereign and a "Universal Manifestation," restrict himself to this intrinsically modest mode of self expression? And, even more so, why did he conform to its conventions? In fact, there are intriguing examples of autobiographical writings from the time in which these norms were transgressed. Often it was done deliberately in order to underscore the exceptional status of the author. This is especially true for works penned by men of great spiritual ambition, namely, saints and would-be messiahs. In Jahangir's reign, the most prominent example of such a case was that of the above mentioned Naqshbandi Sufi, Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi. Sirhindi had described his spiritual achievements in his letters to his disciples and followers, which had been bound together and circulated during his life.

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[633] Jahangir and Hashim, *Jahangirnamah*, 106; Jahangir and Thackston, *Jahangirnama (translation)*, 117.
[634] Jahangir and Hashim, *Jahangirnamah*, 419; Jahangir and Thackston, *Jahangirnama (translation)*, 403. For the eighteenth century paintings commemorating this event see Francesca von Habsburg, *The St. Petersburg Muraqqa': Album of Indian and Persian Miniatures from the 16th through the 18th Century and Specimens of Persian Calligraphy by Imad al-Hasani*, 2 vols. (Milano: Leonardo arte, 1996), 1: plates 115, 158.

Based on the contents of these volumes of letters (*maktubat*), the Sufi had been hauled up before Jahangir on charges of heresy. This is how the emperor described the "charlatan" (*shayyad*) Sirhindi's sacrilegious assertions:

> One of the pieces of nonsense he wrote for his disciples and believers was a book called *Maktubat* [letters], a miscellany of drivel (*jung al-muhammilat*) in which he had penned the basis of his claptrap that would lead to infidelity and apostasy. One thing he had written in his *Maktubat* was the following: "During my [spiritual] progress I chanced upon the state of dual lights. I saw it was an extremely lofty and pleasant stage. I passed beyond it and reached the stage of the Faruq [the second Caliph Umar]. From the stage of the Faruq I crossed over to the stage of the Siddiq [the first Caliph Abu Bakr]. Having written a description worthy of each, I became at one with the stage of Mahbubiyyat [the stage of "being the Beloved" traditionally associated with Prophet Muhammad]. It was seen as a stage of extremely brilliant light and color. I found myself reflected in the lights and colors, that is – [Jahangir exclaims] God forgive me! – I passed beyond the stage of the caliphs and ascended to the highest level."[635]

Jahangir accused the Naqshbandi Sufi of setting up a network of "caliphs" to spread his heretical message. He thought it best to imprison Sirhindi until "the frenzy in his mind (*ashuftagi-yi dimagh*) would settle down, as well as the uproar among the common folk (*shurish-i 'awam*)."

With the phrase "frenzy in his mind," Jahangir suggested that Sirhindi had temporarily lost his head, a condition common among overly enthusiastic mystics. However, Sirhindi certainly knew the risks he was taking by committing such "ecstatic" claims to paper. In one of his letters, he had written that to disclose even more of his spiritual achievements would mean "the throat would be slit and the gullet severed."[636] In other words, Sirhindi's statements in his letters were only muted versions of his visions of his own sacrality. What these visions were we may never know except for the

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[635] Jahangir and Hashim, *Jahangirnamah*, 309; Jahangir and Thackston, *Jahangirnama (translation)*, 304.
[636] Sirhindi's letter quoted in Friedmann, *Sirhindi*, 27.

descriptions given by his disciples of their saint in a state of divine rapture. This is how

one of his chief disciples narrated the experience:

> Sometimes he [Sirhindi] summoned his advanced disciples (*khils ashab*), and
> explained his own chosen secrets (*asrar-i khasa*) and unveiled divine knowledge
> (*ma'arif-i makshufa*). He ordinarily tried to conceal those secrets with all his
> heart, but when he was explaining this divine knowledge, it was perceptible that
> he was encountering and receiving that spiritual state (*hal*). There were many
> who, when they heard this sublime divine knowledge from his pearl-scattering
> tongue, in gazing upon him at that very instant themselves experienced that divine
> knowledge. Most of the time that this revered one spent with his companions and
> others was in silence. His companions, from their extreme awe and wonder at
> him, did not even have the power to breathe. His control was at such a level that,
> in spite of the onslaught and frequency of numerous kinds of enrapturing
> visitations (*waridat-i mutanawwi'a*), no external sign of the rapture of that
> revered one ever appeared. He was never seen to be agitated, to exclaim, to shout,
> or to cry out, except on very rare occasions. Occasionally he wiped away a tear or
> was close to weeping, and sometimes in the midst of explaining divine realities
> (*haqa'iq*) his face became flushed.[637]

As a spiritually ambitious Sufi who had striven for recognition as a saint in his

lifetime, Sirhindi epitomized, in his mystical and literary practices, a broader social

institution at work. This was the institution of sainthood. The contender for this coveted

spiritual status had to follow a dangerous ritual path which involved breaking societal

conventions and doctrinal taboos. The more "inviolable" the norm, the greater the

spiritual reward existed for breaking it. We can see this at work in the stages of Sirhindi's

spiritual ascension as he rose past, one by one, the eminent ranks of the first two Caliphs

of Islam to achieve a status equal to that of the Prophet himself. These stages and norms,

by their aura of inviolability, circumscribed sacred spheres of increasing significance that

could only be entered at the cost of overstepping strongly proscribed boundaries. Such

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[637] This passage is from a seventeenth century Persian hagiography of Sirhindi written by one of his chief
disciples. For the original Persian, see Badr al-Din Sirhindi, *Hazarat al-Quds* (Lahore: Mahakama-i Awqaf
Panjab, 1971), 82-83. The English translation is taken from Carl W. Ernst, "The Daily Life of a Saint,
Ahmad Sirhindi, by Badr al-Din Sirhindi," in *Islam in South Asia in Practice*, ed. Barbara Daly Metcalf
(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 162.

transgressive acts and claims, however, exposed the actor to condemnation and ridicule. But this risk had to be taken because, in a paradoxical sense, the path to sacrality was paved with heresy and madness. This phenomenon was widely reflected in the social practices of the time, both in the antinomianism of naked, screaming mystics and in the bodily and violent excesses of royal life. We have already seen it at work not only in the messianic and prophetic claims of other Sufis like Astarabadi, Nurbakhshi, Shattari, and Jawnpuri but also in the sovereign reputations of monarchs like Timur, Shah Isma'il, Humayun, and Akbar. Sufis and monarchs, in this milieu, were forged by similar ritual processes of sacrality and beholden to similar norms of saintliness.

An important aspect of these norms was that once sainthood was established, its true nature and full extent could only be communicated explicitly to the inner circle. At a distance from this core, the saint's miraculous accomplishments were typically expressed in ambiguous language, and clothed in polyvalent symbols, poetic speech, and esoteric lore. This not only allowed the claimant to avoid condemnation by enemies and critics but also created a draw for potential followers to gain access to the inner circle. We can see how such a scheme was at work in Sirhindi's case, whose "public" letters contained only a diluted version – just a glimmer – of his "private" insights about his spiritual status. One could argue that Sirhindi had miscalculated; that the mystical content of his letters had not been vague enough to let him avoid charges of heresy. However, the fact that Sirhindi only spent one year in prison so that "the frenzy in his mind would settle down," after which he was released, granted a substantial purse, and given a prestigious

appointment in Jahangir's entourage, shows that his actions remained well within the socially accepted institution of sainthood.[638]

Ambitious monarchs in this milieu had used similar methods for articulating the true extent of their sovereignty, manifestly to their inner circle and mysteriously to the wider world. Thus, Timur had denied in public that he was even a king while his soldiers and successors celebrated him as a messianic Lord of Conjunction. Shah Isma'il had expressed his claim to be Ali's reincarnation in ambiguous verse even as his Qizilbash soldiers broke the strongest of taboos to prove their loyalty to him as the godsource. Humayun had assumed the status of *axis mundi* not by promulgating an edict but by arranging his court according to astrological and alchemical principles. Even Akbar, who had declared his millennial and saintly status so explicitly at first, later adopted a more cautious approach. In his regulations of 1601, Akbar forbade the practice of prostration before the monarch in the General Assembly (*Darbar-i 'Am*) while still requiring it in the Private Assembly (*Darbar-i Khas*) where only members of his inner circle were admitted:

> But as some perverse and dark-minded men look upon prostration as blasphemous man-worship, His Majesty [Akbar], from his practical wisdom, has ordered it to be discontinued by the ignorant, and remitted it to all ranks, forbidding even his private attendants from using it in the *Darbar i 'Am* (General Assembly). However, in the private assembly, when any of those are in waiting, upon whom the star of good fortune shines, and they receive the order of seating themselves, they certainly perform the prostration of gratitude by bowing down their foreheads to the earth, and thus participate in the halo of good fortune. In this manner, by forbidding the people at large to prostrate, but allowing the Elect to do so, His Majesty fulfills the wishes of both, and shows the world a fitting example of practical wisdom. [639]

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[638] For a discussion of Sirhindi's religious attitude after he was released and reinstated by Jahangir, see Friedmann, *Sirhindi*, 83-85.

[639] This change in policy was stated explicitly in the "Regulations regarding the Kornish and Taslim." Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak and others, *A'in-i Akbari (translation)*, 156. Abu al-Fazl 'Allami and Ahmad, *A'in-i Akbari*, 120.

Much in the same vein, Jahangir too divided his royal life into an inner and an outer existence. This division created two distinct social spaces in which the emperor lived and demarcated two symbolic realms in which he expressed himself. According to this scheme, the Jahangirnama was a description of Jahangir's outer (*surat*) and material (*zahiri*) world – of his public life and profane self. The self-effacement, modesty, and "profanity" built into the form of the "memoir" made it eminently suitable for the task of recording the uncontroversial daily routine of the emperor. Thus, it related the emperor's public audiences, hunts, pilgrimages, and travels. It recorded his interest in the flora and fauna, the fruits and foods, and the castes and tribes of his realm. In it, Jahangir noted down the stories and anecdotes of his empire both believable and incredulous, its miracles and marvels both good and bad, its religious practices both decent and absurd. In short, it described the empire and the emperor out and about in it. But the text contained no explicit references to his spiritual (*ma'ni*) and inner (*batini*) self, his Private Audience Hall and his visions of his own sacrality.

Jahangir's memoir remained completely silent about the deep debates the emperor had held with the Jesuits in which he had assumed a status above all religions. Indeed, the Jahangirnama did not even mention the Christian priests. This partitioning of Jahangir's royal self across two realms of existence and its implications for royal cultural production was recognized by his courtiers and disciples. We can see this in the way 'Abdus Sattar compared the Jahangirnama to his own hagiographical work on Jahangir's religious pursuits (*Majalis-i Jahangiri*). He called the former work an account of the emperor's activities of the day (*ruznamcha*) while terming the latter an account of the emperor's

activities of the night (*shabnamcha*).[640] It was these nightly or private activities of the

emperor, in which only the Elect participated, that formed the explicit basis of Jahangir's

sacred and saintly cult.

To summarize the argument, the lack of grand spiritual claims in Jahangir's

memoir is not evidence either of his modesty or piety or of his abandonment of the

Akbari tradition of sacred kingship. Rather, Jahangir's choice of a "modest" mode of

narrating his daily routine is proof that he did not deign to express the true nature and

extent of his spiritual status in prose. In fact, he had invented a whole other form of

expression for that purpose, using a medium much better suited for recording talismanic

qualities and conveying iconic messages. This was the medium of images. Jahangir's

miracles and spiritual status – indeed, his millennial claims – are preserved in the

innovative paintings he had his artists produce. Ironically, the Catholic missionaries may

have unwittingly aided the emperor in this project when in their effort to convert the great

"Mogor" to Christianity they had brought to him icons upon icons of the Messiah.

The Sacred Medium of Painting

It is well-acknowledged that painting was an important medium for Jahangir, one

to which he applied a great deal of inventive energy.[641] This is saying a great deal in a

cultural setting where the patronage and appreciation of art was already an established

aspect of aristocratic life. In historical terms, the visual arts had become a powerful and

necessary medium for the conception and enunciation of Muslim kingship from the

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[640] Alam and Subrahmanyam, "Frank Disputations," 487.
[641] In the foreword to the first book-length study of painting in Jahangir's reign, the Honorary General Secretary of The Asiatic Society observed that "If [Mughal Emperor] Akbar was the pioneer experimentalist on internationalism in religion, Jahangir was in art." See the foreword in Asok Kumar Das, *Mughal Painting during Jahangir's Time* (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1978).

Mongol period (i.e., thirteenth century) onwards.[642] In the fifteenth and sixteenth

centuries, Timurid and Safavid princes were tutored in painting and as kings competed

with each other in the commissioning of art.[643] Even if they could not afford to

commission or purchase it, well-born men and women certainly knew how to appreciate

it. Babur, for example, in his days as the impoverished ruler of Kabul, commented on the

portrait technique of the famous Timurid painter Bihzad, noting that the master artist

tended to draw "faces of beardless people badly by drawing the double chin too big."[644]

But this art appreciation was not merely limited to evaluating the painted image. It also

included gazing upon the world through the lens of art. Thus, when awestruck by the

beautiful autumnal foliage of an apple sapling (*nihal-i sib*), Babur gushed that even "if

painters had exerted every effort they wouldn't have been able to depict such a thing." [645]

In sum, there had developed among the Persianizing elites of India and Iran a particular

way of seeing their surroundings and themselves through the painted image. Among the

Mughals of India, this visual paradigm was already highly evolved by the time of

Jahangir.

Within this paradigm, not all paintings were accorded the same value. Those that

depicted kings and prophets held a greater attraction for patron and artist alike. Along

with scenes of courtly merriment and victories in battle, the Prophet Muhammad's night

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[642] For a classic history of the Persian miniature painting tradition see, Laurence Binyon, James Vere Stewart Wilkinson, and Basil Gray, *Persian Miniature Painting: Including a Critical and Descriptive Catalogue of the Miniatures Exhibited at Burlington house, January-March, 1931* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933).
[643] For a good discussion of the role art played in early Safavid times see, for example, Hillenbrand Hillenbrand, "Iconography of the Shah-nama-yi Shahi."
[644] Babur and Thackston, *Baburnama (translation)*, 218.
[645] Ibid., 300. Babur, Thackston, and Khan, *Baburnama (polyglot)*, 527.

journey to heaven had become a choice study for the painter's brush.[646] However, such

imagery tended to run afoul of the long-held Islamic strictures against the making of

graven images. To bypass these strictures, or at least to offer a counter rationale, there

had developed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries an "Islamic art historical" narrative

that gave painting a sacred dimension. This narrative consisted of traditions that located

painting in the practices of ancient Biblical prophets who were also revered in Islam. [647]

In these traditions, which are found both in the universal histories of the time –

including the Millennial History of Akbar – as well as in prefaces to art albums, an

important tradition was that of the Chest of Witnessing.[648] This story was told as a valid

and sacred historical report passed down from the Companions of the Prophet. It related

that after Prophet Muhammad's death, a set of his Companions were sent by the first

caliph to the emperor of Byzantium. This Christian sovereign showed them a chest with

thousands upon thousands of compartments, each containing an image of a prophet

painted on silk.[649] He began by bringing out the image of Adam and continued one by

one until he reached the last box and brought out an image that was, the Companions

attested, of Muhammad. When asked, the Christian emperor told the Companions that the

Chest of Witnessing had been discovered by Alexander in Adam's treasury in the lands

of the west. The prophet Daniel had taken it from Alexander and made copies of the

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[646] For a sample of paintings depicting the Prophet's ascension journey in fourteenth to sixteenth century Iran, along with a review of literature, see David J. Roxburgh, *Prefacing the Image: The Writing of Art History in Sixteenth-Century Iran* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 160-161, 201-205.

[647] My argument follows the insightful analysis of these paintings and sacred traditions offered by David Roxburgh. See Ibid. I would like to thank Yael Rice for referring me to his work.

[648] The Chest of Witnessing tradition is discussed in detail in Ibid., 170-174. The Timurid historian Mirkhvand related it in his universal history *Rawzat al-Safa'* (The Garden of Purity). It is also mentioned in several prefaces to art albums of the time as discussed in Roxburgh, *Prefacing the Image*. Most importantly, it was related in the Millennial History written for Akbar. See Tattavi and Qazvini, *Tarikh-i Alfi*, 1: 63-64.

[649] Interestingly, the Persian word used for "chest" in this tradition was the same that was used for Ark of the Covenant, a "container of revealed truth." Roxburgh, *Prefacing the Image*, 173.

images, which had come into Byzantine possession. In short, the Chest of Witnessing tradition maintained that the original images of the prophets had been given to Adam by God and were copied faithfully by Daniel who, it was well-known, possessed a gift of the occult. Image-making according to this view was not just a form of idolatry but also an important aspect of both divine and prophetic practice. A related tradition held that although no one made images in early Islam, Ali had laid the foundation of calligraphy. It maintained that Ali had made designs (*raqam*) so refined that it amazed even the Chinese, who were widely considered to be masters of the aesthetic arts. As David Roxburgh has argued, such traditions sought to legitimate painting by associating it with calligraphy – already a sacred art – and by rooting the two artistic forms in the experience of early Muslim figures.[650]

The notion that painting was a "scriptural" art, one in which divine and sacred knowledge could be transmitted, was also conveyed through the story of the Iranian "false prophet" Mani (c. 216 to c. 276).[651] Mani's adherents were well-known "heretics" of early Islamic history. It was widely held that Mani had presented the (false) proof of his prophecy in painted images. The implication of this story, especially when it was told alongside the Chest of Witnessing tradition, was that even if Mani had been a false prophet, he had certainly been clever enough to make his claim in a medium that had the ability to enthrall people and had once been used by God and his true prophets. Thus, not all references to Mani and his art carried negative connotations. Indeed, the spell-binding aspect of Mani's legendary images was commonly used to celebrate the mastery of the

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[650] Ibid., 186.
[651] The place of Mani in the early modern Islamic art historical tradition is discussed in detail in Ibid., 174-181. For an association of Mani with heresy and the magical arts in Islam and its use in Safavid polemics see Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*, 48-54, passim.

visual arts. The title "Mani of the Age" was a coveted one for Muslim artists and, in the case of the Mughals, for Hindu ones too.

Overall, the notion of the sacred and talismanic quality of the painted image had filtered into the occult traditions of Islam. Images were commonly used in techniques of magic and drawn in manuals of talisman-making. Paintings were an important aspect of books of divination (*falnama*) such as the famous one painted for the Safavid Shah Tahmasb in 1550.[652] In at least one strand of Islam's mystical tradition, that of the millenarian Hurufis of Iran and Central Asia, and their important offshoots such as the Bektashis of Anatolia, the painted image and the calligraphed alphabet even served as scripture.[653] Thus, despite the doctrinal restrictions against image-making in Islam, in early modern India and Iran not all associations with the visual arts were negative or profane for Muslims. Indeed, when the Jesuits appeared at the Mughal court, they reacted with surprise that there existed among the nobility and the populace a much better attitude towards holy images than that of the protestant "iconoclasts" of Europe.[654]

It should not be surprising, then, that we find in the Jahangirnama strong evidence that painting for Jahangir meant much more than mere aesthetics and representation. Consider, for example, his reference to the art when he narrated his father's first victory in battle. Akbar had gone up against Hemu, a powerful Hindu general who had served the rival Afghan Sur dynasty during Humayun's reign. Hemu had posed a major threat to the

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[652] Roxburgh, *Prefacing the Image*, 199. Also, for this and other surviving sixteenth century royal books of divination see Massumeh Farhad and Serpil Bagci, eds., *Falnama: The Book of Omens* (Washington, D.C.: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 2009).

[653] For the images and icons used in Bektashi mystical practices, see Jong, "Bektashiism."

[654] In remarking on the Mughal appreciation for sacred icons, the Jesuit Father Monserrate observed: "In other respects they may be no better than those Christian revolutionaries, the 'iconoclasts'; but in this respect at least they are certainly their superiors." *Commentary of Father Monserrate* quoted in Ebba Koch, "The Influence of the Jesuit Missions," in *Mughal Art and Imperial Ideology: Collected Essays* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 9.

nascent Mughal Empire at the time when Akbar ascended the throne. His defeat and capture was for the young Akbar, thirteen years of age, a great accomplishment. When the injured and half-dead Hemu was presented after the battle to the youthful emperor, his regent told Akbar to cut off the enemy's head. Jahangir related that Akbar refused to do so, and quoted his father's explanation:

> "I have already torn him to pieces," His Majesty [Akbar] said. And then he explained: "One day, in Kabul, I was practicing drawing with Abdul-Samad Shirin-Qalam [the Sweet Penned]. I drew a picture of a person with disjointed limbs. One of those nearby asked who it was a picture of. I said, "It's a picture of Hemu."[655]

In other words, Akbar refused to perform the execution because he had already done so in a painting.[656] This was one of Akbar's many miracles described in the Akbarnama.[657] Akbar's chronicle also related that on the way to battle he had had an effigy of Hemu filled with gunpowder and lighted up during a fireworks display for the army.[658] This too turned out to be another royal miracle. According to the chronicle, what seemed like an entertainment for soldiers was in reality the miraculous destruction of a vile enemy. That is to say, as a saintly being, the millennial monarch had a thaumaturgic ability to impose his will on the world. Images and likenesses crafted by him had a talismanic effect.

While Jahangir mentioned his father's miraculous images in his memoir, he did not list any of his own. In this he was following, as was argued above, the "modest" convention of his self-authored text. There are however extant a series of Jahangir era paintings which, in their unique and intricate symbolism, present a highly sacred image

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[655] Jahangir and Thackston, *Jahangirnama (translation)*, 41.
[656] This miracle of Akbar is also mentioned in the official chronicle, the Akbarnama. 1,2: 591
[657] Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak and Beveridge, *Akbar Nama (translation)*, 1,2: 590-591.
[658] Ibid., 1,2: 592.

of Jahangir's royal self. While his memoir mainly narrated the worldly doings of the emperor, these paintings referred to his mystical achievements. These paintings, it will be argued, constituted the space where Jahangir performed his miracles.

The Painted Miracles of Jahangir

To understand the basis of Jahangir's approach to the visual arts, it is necessary to appreciate the high bar his father had set. Although the Timurids and Safavids had long been connoisseurs of painting, the number and quality of paintings produced under Akbar was and remained unrivalled. To get an idea of scale, just the illustrated epic *Hamzanama* (The Book of Hamza) produced for Akbar had fourteen hundred poster-sized paintings and took ten years to complete.[659] Indeed, no Muslim ruler of the time could outdo Akbar either in conquest or in the production of visual and aesthetic monuments in celebration of sovereignty. These grand achievements may have been the reason Jahangir did not try to compete with his father on similar terms, keeping instead a diary, something his illiterate – perhaps dyslexic – father had not been capable of. Similarly, in the sphere of art Jahangir distinguished himself from his father in both style and content. Instead of commissioning grand illustrated histories or epics, he ordered a series of highly innovative paintings, arranged in albums, which broke the mold of the Persian miniature tradition.[660]

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[659] Seyller and Thackston, *Adventures of Hamza*.
[660] I must thank Sumathi Ramaswamy for introducing me to the fascinating world of these paintings by generously sharing her early research on the topic, later published as Sumathi Ramaswamy, "Conceit of the Globe in Mughal Visual Practice," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 49 (2007).

Many of these Jahangiri paintings are thought to date from or after the period when Jahangir moved his court to Ajmer for three years (1615-1618).[661] Ajmer was a place of great spiritual significance for the Mughals because of the shrine of Mu'inuddin Chishti (d. 1230), the patron saint of the dynasty.[662] It is plausible that the spiritual and sacred content of these paintings executed at Ajmer may have been inspired by the charisma of the Chishti saint buried there. However, it is also noteworthy that the relationship between Jahangir and Mu'inuddin Chishti is rendered very differently in his art than in his memoir. While in the Jahangirnama, the emperor called himself a slave and disciple of the thirteenth century Chishti saint, in his paintings he made no such submission. This can be seen clearly in a pair of exquisite paintings, designed to be placed on the facing pages of an imperial album, in which Jahangir interacts with the Chishti Sufi (Figure 5-1 and Figure 5-2).[663]

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[661] Elaine Julia Wright and Susan Stronge, eds., *Muraqqa': Imperial Mughal albums from the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin* (Alexandria, VA: Art Services International, 2008), 288, 344.

[662] For an account of the historical significance of the Chishti shrine at Ajmer, see P. M. Currie, *The Shrine and Cult of Muin al-Din Chishti of Ajmer* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989). The political salience of the Mughal dynasty's relationship with the Chishti Sufi order is succinctly reviewed in Richards, "Imperial Authority."

[663] Wright and Stronge, eds., *Muraqqa'*, 290-294.

Figure 5-1: Shaykh Mu'in al-Din Chishti Holding a Globe (detail from folio).
The Minto Album. Painted by Bichitr, c. 1620. India. CBL In 07A.14. © Trustees of the
Chester Beatty Library, Dublin.

Figure 5-2: Jahangir Holding a Globe (detail from folio).
The Minto Album. Painted by Bichitr, c. 1620, India. CBL In 07A.5. ©Trustees of the
Chester Beatty Library, Dublin.

On the left side, with the whole painted page devoted to him, the Sufi saint Muʻinuddin Chishti stands holding a globe with a keyhole, a key, and a crown. His walking stick temporarily resting against his shoulder, he uses both hands to hold this collection of objects as if waiting to give them to someone. The explanatory Persian script on the globe says "The key to the conquest/opening (*fath*) of the two worlds is entrusted (*musallam*) to your hands." On the facing painting is Jahangir, also a sole figure. He has in his hand the same globe and key. However, he holds them up confidently with his right hand while keeping his left one on the hilt of his sheathed sword. The same statement in Persian about the "key to the conquest of the two worlds" appears in this painting but separate from the globe on the top left corner of the page. This statement serves, along with the globe and the key, to link the two paintings together and indicate the flow of the visual narrative from the Sufi to the emperor.

These twin paintings have several features that distinguish them from other works depicting Jahangir's interactions with holy men. To begin with, most such paintings portrayed actual meetings of Jahangir with Sufis and mendicants who were his contemporaries.[664] The famous Muʻinuddin Chishti, however, had lived five hundred years before Jahangir, so the meeting between the two could not have occurred in ordinary space and time. Thus, it is notable that in these paintings the saint and the monarch do not appear on the same page. This compositional technique serves to avoid the question of hierarchy. Both sovereigns are rendered independently, each a master of his domain. That they are equivalent figures is also indicated by how they appear suspended in a similar sacred space, silhouetted against a solemn darkness pierced only

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[664] See for example the paintings showing Jahangir's meetings with Sufi Shaykhs and the Gosain Jadrup reprinted in Jahangir and Thackston, *Jahangirnama (translation)*, 252, 312.

by the light of their respective halos. Finally, what the saint offers Jahangir is not a prayer or token of grace. Rather, it is a key to the mastery of two worlds, the material *and* the spiritual world. The word used to explain this transaction "*musallam*" means to entrust, to give custody, to give up possession, to make whole. It conveys a sense of permanency. Thus, the most eminent Sufi saint of India gives up his position as master of the two worlds to Jahangir. In essence, this pair of images does not merely depict a Sufi blessing a king. Rather, it constitutes an act of succession from the Mu'inuddin Chishti to Jahangir; the substitution of one saintly being by another.[665]

There are a number of Jahangiri paintings with characteristics similar to the ones discussed above. These features which serve to unite them, while distinguishing them from traditional Persian miniatures, can be summarized as follows:

1. The portrayal of a royal action taking place on a mythical or metaphysical plane.

2. The recurrence of mythological symbols from different religious and cultural traditions spanning India, Iran, and Europe.

3. Comments written directly on the painting in a minute but legible Persian script to explain its complex symbolism.

Given their inventiveness and sharp formal break from received artistic trends, it can be argued that these paintings belong to an emergent genre of visual culture. Linked by a shared symbolism, style, inspiration, and even the location and period in which they

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[665] It is important to note that many of the same artistic techniques and painting conventions were used in post-Jahangiri Mughal art to portray the transfer of sovereignty from one monarch to another. For example, the succession from Timur to Shah Jahan – one Lord of Conjunction to another – was depicted in a similar manner, with the two sovereigns painted separately facing each other and Timur handing over a crown to Shah Jahan. See the opening folios of Shah Jahan's chronicle. See Beach, Koch, and Thackston, *King of the World*, 26-27.

were produced, they can only be appreciated when studied together. These images also bear a complicated relationship to Jahangir's memoir. Rather than being representations of events or royal qualities mentioned in the emperor's writings, they add to the text and at times even contradict it. Indeed, if in his candid memoir Jahangir was an "ordinary" king, in these sacred images he becomes the saint of the age, with all the spiritual and thaumaturgic power that the position entailed. [666] Armed with this insight, we are ready to explore the inner recesses of Jahangir's sovereign existence and witness a record of his miracles.

Jahangir the Thaumaturge

Take, for example, the miniature in which Jahangir stands atop the globe of the earth shooting an arrow at the severed head of a dark-skinned man impaled on a lance (Figure 5-3). [667]

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[666] For their narrative content, these paintings are often called "allegorical," labeled after the style of Catholic iconography brought to the Mughal court by the Jesuits. Also, for their complex symbolism, these images are sometimes called Jahangir's "dream images." As such, they are described as amusing, exotic, and even comical because in these images the emperor appears in poses and performs acts that seem highly fanciful, especially in comparison to his sober memoir. Whether taking them as allegory or farce, few studies go beyond a description of these images as ideology and propaganda. Such readings ignore the fact that these paintings were produced for the emperor's private collection, kept in bound albums, and not copied until centuries later – surely an unseemly strategy for ideological propagation. Suffice it to say, for all the attention paid to these works of art, their purpose and function in the institution of Mughal sacred kingship remains to be fully appreciated.

[667] For discussion and reproduction of this painting see Skelton, "Imperial Symbolism." Also, see Wright and Stronge, eds., *Muraqqa'*, 344-348.

Figure 5-3: Jahangir Shoots Malik 'Ambar (detail from folio).
Painted by Abu'l Hasan, ca. 1620. Gouache on paper, 25.8 × 16.5 cm. CBL In 07A. 15.
©Trustees of the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin.

Two *putti* hover above Jahangir, handing him a sword and arrows. Two owls are also present; one is perched on the head while the other is hanging dead, lower down on the lance. A gun rests against the foot of the lance. The Persian commentary written on the painting tells us that the disembodied head belonged to Malik Ambar, an enemy general of Abyssinian slave origins. Malik Ambar had become the power behind throne of the Nizamshahi dynasty of Ahmadnagar in the Deccan. Jahangir despised him because he had kept the Mughals from extending their dominion in the region. While there were many engagements between Mughal forces and Malik Ambar's army, the latter was only temporarily defeated but never captured or killed. In this sense, this painting's depiction of the impaled head of Malik Ambar is not a factual event. The painting is not completely devoid of historical reality, however. For, it does portray an incident mentioned in the Jahangirnama. This event involved the killing not of Malik Ambar but of an owl.[668]

The owl incident occurred while Jahangir was in Ajmer in 1617.[669] It was the evening before the Mughal army was about to set out under the leadership of Jahangir's son Prince Khurram, the future Shah Jahan, to confront Malik Ambar. At twilight, an owl alighted on the palace roof. Jahangir was immediately informed of this ominous occurrence. An owl was a symbol of violent death.[670] The matter was serious enough for the emperor to act personally. He immediately sent for his gun. Although the light was failing, Jahangir, a keen marksman, was able to bring down the ill-omened bird. This owl

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[668] It was Robert Skelton who first pointed out the connection between this painting and the owl-shooting incident in the Jahangirnama. He suggested that this painting was executed well before Malik Ambar's death and noted that "if the picture mythologizes an actual event in order to glorify Jahangir as a divine ruler, it also attempts to influence fate by sympathetic magic." Skelton, "Imperial Symbolism," 181.
[669] Jahangir and Hashim, *Jahangirnamah*; Jahangir and Thackston, *Jahangirnama (translation)*, 192.
[670] Fahd, *La Divination Arabe*, 513.

is one of the two depicted in the painting, with its neck bent, hanging above the royal matchlock that ended its life.

The dead bird and the gun are the only two things that relate the image to an event mentioned in Jahangir's memoir. The remaining ensemble of symbols, including the live owl perched on Malik Ambar's head, constitute an act set on a metaphysical plane. First of all, Jahangir occupies a position reserved for the saint of the age, the pole or axis (*qutb*) of the world. That this world is not merely a material entity but the center of the cosmos is made evident by the presence of the cosmological symbols of the fish-bull.[671] Jahangir, in other words, maintains the balance of the cosmos, as the commentator states: "Through the felicity (*yumn*) of the Divine Shadow's coming, the earth is raised up on to the Fish-bull."[672] Similarly, it is because of Jahangir's sovereign presence that the world is at a messianic peace with "the lion drinking milk from the goat's teat" [673] – an image whose significance will be discussed in detail further below.

From this elevated spiritual position, Jahangir reverses the ill-effects of the owl's presence in the royal abode. He acts as the cosmic agent through whom the forces of light and good are channeled against the powers of darkness and evil – the owl and Malik Ambar – as the commentary states: "Your enemy-smiting arrow has driven from the world [Malik] Ambar, the owl which fled the light."[674] Jahangir enjoys abundant supernatural assistance. Angels hand him ammunition. A phoenix (*huma*) preserves his throne by alighting on the royal Timurid genealogy. However, it was not sufficient for

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[671] The fish and the bull are symbols of Islamic cosmology with roots in both Indic and Iranian mythology relating to the center and balancing of the world. Some Arab scholars conflated these symbols with the Biblical symbols of Behemoth and Leviathan, respectively. See M. Streck and A. Miquel, "Kaf," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, CD-ROM* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).
[672] Wright and Stronge, eds., *Muraqqa'*, 348.
[673] Ibid.
[674] Ibid.

Jahangir to merely kill the owl that sat on his palace roof. The curse had to be turned back on the enemy. Thus an owl – the live one in the painting – finds its rightful abode on the head of the accursed Malik ʿAmbar. Much in the way that the young Akbar had drawn a dismembered Hemu and burned his effigy before battle to miraculously destroy the enemy, Jahangir attempted to curse and kill Malik Ambar through a talismanic painting.

It is worth emphasizing that in following such "magical" practices, Jahangir was not acting out of mere superstition. Rather, he was beholden to the institution of sacred kingship he embodied. For one, the practice of observing birds near a king or ruler for signs of evil omens, called *tatayyur*, was common at the time.[675] It belonged to a range of divinatory and cosmological knowledge such as astrology, geomancy, and dream interpretation, which structured the lives of the elite and learned. Furthermore, such knowledge was especially important for rulers and sovereigns because it indicated the health of the body politic and the rise and fall of dynasties. Thus when a lunar eclipse occurred, a well-established sign of evil, Jahangir recorded it in his memoir and noted that he gave away fifteen thousand rupees in alms – a huge sum by the standards of the day – to propitiate its dark effects.

Similarly, Jahangir also recorded in detail another "celestial phenomenon," the appearance of a long-tailed comet in the winter of 1618. He noted the opinion of astrologers that "its appearance indicates a weakness among the kings of the Arabs and domination of them by their enemies." Although the emperor did not say anything else on the matter, his close confidante and secretary, Muʿtamad Khan provided a great deal

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[675] Something like this, for example, was performed by Jahangir's grandfather, Humayun. See note 411.

more detail.[676] This is how he described the ill effect of the comet of 1618 on Jahangir's dominions:

> Throughout the vast realm of India, it caused epidemic and cholera the likes of which had never been seen before. People had never heard of such disease or read about it in the trustworthy books of India. These dire conditions became manifest within one year of its appearance and remained so for eight years. And it was its influence that caused confrontation and animosity between Jahangir and his nobility. These violent state of affairs lasted for the next seven or eight years causing untold blood to be spilt and countless homes to be destroyed.[677]

As if to give a concrete example of the effects of this celestial phenomenon, the next report in both the Jahangirnama and the narrative of Mu'tamad Khan recorded a massive infestation of rats in the province of Kandahar. This plague destroyed all crops, orchards, and stores of grain, ending only when there was nothing more for the rodents to feed on. This, then, was a royal perspective on the comet's effects. To get a saint's of point of view, we have to turn to the mystical letters of Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi.

One of Sirhindi's disciples had written to him asking about the messianic significance of the same celestial phenomenon, the comet of 1618. The Naqshbandi Sufi's rambling reply evaluated a number of interpretations.[678] He began by noting that such a twin-tailed comet was indeed expected to presage the coming of the mahdi. This phenomenon, he wrote, had reoccurred many times before in history at moments of great changes in world affairs: at the time of Noah and the flood; when Abraham was thrown into the fire; when Pharaoh and his people were destroyed; and when the prophet John [the Baptist] was killed. However, Sirhindi concluded that this particular comet did not

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[676] Mu'tamad Khan wrote the *Iqbalnama-yi Jahangiri* (The Epic of Sovereignty of Jahangir), a chronicle of Jahangir's reign that is largely based on the Jahangirnama. As a confidante of the emperor, he also took on the duty of composing the Jahangirnama when Jahangir became too ill in his final years to write.

[677] Mu'tamad Khan, *The Iqbalnamah-yi Jahangiri*, Bibliotheca Indica (Osnabruck: Biblio Verlag, 1982; reprint, Calcutta 1865), 118.

[678] The letter discussed here and below is from Sirhindi, *Maktubat*, 2: 135-138.

indicate the imminent appearance of the mahdi. This was because the mahdi, according to

Sirhindi's calculations, was scheduled to manifest himself at the end of the current

Islamic century out which only twenty eight years had yet passed (i.e., it was 1028 AH

and the mahdi would appear in 1100 AH). Nevertheless, Sirhindi speculated that even if

the comet was not a sign of the mahdi's manifestation, it could very well be a sign of his

physical conception. He wrote that if this was the case, it would soon be confirmed by

many of the same signs that had once accompanied the conception and birth of the

Prophet of Islam:

> Thus it is written that when [the Prophet's father] 'Abdullah's seed (*nutfa*), which
> was the substance of Prophet Muhammad's form, peace be upon him, lodged
> itself in [the Prophet's mother] Amina's womb (*rihm*), all the idols of the world
> fell down, and all the devils stopped their work. The angels turned Satan's
> [*Iblis's*] throne upside down and threw it in the sea and tormented him for forty
> days. And the night when the Prophet was born, an earthquake shook Xerxes'
> palace and its fourteen battlements fell. And the [Zoroastrian] fire of Persia that
> had been burning continuously for a *thousand years* died out. [my italics]

Sirhindi's letter shows how well he was attuned to cyclical and millennial

interpretations of history and its implication for embodied sovereignty.[679] His

interpretation of the celestial phenomenon had a strong political undercurrent: if all the

idols of the world fell down at the time of the Prophet's physical conception, and the

thousand-year flame of Zoroaster's religion died out at his birth, the conception of the

mahdi in the first century of the Islamic millennium could also spell doom for the religio-

political order of the day. Overall, the widespread focus on a sign in the sky shows that it

was a weighty matter of religion and politics. It could be used to explain natural and

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[679] The idea that Islam had displaced a millennium of Iranian-Zoroastrian dispensation was one that was found in both Islamic conjunction astrology as outlined by Ibn Khaldun as well as Zoroastrian apocalyptic narratives. See notes 73 and 170 above.

political disaster, develop claims of power, motivate followers, and threaten enemies. But under no circumstances it could be dismissed as meaningless.

In this vein, it is worth noting that Jahangir's ritual action against a dark omen at a moment of war and rebellion was similar in many ways to his Iranian contemporary Safavid Shah Abbas's response to an astrological threat. As was discussed in the previous chapter, Shah Abbas temporarily abdicated his throne to defend himself from the evil influences of a planetary conjunction and to turn back the dire predictions of the millenarian Nuqtavi brotherhood.[680] For both Safavid and Mughal kingship, such divinatory knowledge was related to the cosmological right to rule. A commoner may have ignored an owl on his roof or a comet in the night sky but a sovereign could not, especially during a moment of war and rebellion. The owl for Jahangir, like the conjunction for Shah Abbas, was a cosmological sign that required immediate and forceful ritual action. The only difference in the two cases was that while Shah Abbas had organized a ritual theatre for the purpose, Jahangir had encapsulated the ritual in a painting.

Jahangir the Renewer

If there is any doubt that the painting just discussed constituted a ritual act, it should be dispelled when we examine another formally similar image (Figure 5-4).

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[680] Jahangir had continued to patronize Nuqtavis in his dominion. For example, Sharif Amuli, a Nuqtavi from Iran mentioned in the previous chapter, received a high rank (*mansab*) and even served as a provincial governor. Jahangir and Thackston, *Jahangirnama (translation)*, 46.

Figure 5-4: Emperor Jahangir Triumphing over Poverty (detail from folio). Attributed to Abu'l Hasan, ca. 1620–1625. Opaque watercolor, gold, and ink on page, 23.81 × 15.24 cm. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Nasli and Alice Heeramaneck Collection, Museum Associates, purchase M.75.4.28.

In this painting, Jahangir, once again the *axis mundi*, shoots an arrow at a naked, emaciated, dark-skinned old man.[681] The explanatory script states: this is an "auspicious image of His Supreme Majesty [Jahangir] whose arrow of kindness destroys *dalidar* from this world and recreates the world anew with his justice and fairness." Although the commentary is in Persian, the word used for the target of Jahangir's arrow is the Hindi word *dalidar*, derived from the Sanskrit *daridra*, meaning poverty.

In some Hindu religious traditions, Daridra is the goddess of poverty and misfortune, the contrasting sister of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth.[682] In the Diwali festival, one of several "Hindu New Years," people rid their homes of poverty (Daridra) in order to start anew with prosperity (Lakshmi). Accordingly, the use of this word in the painting indicates that Jahangir is performing a type of renewal ritual. This is supported by the commentary which states that the emperor is recreating the world (*jahan*) anew with justice. But neither this painting nor the memoir explains why the king must perform this renewal ritual for the world. Nevertheless, a clue may be found in the association of the Diwali festival with a key symbol of Hindu kingship: Rama.

Diwali in northern India was, and still is, a commemoration of the coronation of Rama upon his victory over the demon Ravana. The story of Rama and its importance for Indic kingship was well-known to the Mughals.[683] Rama was a god-king, an avatar of Vishnu, who inaugurated a new cycle of time by ridding the world of demons, corruption, and disorder. It is for this reason that Akbar, at time of his millennial claim, was declared to be a reincarnation of Rama. In light of these facts, *dalidar* here may not simply refer to

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[681] Discussed in Amina Okada, *Indian Miniatures of the Mughal court* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1992), 48. Also, in Skelton, "Imperial Symbolism."

[682] See Kirin Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels: Folk Narrative in Hindu Religious Teaching* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 212-223.

[683] See Pollock, "Ramayana."

poverty but to evil, darkness, and a corrupt world order. The Biblical sign of messianic

peace – the lion and the lamb living in harmony – at Jahangir's feet, once again

reinforces Jahangir's actions to renew the world. Finally, below the globe of the earth, we

witness another story of cosmic rebirth. The fish, the Matsya avatar of Vishnu, carries

Manu on the waters of the flood which, much like the Biblical Flood, inaugurated a new

cycle of time in Indic cosmology.

There does not seem to be an event in the *Jahangirnama* which directly connects

the text to this image. However, from his memoir it is evident that Jahangir vigorously

observed many important Indic customs of kingship. These included annual rituals such

as the solar and lunar weighing ceremonies in which the ruler was weighed against

precious metals, which were then distributed among the needy. He also gave alms to

Brahmans as propitiatory acts during times of war and rebellion. He held private spiritual

counsel with Hindu mendicants, the most famous being the ascetic Jadrup.[684]

Furthermore, Jahangir participated in the major festivals of the Hindu calendar, including

Diwali and Holi. Finally, Jahangir was well aware of the cyclical dimension of time

which formed the cosmological substrate of these Indic rituals. In describing the Hindu

festival of Holi, Jahangir remarked that "the lighting of fires of the last night of the year

is a metaphor for burning the old year as though it were a corpse."[685] Jahangir's arrow of

light in the painting performs a similar function as he puts an end to disorder and

inaugurates a new cycle of time.

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[684] Jahangir mentioned his meetings with the ascetic Jadrup in his memoir. Some of these meetings were even depicted in painting. Jahangir's interactions with Jadrup are discussed in detail in Sajida S. Alvi, "Religion and State during the Reign of Mughal Emperor Jahangir (1605-27): Nonjuristical Perspectives," *Studia Islamica* 69 (1989).
[685] Jahangir and Hashim, *Jahangirnamah*, 140; Jahangir and Thackston, *Jahangirnama (translation)*, 147.

Overall, it is important to recognize that Jahangir's ritual art bore an important relationship to the experience, practice, and embodiment of sacred kingship. To develop a textured sense of what this means, it is worth paying attention to the Gauvin Bailey's insights on the way Mughal artists drew inspiration from popular culture and religious festivals for their depictions of Jesus. When Mughal artists were ordered to illustrate a Persian narrative of the life of Jesus, they not only copied scenes from European oil paintings and engravings but also rendered them from the lively street theatre, full of gimmicks and contraptions, which the Christian priests had regularly organized for the Indian populace.[686] These religious parades sometimes attracted thousands of people and were often enjoyed by the emperor himself. Intriguingly, in the report of one such parade, we learn that the decorations at the Christmas crib featured a portrait of Jahangir:

> A [mechanical] ape which squired water from its eyes and mouth, and above it a bird which sang mysteriously…and a globe of the world supported on the backs of two elephants…and above this a large portrait of the King [Jahangir] which he sent us when he was a prince…and next to this figure was placed a large mirror at the front of the crib… [At the gates] was the Angel, i.e., Gabriel, with many angels…[687]

In effect, Jahangir participated in the Christmas pageant organized by the Jesuits through one of his paintings. Through this participation, the Jesuit's religious festival became a venue for the articulation of Jahangir's sovereignty. This articulation occurred via sacred icons and symbolic juxtapositions. In other words, it made use of a visual form

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[686] This lavishly illustrated work on the life of Jesus was the *Mirat al-Quds* (Mirror of Holiness), a compilation of Biblical narratives in Persian jointly produced by Jesuit and Mughal scholars under orders from Akbar and Jahangir. In a careful analysis, Bailey showed how Mughal artists used as models for their paintings the religious pageantry organized by the Christian priests. He concludes: "Late Akbar and early Jahangir period painting in general may owe as much to the vibrant spectacle and drama of Catholic pageantry as it does to the two-dimensional oil-paintings and engravings that have long been recognized as the main conduit of European art to the Mughal court." Gauvin Alexander Bailey, "The Lahore Mirat al-Quds and the Impact of Jesuit Theatre on Mughal Painting," *South Asian Studies* 13 (1997): 42.

[687] This statement was made by Father Xavier, who had led the mission to Jahangir's court. He is quoted in Ibid.: 32.

very similar to the ones we have seen in the last two paintings: the depiction of Jahangir above the globe of the world, framed by angels, and paired with prophetic and messianic figures. The similarity between the elements of Jahangir's talismanic paintings and the way his figural presence was arranged within this popular parade indicates how Mughal artists may have used popular events and public spectacles as models to base their portrayals of the emperor's miraculous qualities.

Furthermore, these connections between the world of popular spectacles and the art of imperial self-fashioning shed new light on the significance of animal imagery in Jahangir's paintings. Specifically, this was the imagery of predator and prey lying together in harmony. In some paintings it was a lamb, in others a goat or an ox alongside a lion, but the theme was instantly recognizable as one of sacred sovereignty and messianic justice. In a classic essay, Ebba Koch observed that the source of this iconic image was the picture of "peace among animals under the rule of the Messiah" that had graced the Jesuits' printed Bible.[688] She also noted that the peaceful coming together of the hunter and hunted – leopard and deer, hawk and dove, etc. – was an ancient myth of Iranian kingship that had survived in Mughal court panegyrics.[689] To these insights we must add, however, that this Mughal vision of messianic peace was more than just pompous mimicry of received images and texts. The notion may well have been part of Biblical and ancient Iranian traditions but Jahangir, his populace, and his painters saw this miracle manifest itself in nature all around them.

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[688] For a reprint of this image and a discussion of its meaning in the Mughal setting, see Koch, "Influence of the Jesuit Missions," 2-5.

[689] For example, in the panegyric text *Qanun-i Humayuni* discussed in chapter 3, Humayun was described by the historian Khwandamir as having brought several pairs of the "hunter" and the "hunted, e.g., the leopard (*palang*) and the deer (*ahu*), in peace together. See Khvand Mir, *Qanun-i Humayuni*, 8.

The emperor's memoir contains a large number of observations concerning the marvels of nature. These marvels and inexplicable occurrences, much like the popular religious spectacles, were both a source of popular entertainment as well as sacred wonder. To begin with, consider the episode concerning a lion and a mendicant:

> A lion was brought from the royal lion house to be made to fight an ox. Many people had gathered to watch. There was also a group of yogis, and the lion approached one of the yogis, who was naked, in a playful manner, not in rage, and knocked him to the ground. Then, just as though it were copulating with a female of its own kind, it mounted him and began to hump. It did the same thing the next day. It has acted like this several times. Since before now no such thing had ever been seen, and it is exceedingly strange (*ghara'ib tamam dasht*), it is recorded. [690]

The emperor had wanted to enjoy a fight between a lion and an ox in the company of a crowd, which included a band of naked Hindu ascetics. However, the affair suddenly took a strange turn. The episode was termed marvelous not simply because of the puzzling fact that the beast had changed its nature and tried to consort with a man, but because it occurred in the presence of the sovereign. In other words, it took on cosmological significance and became an omen to be interpreted. As was argued in chapter 2, "strangeness" was an important category of knowledge for kingship, one to which sovereigns devoted a great deal of time and attention because it related to the health of the body politic and, consequentially, to the health and power of the sovereign. This was not only a "magical" worldview but also a "scientific" one, reflecting a "humoural understanding of polity." [691] In this view, the monarch held the status of chief natural philosopher and news writers were required to report to him strange occurrences in the animal, vegetable or mineral world so he could determine their significance for his dominion.

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[690] Jahangir and Hashim, *Jahangirnamah*, 90; Jahangir and Thackston, *Jahangirnama (translation)*, 103.103

[691] See Bayly, *Empire and Information*, 26.

Jahangir noted, for example, how in his reign leopards and lions had begun to mate successfully in captivity. Such wondrous phenomena, the emperor observed, had not been witnessed even in the time of his father.[692] Indeed, Jahangir's dominion had become so full of felicitous signs in nature that the emperor could not help but state – ever so humbly – that in his reign wild beasts had lost their wildness:

> During the felicitous reign of this petitioner at the divine court [i.e., Jahangir] wildness has been eliminated from the nature of wild beasts to such an extent that lions have become tame and roam in packs among people, without restraints or chains, and they neither harm them nor run away.[693]

How these phenomena were used to celebrate Jahangir's sovereign health can be seen in the gift given him by his son. Prince Dawarbakhsh presented the emperor with a pair of animals that seemed to have overcome their wild natures and opposing tendencies to bond with each other. A lion and a goat had apparently fallen in love:

> The lion got along so well with the goat that they were kept in the same cage and the lion exhibited great affection for the goat. The lion would take the goat in its embrace in the manner that animals couple and hump it. When an order was given for the goat to be concealed, the lion cried out and showed great distress…. Then the first goat was brought, and the lion exhibited the same love and affection as before, falling on its back, taking the goat on its chest and licking it on the mouth. Never before had any animal, tame or wild been seen that kissed its mate.[694]

This was indeed a "strange" affair by the standards of any era. However, we must do more than laugh at it. The wondrous interest of the emperor and his entourage in it may explain why it was only in Jahangir's time that the image of "the lion drinking milk from the goat's teat" became a painted icon of sovereignty. In sum, the medley of symbols in Jahangir's sacred paintings – animals and angels, condemned men and holy ones, chains of justice and arrows of light – were more than just reflections of elite ideals,

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[692] Jahangir and Hashim, *Jahangirnamah*, 137; Jahangir and Thackston, *Jahangirnama (translation)*, 144.
[693] Jahangir and Hashim, *Jahangirnamah*, 137; Jahangir and Thackston, *Jahangirnama (translation)*, 144.
[694] Jahangir and Thackston, *Jahangirnama (translation)*, 435.

written theories, or literary tropes of sovereignty. Rather, they drew their strength from popular practices and public spectacles that framed the performance and shaped the experience of sacred kingship. These signs signified, by their materialization in culture and nature, the embodied sovereignty of the ruler. And this is why they graced the emperor's talismanic paintings.

Jahangir the Seer

The paintings discussed above show that Jahangir following the tradition of sacred kingship established in the time of his father. The monarch, in this tradition, was a source of immense spiritual power with which he could perform miracles, sustain the balance of the cosmos, inaugurate new cycles of time, and impose his will on the world by mere allusion. Moreover, this inner strength of the king drew sustenance from the truth of not one but many sacred traditions; and not just from their doctrines but also from their practices and symbols. Kingship, in other words, was above all religions. However, a skeptic may take issue here that these paintings are nothing more than the product of court sycophants, of painters eager to praise the emperor. Indeed, how do we know that these innovative works of art bear the stamp of Jahangir's own imagination and desire?

The proof, fortunately, is available in a unique cultural artifact from this period: the visual record of a royal dream (Figure 5-5).

Figure 5-5: The St. Petersburg Album: Allegorical Representation of Emperor Jahangir and Shah 'Abbas of Persia (detail from folio).
Painted by Abu'l Hasan, ca. 1618. Opaque watercolor, gold and ink on paper, 23.8 × 15.4 cm. Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., purchase F1945.9.

In this painting, Jahangir stands atop the world embracing his contemporary Shah Abbas of Iran. Many of the symbols in this painting connect it to the two already discussed: the globe; the lion and the lamb; and a miraculous event – the oneiric meeting of Jahangir and Shah Abbas. According to the commentary on the painting, Jahangir saw a dream in which Shah Abbas appeared in a wellspring of light (*chashma-yi nur*). He ordered his artist to paint the dream quickly before the approaching Persian New Year (*navruz*). In order to render Shah Abbas's portrait accurately, the artist interviewed people who had visited Iran and seen the Safavid ruler. Finally, the painting is also marked by a verse which spontaneously came to Jahangir's "miraculous tongue":

> Our Shah came in a dream, and so gave us joy
> The enemy of my dream is the one who woke me up

Most art historical interpretations of this painting ascribe it to Jahangir's anxiety over losing the border province of Kandahar, in present day Afghanistan, to the Safavids.[695] These political and psychological interpretations overlook the important fact that in Jahangir's time the dream was a medium of miracles and prophecy.

In general the dream in Islamic culture, both learned and popular, was considered to be a part of prophecy.[696] Receiving a clear dream message was a sign of one's prophetic powers. Thus dreams were a major source of visions for those seeking a glimpse of the ultimate reality. The appearance in a dream of God, the Prophet Muhammad, a saint or a king was considered a source of blessing. Most importantly, the truth content of such sanctified oneiric visions was higher than that of a report received in

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[695] The art historian Amina Okada, for example, made the following observation about this painting: "The scene, completely devoid of historical fact, is the brilliant if naïve expression of Jahangir's anxiety and insecurity when confronted with the question of Kandahar." Okada, *Indian Miniatures*, 55.

[696] For a succinct summary of the concept of dreams in Islam, see Leah Kinberg, "Dreams and Sleep," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an* (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

a waking state.[697] For example, in his memoir, Jahangir mentioned a dream in which his late father appeared and told him to free Mirza Aziz Koka, a nobleman who was at the time imprisoned in the fearsome Gwalior fort.[698] Jahangir followed his dead father's instructions and freed the man. It has already been mentioned earlier how Jahangir himself was known to appear in the dreams of his officers. In sum, dreams were substantial and real events which played an important role in social discourse. Jahangir's emphasis on having his dream depicted realistically underscores this point. The people and elements in his dream were real, not imaginary or metaphorical, even if they had only come together in a higher spiritual realm opened up by dreaming.

It is worth noting however that this particular dream is not mentioned in Jahangir's memoir. This is significant because Jahangir referred to the Iranian ruler many times, calling him endearingly as "my brother" (*baradaram*) and even included copies of letters sent by Shah Abbas. This gap between the memoir and the painting strengthens the impression that Jahangir had reserved this new visual genre for the expression of his deepest mystical thoughts and actions. From the phrase in Jahangir's verse "gave us joy" or more literally "blessed our time" (*khushwaqt kard*) it appears to be a friendly visit. From Shah Abbas's pose, it seems like a brotherly submission. If two of Jahangir's forefathers – Babur and Humayun – had submitted themselves to the ritual discipline of the Safavids, this oneiric miracle of his seemed to have undone and reversed that bond. Shah Abbas was now Jahangir's disciple.

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[697] See for example Leah Kinberg, "Literal Dreams and Prophetic Hadiths in Classical Islam—a Comparison of Two Ways of Legitimation," *Der Islam* 70 (1993).
[698] Jahangir and Thackston, *Jahangirnama (translation)*, 162.

Jahangir the Millennial Being

There is another striking painting that has much in common in terms of style, theme and symbolism with the one depicting Jahangir's dream (Figure 5-6). In it too, kings whom Jahangir had never met in person appear before him, and the same giant halo surrounds him. Could it be that this was another one of Jahangir's dreams?

In this painting, Jahangir no longer stands on the globe of the earth as he did in the other images. [699] Instead, he sits on a giant hourglass. The poetry above and below the painting sets the scene:

> The King of the outer (*surat*) and inner (*ma'ni*) domains is, by the grace of God,
> Nur al-Din Jahangir ibn Akbar Badshah.
> Although outwardly (*dar surat*) kings stand before him,
> Inwardly (*dar ma'ni*) he always turns his gaze towards dervishes.

Here we have an explicit statement of Jahangir's sovereignty over the world in all its aspects; its material and outward form as well as its spiritual and inward dimension. The world's greatest monarchs and mystics pay him homage. In the competition for Jahangir's attention, the kings are disappointed while the Sufi is rewarded.

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[699] This famous painting was discussed in detail in a well-known article by Richard Ettinghausen, "The Emperor's Choice," in *De Artibus Opuscula XL: Essays in Honor of Erwin Panofsky*, ed. Millard Meiss (New York: New York University, 1961). Ettinghausen argued that the painting shows that Jahangir is turning from the material world in his old age in order to find spiritual solace in the veneration of saints. Note that my interpretation differs significantly from that of Ettinghausen.

Figure 5-6: Jahangir Preferring a Sufi Shaikh to Kings (detail from folio).
By Bichitr (act. 1615–50). India, Mughal period, ca. 1625. Opaque watercolor, gold, and
ink on paper. 25.3 x 18.1 cm (10 x 7 1/8 in.). Purchase F1942.15a.

The visual hierarchy makes clear that the Sufi is above the kings and Jahangir above them all. The Sufi whom he rewards with a book was the leader of the Chishti brotherhood in Jahangir's time. The kings who stand before him are the Ottoman Sultan and King James I of England.[700] But there are other symbols and actions that the verses do not explain. Instead of the globe of the earth with a lion and lamb on it, we have an hourglass with a pair of angels writing on it. The *putti* above Jahangir have broken their arrows in despair. What are we to make of these differences and changes from the images discussed earlier?

Although there is no detailed commentary to aid our understanding, there is one line of writing on the lower half of the hourglass. It is a prayer written jointly by two angels. And in it we may have the clue to the significance of the hourglass. The angels have written: "Allah-u Akbar! O King, may your age endure a thousand years." The angelic prayer of a thousand year life, juxtaposed with Akbar's talismanic sign, marks Jahangir as a millennial being. Jahangir, adorning the throne of Time, inaugurates the new Islamic millennium. The running sands of the hourglass show that the millennium has already begun. The struggle to bring order to the world is over. With the kings of the world at Jahangir's feet, the *putti*'s heavenly arrows are no longer needed. The emperor blesses the new millennium as he would bless a new year, by patronizing holy men. In

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[700] The fact of the Ottoman Sultan and the English monarch standing before Jahangir is not as absurd as it seems. Both the Ottoman and the English court were in fact represented by ambassadors and senior officials at the court of Jahangir. The English Ambassador, Sir Thomas Roe, is said to have developed a close relationship with the Mughal emperor and regularly supplied him with gifts, including paintings, from Europe in order to gain imperial favor and obtain trading rights with the Mughals. See, Michael J. Brown, *Itinerant Ambassador: The Life of Sir Thomas Roe* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1970); Thomas Roe, *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to India, 1615-1619: As Narrated in his Journal and Correspondence*, ed. William Foster, Revised ed. (London: Hakluyt Society, 1926; reprint, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publications, Ltd., 1990).

short, Jahangir upholds the millennial-messianic dispensation that he inherited from his father.[701]

From his memoir we know that under Jahangir, as it had been under Akbar, one of the rituals imperial discipleship involved the veneration of the Sun and the Moon.[702] This may explain why the emperor's halo in the last two paintings consists of the disc of the Sun and the crescent of the moon. When Jahangir referred to the Sun and the Moon in his memoir, he addressed them as His Holiness the Greater Luminary (*Hazrat Nayyir-i A'zam*) and His Holiness the Lesser Luminary (*Hazrat Nayyir-i Asghar*), respectively. That is to say, the emperor addressed the Sun and the Moon as holy beings.

The idea that these two heavenly bodies were beings worthy of veneration was not merely an Indic practice taken up by the Mughals. Rather, it was an integral part of the Illuminationist (*Ishraqi*) philosophy of the famous mystic Suhrawardi (d. 1191), which was in vogue at the time. Indeed, Suhrawardi had composed prayers in Arabic to ask the Sun for knowledge and salvation.[703] But he was not the only Muslim authority on the subject. Another major figure in this regard was Abu Ma'shar (d. 886), a Persian philosopher and mathematician of the Abbasid period who became the most famous astrologer of medieval times.[704] As was noted previously, Abu Ma'shar's Arabic prayers to the Sun were quoted in the first volume of the *Tarkih-i Alfi* (Millennial History)

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[701] Gauvin Bailey has noted how Jahangir preserved his messianic inheritance from Akbar in a pair of miniature portraits from circa 1614: "One of them, now in the Musée Guimet in Paris, depicts the emperor holding a portrait of his real father, Akbar; its companion, now in the National Museum in New Delhi, shows him holding a portrait of his spiritual mother, the Virgin Mary." Bailey, *Jesuits and the Grand Mogul*, 37.

[702] "The luminaries, which are manifestations of divine light, should be venerated in accordance with the degrees of each one, and one should recognize that the real mover and creator in all forms and time is God." Jahangir and Thackston, *Jahangirnama (translation)*, 53.

[703] See Ziai, "Suhrawardi."

[704] Abu Ma 'shar was also an authority on the ancient cosmology and knowledge of antediluvian sage Hermes Trismegistus. It is important to note that the *Akbarnama* stated that it was Hermes, also known as the Quranic prophet Idris and the Biblical prophet Enoch, who "guided men to the reverence of the Great Light (the Sun)." Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak and Beveridge, *Akbar Nama (translation)*, 1,2: 143.

commissioned by Akbar. [705] Incidentally, it was in the same work that the emperor was also declared to be the Renewer of the Second Millennium (*Mujaddid-i Alf-i Thani*). Abu Ma'shar was a great proponent of the science of conjunction astrology which he used to divide historical time into millennial cycles. He was also deeply influenced by Indic notions of cyclical time and bequeathed the idea to both the Islamic and Christian worlds in the science of astrology.[706] The Sun and the Moon, then, were for Mughal kings, luminous beings responsible for the changing cycles of time and the vicissitudes of kingship. Sovereignty, especially of the millennial order, could not be had without paying heed to these heavenly bodies.[707]

Conclusion

The talismanic paintings discussed above were both a medium and a record of Jahangir's miracles. They were meant to be shown to the inner circle of royal disciples. By contrast, the imperial memoir was a public document, copied at various stages of writing and sent across the realm as a model of royal behavior. What could not be stated in the memoir was portrayed in these miraculous paintings. This scheme followed a well-known Sufi practice. The saint's miracles were only disclosed to his closest disciples and sons. Although they may become part of the oral lore surrounding the saint in his lifetime, they were committed to paper and made public in a hagiography (*tazkira*) only

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[705] Tattavi and Qazvini, *Tarikh-i Alfi*, 1: 381-383.
[706] He is famous for his *Kitab al-Mudkhal al Kabir ila Ahkam al-Nujum* (Great Introduction to Astrology) and *Kitab al Milal wa al-Duwal* (The Book of Religions and Dynasties). When his work was translated into Latin in the thirteenth century, his ideas had a major impact on shaping the intellectual basis of Christian millennial theories. See, Millas, "Karmati."
[707] The *Dabistan-i Mazahib* (School of Religions), written by a Zoroastrian scholar in India in middle of the seventeenth century reported that the Mughal emperor Akbar, in reflecting upon the history of his Mongol ancestors, remarked that the Mongols had remained masters of the world as long as they worshipped the planets; when they gave up this practice, they lost their empire and became worthless. Fani, *Dabistan-i Mazahib*, 1: 308.

after his death. Any saint who broke this rule caused controversy and was accused of heresy. This was true as much of the famous Naqshbandi leader Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi, who made a millennial claim in Jahangir's reign, as it was for the emperor Akbar. Both men had become the focus of religious controversy because they claimed their sacredness explicitly and publicly in writing. Jahangir, it seems, was much more cautious and followed the norms of saintliness. Moreover, instead of writing down his miracles, he had them painted.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the painted image played a major role in the Mughal institution of imperial discipleship. Akbar had revived Humayun's cult of disciples but not his cosmologically inflected headgear, the *Taj-i 'Izzat* (Crown of Glory). Instead, each supplicant was given upon initiation a small painted likeness (*shabih*) of the emperor which could be pinned on or wrapped within one's turban. Although no such portrait has been found from Akbar's reign, we possess several copies of tiny portraits of Jahangir that were rendered for this purpose.[708] In these paintings Jahangir appeared haloed and framed by a window. The window indicated that he was performing the famed *jharoka darshan* (balcony witnessing) ceremony, in which the sovereign showed a glimpse of himself from a palace balcony to his subjects. These tiny portraits were, in other words, painted rituals. They encapsulated in visual form the sacred manifestation of the saint-emperor to his disciples.

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[708] It is noteworthy that the official sources of Akbar's time do not mention the use of the emperor's portrait in rituals of discipleship. The only evidence that Akbar gave such portraits to disciples appears in the accusations of Badayuni. There are, however, several extant royal portraits from Jahangir's time and later that may have been used in the ritual of imperial discipleship. These paintings are referred to in art historical literature as "jewel" portraits as they were meant to be worn as a turban-ornament by the king's devotee alongside or instead of other jewels. See, for example, Habsburg, *St. Petersburg Muraqqa'*, 1: plates 21 and 22.

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EPILOGUE

The "Millennium" of 1857

Introduction

The Mughal Empire thrived for almost a hundred years after Jahangir. Even when

its slow disintegration began in the early eighteenth century, the institutional shell of

Mughal kingship survived. Although made politically powerless and at times humiliated,

impoverished and even tortured by different regional or invading forces, the ruling

Mughal dynast remained the exclusive symbol of sovereignty.[709] It was as if the throne of

Hindustan could only be occupied by an heir of Timur. Even the English East India

Company accepted and perpetuated this tradition by formally drawing its authority from

the Mughal dynasty.

The Beginning of Colonial Rule

In 1757, the Company became the *de facto* ruler of Bengal. A few years later, it

negotiated from the Mughal emperor a formal and highly lucrative authority to collect

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[709] The literature on the political history of eighteenth century India is considerable. See, for example, Muzaffar Alam, *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and the Punjab, 1707-48* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986), 330; Richard B. Barnett, *North India between Empires: Awadh, the Mughals, and the British, 1720-1801* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); Juan R. Cole, *Roots of North Indian Shi'ism in Iran and Iraq: Religion and State in Awadh, 1722-1859* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Stewart Gordon, *The Marathas 1600-1818* (New York: Cambridge University, 1993). Grewal, *Sikhs*. For a literary perspective of a minor Mughal prince on how his world was changing, see Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Envisioning Power: The Political Thought of a late Eighteenth-Century Mughal Prince," *Indian Economic Social History Review* 43, no. 2 (2006).

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taxes in what was the richest province of the empire. In exchange it agreed to send an annual tribute. By assuming the role of Mughal vassal to legitimate its political status, the Company acted like many of the other regional South Asian powers in the eighteenth century. Gradually but relentlessly, it outspent, outfought, and outmaneuvered its political competitors. In 1803, when the Company gained control over Delhi, it also assumed the responsibility of maintaining and protecting the Mughal emperor. This arrangement lasted for more than five decades during which the Company managed to eliminate or defang all its major rivals. However, in 1857, with their political and military hold over the subcontinent complete, a massive rebellion erupted among the Company's own Indian soldiers. This violent episode, which caught the English by surprise and nearly brought their rule in India to an end, became known as the Great Indian Mutiny.

The Mutiny of 1857

The uprising of 1857, which spread throughout north and central India and raged for more than a year, did not have one central cause or unified strategy behind it. The episode began with a mutiny among the Indian soldiers of the Company's Bengal Army. Some regional powers, especially those who had recently lost their dominion to English conquest, like the Maratha leader Nana Sahib, or were soon to lose it to the Company's policies, like the Rani of Jhansi, also joined in. What is surprising, however, that the key symbol around which the diverse rebel groups rallied was the octogenarian Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar.

That Bahadur Shah's sole interest and chief accomplishment was classical Urdu poetry did not stop the rebels from declaring him their leader when they captured Delhi.

When the English finally managed to crush the rebellion after severe losses and considerable savagery, they too held him accountable. During his trial, they charged him with leading an Islamic conspiracy against the British – a conspiracy with tentacles reaching out to Iran, Mecca, and the Ottoman Empire.[710] This was an odd accusation, as even a few contemporary Englishmen observed, since most of the rebel soldiers were upper-caste Hindus. The English prosecutor insisted, however, that the gestures made by the rebels to the rulers of Iran to invade India were proof of an international plot; and the fact that a few years before the Mutiny a group of soldiers had formally requested to become disciples (*murids*) of the emperor showed that he had harbored ambitions to become a champion of Islam.[711]

The old emperor initially protested. He presented a short written explanation of his innocence. It stated that he had been powerless in the face of events, and that his seal and signature had been indiscriminately used by rebel soldiers to issue orders without his permission or advice. Having made his case, he reconciled himself to nod through the remainder of the proceedings, not in apparent agreement but in fitful slumber. It was just as well because at the end of the farcical trial, Bahadur Shah was found guilty of all charges and exiled to Burma along with a handful of male and female family members who had survived the war and English retribution.

The Question of Sovereignty

In 1922, F. W. Buckler, a learned but unconventional historian of India, offered a controversial assessment of the Mughal emperor's trial. He pointed out that "if in 1857

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[710] My account of the trial of the emperor follows the one recently sketched out vividly in William Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty, Delhi, 1857* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 435-441.
[711] Ibid., 441.

there was any mutineer, it was the East India Company."[712] His assertion was based on the observation that the Company had been a Mughal vassal *de jure*. This was a legal fiction the Company had maintained for over a century by submitting itself to customs of Mughal kingship. However, in the years before the rebellion the English had begun to neglect the ritual privileges due the emperor. Thus, Buckler argued, "the army turned to its sovereign's allegiance against its rebel officer," i.e., the Company. In strictly legal terms, the emperor and his men were in the right, Buckler insisted; it was the English who were the transgressors.

It should come as no surprise that Buckler's argument was roundly criticized by his fellow English historians as naïvely idealistic and wholly ignorant of social and political reality.[713] This may be so. But it has to be said in the eccentric historian's defense that some of the alternative explanations offered by his critics were no less whimsical. One English historian in his reply to Buckler argued that the Mutiny was not, as the latter had suggested, a Muslim attempt to reclaim the dignity of their sovereign but rather it "was really the outcome of that fundamental Hindu antagonism to Western civilization and Western materialism, which in more recent times has formed one of the mainsprings of anarchical conspiracies and non-co-operation movements."[714] In other

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[712] F. W. Buckler, "The Political Theory of the Indian Mutiny," in *Legitimacy and Symbols: The South Asian Writings of F.W. Buckler*, ed. M. N. Pearson (Ann Arbor: Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Michigan, 1985), 46. This essay was first published as F. W. Buckler, "The Political Theory of the Indian Mutiny," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society (London)* 5 (1922). I would like to thank Thomas R. Trautmann for introducing me to Buckler's writings.
[713] Douglas Dewar and H. L. Garrett, "A Reply to Mr. F. W. Buckler's *The Political Theory of the Indian Mutiny*," in *Legitimacy and Symbols: The South Asian Writings of F.W. Buckler*, ed. M. N. Pearson (Ann Arbor: Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Michigan, 1985); S. M. Edwardes, "A Few Reflections on Buckler's Political Theory of the Indian Mutiny," in *Legitimacy and Symbols: The South Asian Writings of F.W. Buckler*, ed. M. N. Pearson (Ann Arbor: Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Michigan, 1985).
[714] Edwardes, "A Few Reflections on Buckler's Political Theory of the Indian Mutiny," 79.

words, Buckler's chief fault was that his historical fancies ran counter to the colonial fancies of his contemporaries.

In any event, the enduring value of Buckler's scholarship was not in his grand explanation of historical causes but in the fresh interpretations he offered of the traditions and customs of Mughal sovereignty.[715] He noted that the Company had maintained its ritual subordination to the body of the emperor by presenting offerings (*nazr*) upon gaining a royal audience and accepting robes of honor (*khil'at*) at least until 1843 when it abandoned these practices. Around this time, the Company had begun to shed the cumbersome pretense of being subordinate to a man who had become in English eyes little more than a tourist attraction. Even as an attraction, the Company kept the Mughal ruler in too impoverished a state to be presentable. Indeed, one unimpressed English visitor to the emperor in 1838 had noted in his diary that the Mughal ruler was nothing but a "dirty, miserable old dog."[716]

This English disregard for Mughal traditions of sovereignty did not, as Buckler had insisted, create a legal breach of contract sufficient by itself to inspire Indian soldiers to revolt. However, it was highly symptomatic of a growing English disconnect from and disregard for Indian society. The decades leading up to1857 had seen widespread social and economic transformation in many segments of agrarian society, and the colonial government had paid too little attention to the implications of these shifts for Indians, elite and commoner alike. The English had lost their affective connection to local

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[715] See, for example, Buckler's critical remarks on the theory of "Oriental Despot" prevalent in his days and his insightful reworking of this theory based on rituals of embodiment and incorporation. F. W. Buckler, "The Oriental Despot," in *Legitimacy and Symbols: The South Asian Writings of F.W. Buckler*, ed. M. N. Pearson (Ann Arbor: Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Michigan, 1985). His contribution was reviewed and acknowledged in Gordon, ed. *Robes of Honour*, 1-30. Also see Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 114.

[716] Dewar and Garrett, "A Reply to Mr. F. W. Buckler's *The Political Theory of the Indian Mutiny*," 156.

knowledge. As C. A. Bayly has argued, an increasingly distant and unsympathetic attitude had by the middle of the nineteenth century made the colonial government tone-deaf to India's "information order."[717] In the language of sacred kingship, it was as if the rulers had lost their ability to see the symptoms of distress and signs of disorder spreading through the body politic. The English were not listening when holy men began to dream and astrologers began to predict that the rule of the Franks was to last no longer than a hundred years; that it had begun in 1757 and so would end in 1857.

A Mutiny of Knowledges

The colonial archives on the uprising of 1857 contain a number of rebel pamphlets and letters that were collected for intelligence purposes or used as trial evidence. These artifacts preserve a "strange" worldview that is strikingly similar to the one that had informed the institution and practice of sacred kingship in the classical Mughal period. They are full of signs, omens, and prophecies against the English. In these documents, the Company was accused not of illegally usurping territory and political authority but rather of perverting India's moral order and upsetting its cosmological balance. According to this view, the earthly effects of this disturbance were being felt and seen all around and the war was nothing less than a cosmologically-ordained corrective action.

One document, for example, contains a long history-prophecy of the world that predicted the end of English rule after a hundred years, followed by the rise of the

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[717] Bayly, *Empire and Information*, 315-337.

Messiah and the end of time.[718] While the original document was in Persian verse, it

survived only in a partial English translation made a few years after 1857. The translated

section of the prophecy begins with the rise of Timur and continues through the reigns of

his descendents in India, the decline of Mughal power, the rise of the Sikh empire, the

coming of the English. It then predicts the imminent rise of the "Western King" (Shah

Ghurbee) who would come from the west, presumably Afghanistan or Iran, and defeat

the English in battle. The prophecy had apparently been printed in Delhi a few months

before 1857 and was attributed to Shah Ni'matullah, a fifteenth century Persian saint

widely acknowledged as the "Nostradamus of the East."[719] The English officer who

translated this prophecy described its international significance and political danger to his

superiors as follows:

> The House of Timour no doubt had a good deal to say to the printing and
> circulation of the Prophecy, and through the influence of the late Kings of Delhi,
> it must have found its way into Afghanistan, and Persia, and the Furruchabad
> Nawab (Taffussool Hosain Khan) no doubt carried a copy with him to Mecca.
> This Prophecy in the hands of able men (Mahommedans) well versed in intrigue,
> is likely to do an immense amount of mischief in British India.[720]

In an insightful analysis of such rebel communiqués, Bayly observed that these

texts represented a "mutiny of subordinated knowledges."[721] He showed that this form of

political communication and those who had wielded it had been rapidly marginalized in

nineteenth century British India. The uprising of 1857, from this perspective, was as

much a rebellion against an oppressive epistemology as it was against economic and

political exploitation. We must add, however, that this insurgency of knowledges was

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[718] "Documents from the Collections of Sir George Forrest, C.I.E.: Miscellaneous Documents (1746-1859): Seditious Proclamation Issued During the Mutiny, a Muhammadan Prophecy of the Expulsion of the English," Home Miscellaneous Series, London, IOR/H/814.
[719] Shah Ni'matullah's prophecies had played an important role in Safavid Iran as well. See notes 293 and 294.
[720] "Seditious Proclamation," f. 469.
[721] He borrows the phrase from Foucault. See Bayly, *Empire and Information*, 330.

also the last great sigh of the Mughal world in which sacred sovereignty was conceived of as messianic and millennial.

This cultural logic can be seen clearly at work in a long pamphlet issued from the rebel camp, entitled "Advice of the Royal Army." This mutinous document also contained references to the prophecies of Shah Ni'matullah and it too began its justification of war against the English in explicitly millenarian terms: "Now the astrologers have ascertained and the Englishmen are convinced of the fact that their rule is not to last longer than one hundred years."[722]

The "Strange" Advice of the Royal Army

Although written under the exigencies of war, the "Advice of the Royal Army" was a document designed to engage the imagination and excite the passions of its audience, "brethren in the faith throughout India, Hindoos as well as Mussulmans [Muslims], whomsoever God as exalted." [723] Like its audience, the pamphlet's authorship also transcended communal boundaries. It was produced under the authority of a Hindu leader, Kishori Lal Lahori. But it was composed by a Muslim scribe, Shaykh Said, whose flair for storytelling was proudly proclaimed in his *nom de plume*, Colorful Pen (*rangin raqam*). Indeed, much of the pamphlet was written in the entertaining and didactic style of a popular narrator or street preacher.

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[722] "Sir John Kaye's Mutiny Papers (1857-1858): Translation of 'Advice of the Royal Army,' a Pamphlet in the Handwriting of Shaikh Said Rungin Rakam 15th Sept. 1857, A justification of the Mutiny after the One Hundred Years rule of the English," Home Miscellaneous Series, London, IOR/H/727, f. 491. This document is also briefly analyzed in Bayly, *Empire and Information*, 330-331. Note, however, that the reference to the archival document is inaccurate in this work.
[723] "Advice of the Royal Army," f. 489.

The pamphleteers acknowledged the stressful conditions under which they had prepared this document: "in camp during the confusion of a march and without having the proper printing materials at hand."[724] The hurried and unrevised nature of the document is evident in its jumbled organization, repetitions, digressions and confused juxtapositions of pious anecdotes, rousing verses, passionate pleas and exhortations to fight. In its rough-hewn state, however, it preserves the voices and feelings of the rebellious soldiers in their diversity – brave and fearful, determined and wavering, hopeful and desperate.

The pamphleteers began by giving their former masters credit where it was due. The English had ruled successfully, they noted, as long as they had kept their promises, performed public service, built roads, maintained security and administered justice. However, after they were defeated in Kabul – a likely reference to the first Anglo-Afghan war (1839-1842) –, they had decided to "efface the religion of Muhammad."[725] This effacement occurred not only through proselytizing Christian missionaries, the pamphlet implied, but via techniques of bodily pollution and miscegenation designed to corrupt the Indian body politic. Missionary schools had served to corrupt Muslim and Hindu children.[726] Hundreds of Englishmen had seduced "females of Indian households" and sired many half-caste children.[727] Women were given undue liberty.[728] Historical texts were printed to heap contempt upon Muslims and Hindus.[729] Medicines had been mixed with cow fat, wine and other forbidden things. Such actions could not be ignored. Thus,

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[724] Ibid., f. 733.
[725] Ibid., f. 495.
[726] Ibid.
[727] Ibid., f. 497.
[728] Ibid.
[729] Ibid.

when an English doctor gargled into a bottle and gave it to a soldier as medicine, the

soldier complained to his colleagues. They killed the doctor and burnt his bungalow.[730]

It is worth noting the similarities between this discourse of bodily pollution and

societal corruption to Badayuni's portrayal of Akbar's attempt to overthrow the "Islamic"

order at the turn of the millennium. In the same vein, the pamphlet emphasized how

under the English, the entire socio-moral order of India was being turned upside down.

Indians were being incited away from their religions and social norms and turned into

Christians and made to behave like Europeans. It maintained that in Lahore the English

wanted to convert every Sikh to a Christian.[731] The entire Company army was to be made

Christian.[732] Instead of respectable Hindu and Muslim scholars, the Company had

appointed "low caste" converts to Christianity to courts of justice.[733]

As part of the same effort, the English had also encouraged indecency and

fornication.[734] Wives who were not satisfied could now leave their husbands.[735] Veiled

women were required to appear in court.[736] When a brother attacked his sister's lover to

avenge family honor, he was imprisoned for years while the sister was set free to do as

she pleased.[737] In a reference to the latest instance of English conquest, that of the

Punjab, the pamphlet noted that the Company not only took the kingdom away from the

reigning queen (*rani*) but also took her son and converted him to Christianity.[738] A

similar scheme was at work, it implied, when the English gave their Indian soldiers rifle

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[730] Ibid., f. 499.
[731] Ibid.
[732] Ibid., f. 499-501.
[733] Ibid., f. 503.
[734] Ibid., f. 505.
[735] Ibid., f. 507.
[736] Ibid.
[737] Ibid., f. 509.
[738] Ibid., f. 515.

cartridges made with pig and cow fat – a widely recognized source of the rebellion. The Governor General, the pamphlet insisted, had devised this cartridge to Christianize all of Hindustan.[739]

After relating in great detail the extent of social disorder and moral corruption spreading across the land, the pamphlet turned to describing its consequences. Holy men began to see visions of what was to come. One man who had constantly offered prayers prescribed by Ali saw the following vision: A hawk pounced upon a group of paddy birds in a field and slit their throats; another group of paddy birds appeared and the hawk did the same thing. The English are the paddy birds, the pamphlet explained, and the Indian soldiers fighting them are the hawk.[740] Similarly, in another dream, a man who had memorized the entire Quran (*hafiz*) saw that the second Caliph Umar was conducting prayers at congregation mosque (*jami' masjid*) in Delhi.[741] These dreams featuring Ali and Umar, symbols of Shi'ism and Sunnism, it should be noted, were meant to address a broad range of Muslims. But the pamphlet constantly emphasized throughout its narrative that its message was meant to be even broader: "In India there are two tribes Hindoo and Mussulman and neither of them feel disposed to embrace Christianity. Each is determined to uphold his respected faith."[742]

The pamphleteers pleaded that "with tears in our eyes" we used many devices to correct these wrongs but not one was successful. At last, a holy man dreamt that all the saints of God were assembled in front of the Prophet and complained against the oppression of the English. The Prophet, in response, took his Indian (Hindi) sword from

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[739] Ibid., f. 517.
[740] Ibid., f. 555.
[741] Ibid.
[742] Ibid., f. 527.

the waist of Christ and entrusted it to his companion Umar. In this way, the pamphlet

implied, the Prophet of Islam took away the sovereignty over India away from Christians

and gave it back to his own followers. This vision strengthened the rebels resolve to

uphold their faith and embrace death rather than "obey this race of unclean barbarians

whose food is pork and wine and whose habit is lust and fornication."[743]

The imagery and language used in the pamphlet was Islamic but also universally

designed to appeal to Indians of all faiths. It related the omens and auguries from well-

known Muslim and Persian sources – the Quran[744], the poetry of Hafiz (d. 1390)[745], and

mystical verses of Shah Ni'matullah (d. 1431) – to prove that English rule was fated to

come to an end after a hundred years, i.e., in 1857.[746] But it also maintained that these

signs and prophecies were meaningful to both Hindus and Muslims. For example, it

accused the English of proscribing the use of the Islamic formula *Bismillah* (By the Name

of God) even in children's books, while noting that both Hindus and Muslims used it.[747]

Moreover, it observed the harmful consequences for the English when they stopped using

this formula: it became easier for the soldiers to kill them.[748]

The pamphlet also used well-known cultural differences among Hindus and

Muslims to good effect. For example, in an attempt to dismiss the soldiers' fears that the

English possessed powers of sorcery, it offered three observations: First, it suggested,

what appeared to be magic was typically a technical malfunction such as the "hang

firing" of an incorrectly loaded cannon; second, if the English possessed magical power,

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[743] Ibid., f. 555.
[744] Ibid., f. 557-559.
[745] Ibid., f. 495.
[746] Ibid.
[747] Ibid., f. 499.
[748] Ibid., f. 599.

it replied, then Hindus wielded it too; and, third, although Muslims considered magic forbidden, it pointed out, they used powerful techniques to negate its powers. [749] The pamphlet then listed a series of Quranic verses, prayers and incantations that would annul the effect of sorcery. The implication was that with such complementary abilities, Hindus and Muslims could perform their own magic and render useless that of the English. In this vein, the pamphleteers also cautioned the soldiers that rather than attribute their defeats to English magic, they should blame them on their own sins of looting and disobedience.

It was with such an outlook in which magic, sin, and the will of holy men shaped the outcome of events that the pamphlet narrated how the last Mughal king was reinstated and empowered by the rebel soldiers. This event was preceded by the following miraculous occurrence.[750] A poor water-career (*bihishti*) in Delhi was on the steps of the congregational mosque (*jami' masjid*) when he was drawn to a mysterious green glow nearby. He discovered that it was coming from the shrine of the Sufi saint Sarmad, buried near the mosque. Sarmad, it should be noted, was a famous seventeenth century Sufi of Persian-Armenian origin best known for his mockery of formal religious doctrines. He described himself as a "follower of the Furqan (i.e., a Sufi), a (Hindu) priest, a (Buddhist) monk, a Jewish rabbi, an infidel, and an apostate Muslim,"[751] and was sentenced to death by the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb for apostasy. It is no accident that in this moment of crises, a holy man such as Sarmad was needed to miraculously overcome communal divisions.

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[749] Ibid., f. 597-605.
[750] Ibid., f. 563-567.
[751] Nathan Katz, "The Identity of a Mystic: The Case of Sa'id Sarmad, a Jewish-Yogi-Sufi Courtier of the Mughals," *Numen* 47, no. 2 (2000).

According to the pamphlet, a hand came out of the mound at Sarmad's shrine and gave the water-career a set of gold coins. A voice told him that these coins would lead him to the king, and gave him a message for the Mughal ruler: "I have now freely pardoned the shedding of my blood. Up to this day my wrath has been boiling and in spite of intercession of the saints it has never grown less till now. Now, I freely and of my own accord grant an absolute pardon." When the water career tried to use the gold coins, he was arrested by the authorities on suspicion of theft. He was eventually brought in front of the Mughal king and so managed to give him the saint's message. The story implied that the saint had absolved the Mughal ruler for his ancestor's crime of shedding the Sufi's blood. This absolution cleared the path for the Mughal to become a true sovereign again. Soon after this incident, the pamphlet recorded, the rebels enter Delhi and put the king on the throne.

Not only were the saints of yore aiding the rebels' efforts. Present day ones were also actively involved in defeating the English. The pamphlet related the following ongoing miracle featuring a black-clad messianic figure.[752] A prediction had been made that a mendicant (*faqir*) in a black blanket would take over the English Fort William in Calcutta. When the English found a man of such a description near the fort, they arrested and imprisoned him. However, he disappeared and now every Friday the sound of Muslim call to prayers (*azan*) came from the chapel in the fort. When the time was right, the pamphlet announced, this man would appear and wrest control of the fort away from the English.

Not all of the rebels' views were mystical and miraculous, however. They listed many of their complaints with historical precision and political pragmatism. They noted

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[752] "Advice of the Royal Army," f. 679-681.

that the English via their "regulations" wanted to eliminate them as Christians had eliminated Muslims in Spain.[753] They posed the question of why it was that the English had no influence in Rum (the Ottoman Empire) but so much in India.[754] They provided a tabulated count of the Europeans they had killed.[755] They compiled a list of grievances against the English to be sent to the kings of Iran, China, and other territories.[756] They noted how the Company had unilaterally broken its decades long agreement with the kingdom of Awadh, and how they were trying to get the Shah of Awadh to affix his seal to a deed of satisfaction to hide their legal transgressions.[757]

In reading the pamphlet, however, one gets the sense that despite their historical awareness and political astuteness, what deeply puzzled the rebels was the nature of the Company's sovereignty. How was it that a commercial, bureaucratic entity could take the place of a king? The Company, in their eyes, did not behave as an organization subordinate to a sovereign. They wondered about the state of affairs in England itself. The Queen of England, the pamphleteers reported, had become a debauched and helpless creature.[758] They said that Victoria was not allowed see her own husband because he was suspected of harboring French loyalties; she was, instead, serviced by an Ethiopian boy who wanted to whisk her away to Africa. Indeed, the pamphleteers remarked, the Company was plotting to take her kingdom just as they had stolen the kingdoms of India. Kingship was dying not only in India but also in England. It truly was the end of the world!

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[753] Ibid., f. 653.
[754] Ibid., f. 683-685.
[755] Ibid., f. 691.
[756] Ibid., f. 693-729.
[757] Ibid., f. 703.
[758] Ibid., f. 575-577.

Conclusion

Buckler was right in a sense when he pointed out that the Company's growing insults to Mughal sovereignty had caused the Indian soldiers to come to their emperor's defense. The relationship between cause and effect, however, was not as legally determined or politically transparent as Buckler had imagined it to be. It was not a breach of law or a sense of loyalty to old Bahadur Shah that turned the Indian soldiers and their compatriots against the English. Rather, it was a deeply and collectively felt perversion – felt as bodily pollution, social disorder, and cosmological chaos – at the new sovereign order ushered in by the Company. It felt like the anarchy of the millennium. Social life was no longer governed by sacred traditions. Sexual relations were cut loose from the necessities of kinship ties. Taboos of pollution were publicly and forcibly flouted. Most seriously of all, a series of "regulations" had replaced the body of the sovereign as the basis of social order. The Great Indian Mutiny was among other things a rebellion against an inexplicable and unbearable dispensation that constituted, to use Foucault's aphoristic phrase, "sex without the law and power without the king."[759]

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[759] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 91.

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