

**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

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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 *nizām*, 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.

¹ The label “Timurid” is used in this study to refer to the descendants 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'īl I (r. 1501-1524, hereafter referred to as Shah Isma'īl).

While not yet in his teens, Shah Isma'īl 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

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

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 of 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.

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.

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

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

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

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, Massachusetts: 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

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,

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

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

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

(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

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

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 men²⁶ 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

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

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,

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.

³¹Metcalf, "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

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-

³⁴ Aziz Ahmad, "Safavid 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 Physicians 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).

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).

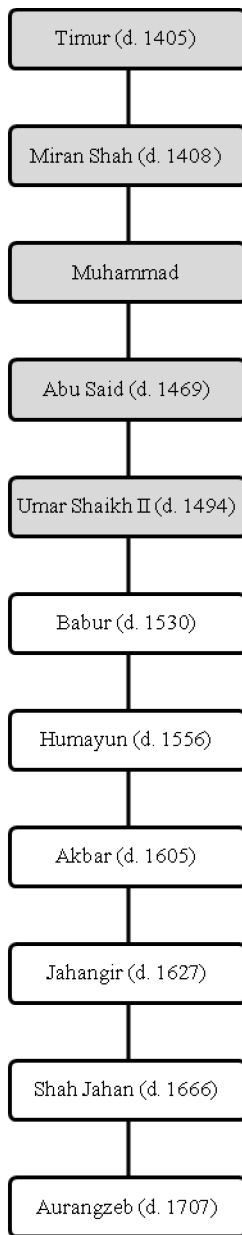


Figure 1-1: The Mughal Dynasty of South Asia with Central Asian Timurid Ancestors (shaded)

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

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

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 Malfuzat 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

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

⁴⁷David Morgan, *Medieval Persia, 1040-1797* (London: Longman, 1988), 93.

⁴⁸The 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

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 Qiran (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

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-Qarawiyyin 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 Jews⁵⁴, 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 things⁵⁵ – 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”

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.

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 Astarabadi 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

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

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 Ma'shar (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

⁶⁷ See J. Samso, "Masha'allah," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, CD-ROM* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

⁶⁸ When Abu Ma'shar'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 farthestmost 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

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, "Djafir," 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

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,

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

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 Futuh-at-i Amir Timur Gurkani*, ed. Panahi Simnani (Tihiran: 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

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

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 Arabshah⁹¹ (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 (*kufir*) 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

⁸⁹ The classic account of this process remains that of Trimmingham, *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,

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.

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.

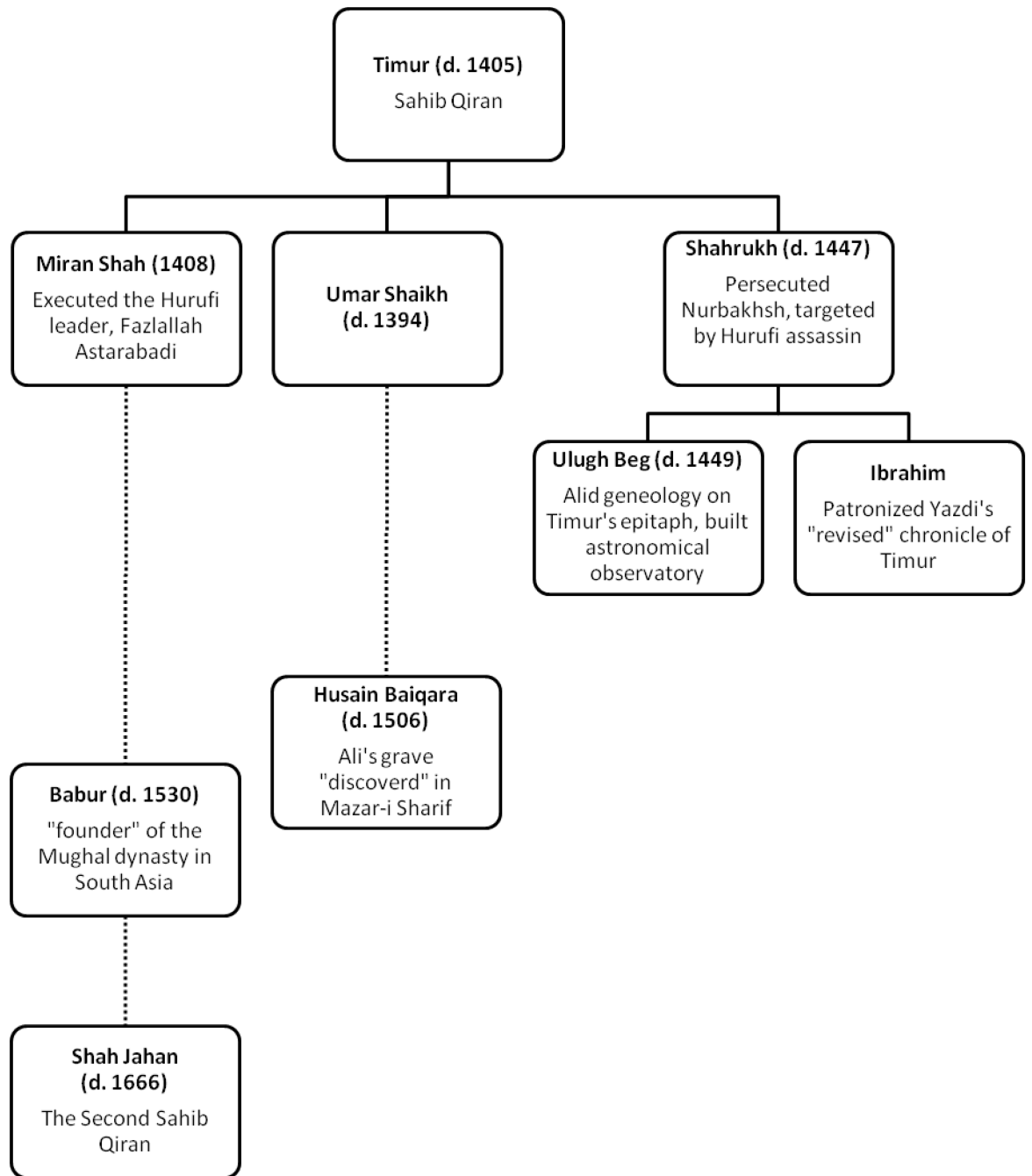


Figure 1-2: An Abridged Genealogy of Timurids Mentioned in the Text

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

⁹⁶ See Woods, "Timur's Genealogy," 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

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 imagine 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

¹⁰² Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi, *Zafarnamah*, ed. Abbasi Muhammad, 2 vols. (Tihiran, 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

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.

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

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 is 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

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 “re-achieved 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 descendants 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 descendants, 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

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 Rostam 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

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 Shehrbano¹²³, 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 Rostam 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.

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 Khvnanan 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 or 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

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

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

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

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 exist 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

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 Taymiyya'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

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

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

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.

¹⁵² The text is in Arabic, edited and annotated by Shahzad Bashir, "The Risalat al-Huda of Muhammad 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

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

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 (Tihiran: 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

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 savior¹⁶⁵ – 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.

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

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 *Jamasnāma* to get across a new messianic message in old millenarian garb.¹⁷⁰ Its “phil-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 *Jamasnāma* 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 *Jamasnāma* 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 eighth 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

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

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,

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

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.

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.

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 Aqqyunlu 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'Exercice 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

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

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

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 Reconsidered," *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 Safavid 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 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

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, *Aqqoyunlu*, 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 –

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

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 Qur'an*, 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

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 priori 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

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

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

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

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 *jinn*s.²¹⁰

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 *jinnqiraliq*, *jinnqiralar*. His sixteenth century Persian translator uses *jingarahgi*, *jingarhai* in Persian. Babur, Thackston, and Khan, *Baburnama (polyglot)*, 6-7. *Jinn*s 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

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

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 Qur'an*, 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

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,

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

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

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

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

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

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 –

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 Khwaja²⁴⁵ 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

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

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,

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 from 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

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 Baburnama 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.