THE MILLENNIAL
SOVEREIGN

SACRED KINGSHIP AND
SAINTHOOD IN ISLAM

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The style of Muslim kingship that evolved in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was deeply rooted in the memory of Timur (r. 1370–1405). A Barlas Turk of common birth, he rose from Central Asia to conquer territories in Anatolia, Syria, Iraq, Iran, India, and Russia, and he 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. 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 descendant, the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan (r. 1628–1658), of Taj Mahal fame. In a direct reference to Timur, Shah Jahan called himself the Second Lord of Conjunction (Sahib Qiran-i Thani). 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 each other, as if one is signifying the other. In a massive work on astronomy commissioned by Shah Jahan and entitled “The Grand Accomplishment of the Second Lord of Conjunction” (Kar-nama-i Sahib Qiran-i Thani), the preface also suggests a deep ontological equivalence between the two men. The mimetic medium here was not visual but “literal,” that is, 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.5

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 was not just metaphorical, a matter of image and text. It was also metonymical, a matter of ritual and mythical enactment. In 1646, Shah Jahan launched from India an audacious campaign to regain the Central Asian territories of Timur, an endeavor without any visible economic reward.6 This campaign is better understood, perhaps, 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.7 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.8

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.9 He was more than a memory in the common sense of the word. 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. To appreciate the historical development and inner workings of the institution of sacred kingship that Timur 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.10

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 into 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. 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 the most complex, puzzling, and unattractive figures in the history of Persia and Central Asia.”

**TIMUR’S MONGOL LEGACY**

What makes Timur so puzzling is that even when he had become the undisputed master of much of Asia, he refused to publicly call himself a king. Instead, he continued to rule in the name of the descendants of 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. The miracle of Chinggis was not in Islam’s favor, however. He was not Muslim, and for almost a century most of his Mongol descendants did not adopt Islam. Thus, in the thirteenth and early fourteenth century a large number of Muslim societies in Asia 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 in Iran and Central Asia had begun to adopt a pattern of seminomadic, 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 steppe. The latter were in turn labeled as robbers or raiders (*jete*) for their rough and ready demeanor and disdain for urban life.

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, and 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 collective processes of memory and meaning making. 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, 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 Timur adopted this title or why was he remembered for centuries by it are questions that remain unanswered. Despite its fame in Timur’s time, Lord of 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 sacred 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. 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.

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 encamp-
ment 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 (hid-than) concerning [Timur’s] appearance. Astrologers who used to discuss the conjunction (qiran) of the two superior planets were awaiting the tenth conjunction in the trigon, which was expected to occur in the year 766 AH (1364). One day . . . I met in Fez in the Mosque of al-Qarawiyin the preacher of Constantine . . . who was an expert in this art (kana mahiran fi hadha al-fann). 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 instrument (qa‘im) of this event would be the Fatimid [a descendant of Ali and his wife Fatima, the Prophet’s daughter] 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.18
Ibn Khaldun had done his research, interviewing merchants from Iran ahead of Timur’s arrival in Syria. Accordingly, he chose a form of flattery to match the lore surrounding Timur. In so many words, he called Timur a Lord of Conjunction whose rise to the mastery of the world was signaled by a “conjunction of the two superior planets”; a leader awaited by the most learned men of the age, by Sufis, astrologers, and physicians, by preachers and metaphysicians, by Muslims and Jews, 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 descended from the prophetic line (al-qā’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—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” perhaps the only coherent theme of religious life. There exists no in-depth historical explanation of why this period became the “messianic age” of Islam. In its absence, the generally accepted argument remains the one given for most instances of millenarism: social and economic deprivation. 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. 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. 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. 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 common people, the stupid mass,” who believed in such things as the imminent arrival of the savior. Which Ibn Khaldun
should we take more seriously, the historian’s historian who despised the
superstitions of the masses (*khurafat al ‘amma*)\(^{28}\) or the self-professed col-
lector 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 astro-
logy 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.\(^{29}\)

There are few detailed studies of the place and function of astrology
in Muslim societies.\(^{30}\) 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.\(^{31}\) 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 as-
sumptions 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 contemporary
rivals.\(^{32}\) In short, astrology was an important intellectual tradition that
contributed to elite theories on the interrelatedness of temporality, sov-
everignty, and the body politic.

What concerns us here is conjunction astrology, which used the cycli-
cal motion of the celestial spheres and the periodic alignment or “con-
junction” of the planets to divide historical time into meaningful eras. A
mixture of ancient Iranian, Indian, and Greek traditions, it was first pro-
pounded in Islamic times by Masha‘allah (d. c. 815),\(^{33}\) 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 medi-
eval times.\(^{34}\) To put it schematically, these astrologers used the conjunc-
tion of the two “superior planets,” Saturn and Jupiter, as a way of order-
ing historical events and predicting the future. Saturn and Jupiter were
called the superior planets because they were the two most distant bodies
among the seven “planets” visible to the naked eye, namely, the moon,
Mercury, Mars, the sun, Venus, Jupiter, and Saturn. Jupiter-Saturn con-
junctions recurred every twenty, 240, or 960 years, depending upon how
they were calculated, and were called “small,” “medium,” and “great,” respectively. 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.

Conjunction astrologers were in great demand, as Ibn Khaldun himself noted. “Rulers and *amirs* [leaders] who want to know the duration of their own dynasties show the greatest concern for these things.” He quoted many astrologers on conjunctions. 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 astrologer 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 and calculations in books of Shi‘i apocalyptic literature called *jafr*. 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. This doctrine made eminent sense in an age when the world was thought to last no longer than seven or eight thousand years from the birth of Adam.
Lord of Conjunction, then, was in its most energetic form a millennial title, which signified change in religiopolitical 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. 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. This polyvalence and cyclical temporality ensconced in the term 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). He asked for the “real” king, a teenaged descendant 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 tent. The conqueror responded with similar modesty when Ibn Khaldun compared him to the great emperors of the past—Khusraw, Caesar, 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. 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, 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.45 In Shami’s chronicle, it was a Chinggisid who was crowned King of the World (Padishah-i Jahan); Timur was not “given” any formal title. The later chronicle of Sharaf al-Din Yazdi revised Shami’s account of the accession ceremony, depicting it as the moment of Timur’s ascension to the throne, calling him shah, while promoting the Chinggisid puppet ruler to the position of “khan.”46 Although both of these chronicles called Timur “Lord of Conjunction,” neither of them pointed to the precise moment when he adopted the title but simply used it to refer to him from the beginning.47 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 mythmaking can only be guessed at, but its broad outlines are reasonably clear.

As was mentioned earlier, Timur upheld the “legal fiction” of Chinggisid supremacy until late into his reign.48 But this was not merely a matter of law. As one historian has astutely observed, there also seems to have been something propitious about it.49 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 person to participate in this bit of magic. Mongols, both 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, Tulunbay Khatun who arrived in Egypt in 1320.50 The Mamluks’ desire for a Chinggisid princess is understandable. They were a “slave” dynasty without noble blood. Faced with similar inadequacy 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: the wholesale destruction of cities; the rape, enslavement, and slaughter of their inhabitants; and the building of towers of skulls on a scale that outdid the Mongol conqueror.51 His reputation for public displays of cruelty seems to have exceeded even that of Chinggis Khan.52 Al-
though unpalatable today, these actions etched a reverent awe for Timur in the social memory of the time. Indeed, early to mid-sixteenth-century copies of Timur’s chronicles include miniature paintings that depicted the conqueror’s military victories—complete with towers of skulls—with the same verve as they illustrated the wedding celebrations of Timurid princes in which an eminent Islamic scholar of Samarqand inducted them into the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam (bar nahaj-i qawā'id-i millat-i hanafi).53

In effect, Timur’s charisma at the height of his reign began to rival his Mongol icon. Yet 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.54

Ibn Khaldun’s healthy skepticism notwithstanding, Timur’s rise to power was, as many suspected, attributable to a wide range of possibilities: “knowledge” (of the occult?), 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 power. 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 breaking out of their monastic shells and reaching out to the masses.55 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 their devotees. Thus 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.56 We must turn to these recently minted institutions and intellectual traditions and practices of Sufism in order to appreciate how Timurid charisma was constructed and imagined. For the processes of cultural production that transmuted kings into saints were spawned not in the domain of kingship but in the realm of sainthood.

If the Damascene historian Ibn Arabshah57 (d. 1450), a well-known detractor of Timur, is to be believed, the conqueror already enjoyed a cult-like following among a group of his soldiers who treated him as their spiritual guide. These men took him as their guide and protector independent of God, glorying in this and being outrageously insolent [about it]. Indeed, their denial of Islam (kufr) and their love for him were so great that had he claimed the rank of prophet or even divinity, they would have believed him in his claim. Each and every one of them sought to gain God Almighty’s favor through devotion to him, making a vow to him when they fell into dire straits and [then] fulfilling it. They persisted in their false belief and their denial of Islam throughout his lifetime, and after his death 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).58

These soldiers had a bond with Timur much like that of a Sufi devotee’s to his pir or master. In their eyes, he was already a qutb (axis mundi) around whom the world revolved and a qibla (focus) upon whose image they would meditate. The devotion of these men toward Timur was tinged with ghuluww (exaggeration), that is, a tendency to treat the spiritual guide as divine.59 We cannot dismiss this phenomenon as the belief of illiterate men or as shamanistic practices prevalent in the Mongol milieu.60 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, 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 predict the future and read men’s minds. As a Safavid astrologer-historian would note more than two centuries later, Timur had been so clairvoyant that he had no need for an astrologer.61

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 and 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 was first to dismantle publicly 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.

As discussed above, in the 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).62 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.  

Timur here is equated and made to share a common biblical genealogy with Alexander of Macedonia. The latter is represented as a prophet mentioned in the Quran and as, of course, a Lord of Conjunction. The words used to describe Timur’s and Alexander’s 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 “cycles” of the sun and the moon. However, he was most likely drawing upon the Iranian astrological 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.”  

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 twelfth-century thinker Suhrawardi (d. 1191), who had even composed prayers in Arabic to ask the sun for knowledge and salvation.  

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 the “Sun of Iran” and the “Moon of Turan (land of the Turks).” 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, which was a royal emblem seen in the region from at least the twelfth century. While the sun and lion were ancient symbols of kingship common across many cultures, the sun on a lion’s back was also used at this time for the zodiacal 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 rebirth of the 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 ap-
plied it in a more muted Islamized form to describe his living patrons. He called Timur’s heir, Shahrukh, the centennial 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-nabuwat). 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.

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. 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 coexisted 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 ibn Abi Talib (d. 661), the son-in-law of the Prophet and the only male progenitor of his descendants, from whose line the savior was expected to appear.

As Ibn Khaldun observed, Timur already had a reputation for conferring favor upon the descendants of the Prophet, the Sayyids or Alids. 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 toward Ali as a source of sovereignty is the engraving on Timur’s tomb, in the Grave of Amir (Gur-i Amir) complex in Samarqand. 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. 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 aspect, however, the stone inscription is no different than what is found in the revised Timurid chronicles. What is unique in the inscription is the added assertion—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.74

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.75 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 descendant of Ali who helps Alanquva conceive Timur’s ancestor. The implications are clear: Timur was a descendant 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 the 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.

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, it was 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 (oc-
cult sciences) and enjoyed close links with Naqshbandi and Ni‘matullahi mystical orders. 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 Samarqand. In short, in the episteme of the time, science, mathematics, scriptural knowledge, and occult 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 and son-in-law of the Prophet, 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 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. After Timur’s death, the Timurids began to shift away from Chinggis Khan as the dominant 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 Alexander of the Quran, a sanctified figure of kingship greater than Chinggis Khan. Second, in an important gesture toward 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 in the words of one historian, “an ‘officially’ Shi‘i dynasty could hardly have been more obsequious.” 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).79 The site received such massive Timurid patronage that pilgrimage to it was officially promoted as an alternative to the *hajj* to Mecca. This Timurid preference for Ali has been explained as part of the group religiosity of the times, in which Sufi and Shi‘i elements came together in the light of a “reached Islamic unity.”80 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.81 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.82 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.83 Indeed, nearly all the Sufi families in this period traced their descent from Ali and, through him, to the Prophet. 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 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.84 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. Similar to the vast poems of war and conquest about pre-Islamic Iranian kings and heroes in the famous *Shahnama* (Book of Kings) of Firdawsi (d. 1020), there existed as early as 1089 a versified epic relating the exploits of Ali called the *Alinama* (Book of Ali).85 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.86 These tales in their oral form not only provided entertainment and “enthusiasm” (*hamasa*)87 but also supplied
much of the symbolism with which people, especially warriors, imagined themselves and identified with Islam and its heroes. Even in their stylized courtly forms, these works were a mixture of Islamic historical material and recycled stories of pre-Islamic Iranian heroes. For example, in the Khawarnama, Ali goes on a series of fantastic adventures fighting dragons and monsters much like Rustam of the Shahnama, but Ali begins his journey in the Hijaz and returns at the end to Medina, where his father-in-law, the Prophet, and his two sons, Hasan and Husayn, await him with open arms.\(^8\) Overall, we have to be careful in making too sharp and general a distinction between “history” and “myth,” between popular and elite culture, or between religion and entertainment. This was a bias of only a small minority from this period. Indeed, the early seventeenth-century Deccani Urdu Khawarnama, which is replete with paintings of gory battle scenes, was not dedicated to a warring king but to the Adil Shahi princess Khadija Sultan Shehrbano,\(^9\) a devout Shiʿi lady who patronized this work as a devotee of Ali.\(^9\)

Ali was not the only hero of these epics. Many of his partisans and followers were also extremely popular as protagonists of these stories.\(^9\) 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.\(^2\) Ali and his supporters faced competition, however, from other popular heroes. There was Hamza, an uncle of the Prophet and a great warrior. And there were of course the ever-popular ancient Iranian heroes like Rustam and Darab of the Firdawsian tradition. The question, however, 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: aristocratic tents nestled in grand symmetrical gardens, inner-city neighborhoods controlled by artisanal groups, and, most importantly, the military camps (ordu) of the marches.

Timur’s army was a diverse, complex, and semipermanent 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.\(^3\) 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.94

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 Samarqand, 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 opinions [most likely Hindus],” brought there from distant lands conquered by Timur.95 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.96 We have little ethnographic information on what went on in these vast tent encampments or in the 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.97 A particularly interesting but much ignored one is the memoir of the Bavarian soldier Johann Schiltberger (d. c. 1440).98

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 traveled extensively with the Timurid army, even going far north into 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 the fifth, some believe, and the largest number among the Infidels believe, in one who is called Machmet.99

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. But Schiltberger was correct in observing that most Muslims followed “Machmet” (that is, Prophet 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. And 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? 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 singlehandedly 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.100 Schiltberger brought up Ali again when describing the history of early Islam. He reported that “Machmet” had been adopted by the king of Babylon. When the king died, “Machmet” 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 “Machmet” 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 as do other Infidels. They believe in a certain Aly.” In sum, Ali appeared to Schiltberger as someone who was believed to be the true successor of the Prophet as the leader of the Muslims, a great warrior of
superhuman strength, and someone who was revered even more than the Prophet in some cities. “Machmet,” moreover, appears in this account as a king incorporated by marriage into the line of Persian (Babylonian) kings.

At first glance, Schiltberger’s descriptions of Islamic history and Muslim beliefs appear ill informed, as they 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 lands or that he 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.” 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 Muslims, while not historically accurate, were attempts to make sense of the present with signs that were, nevertheless, the detritus of history. 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 among Muslims. 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. 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 battles of Badr and Uhud and was killed on the day of Uhud [in the year 625]; 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 . . .

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. 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; 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. 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 proselytizer and campaigner (sahib al-da’wa) for the sovereignty of the Alids was kept alive by the orally recited tales of the Abu Muslim-nama. 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 had gotten his names and dates mixed up. In general, boundaries between religion, oral culture, and public entertainment are hard to draw in this period. Further, we cannot necessarily assume that the learned elite were somehow above these concerns and did not make recourse to “mythical thought.” 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. Nevertheless, literary versions of the story abound in manuscript collections, and we know of its popularity among the most learned of men. The tales of Hamza belonged to pre-Islamic Iranian lore that survived in
oral culture as Iranians converted to Islam. In the process, an Iranian hero became conflated with the historical figure of Hamza, the warrior uncle of the Prophet. In life, Hamza was a childhood playmate and foster brother of the Prophet who died during the latter’s life in the battle of Uhud in 625. In the epic, however, Hamza is born with the horoscope of a great sovereign and becomes, in effect, the Prophet’s earthly and cosmological twin: while the latter 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 legendary stories of Hamza are structured by a plot that can 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 detracted 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 embodiment, the mahdi (messiah), and the true sovereign of the age. He had made his messianic claim during the reign of Timur’s son Shahrukh, who had him arrested several times. After Timurid authorities imprisoned Nurbakhsh in a deep well for more than fifty days, 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. 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. 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, along with the religious and political implications of that claim. Given his popularity and his entanglements with the Timurid authorities, this manifesto is worth examining closely. 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.116

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 and in his claim to earthly sovereignty. He quoted, among others, the Greek astronomer Ptolemy and the Zoroastrian sage and seer Jamasp.117 But what is the connection between Nurbakhsh’s 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 he 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 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, of his avatar, Nurbakhsh.

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),118 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."119
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 [1423–1424], 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.120

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 on Timur’s tombstone in Samarqand around this time, in which Alanquva was impregnated by a ray of light that took on the form of a descendant of Ali? The “bizarre” Timurid claim of being descended 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 neoplatonic version.121 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 Antichrist.122 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.123 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. A believer in transmigration of the soul (tanasukh), Musha’sha’ had taught the mysteries of the name of Ali. A similar case of divine infection occurred with the founder of the influential and widespread Hurufi (letterist) mystical movement, Fazlallah Astarabadi (d. 1394). 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, which had followed the earlier cycles of prophethood and sainthood. 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.

It is in this environment—one 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 coexist at the same time. There was no reason why the complete soul could not descend into multiple perfect beings, a fact pointed out by later expounders of Nurbakhsh’s idea. Its philosophical niceties aside, the theory was an attempt to make sense of a lived reality in which every region had its own sacred presence of a divinely inspired savior—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. Why did this philosophical school, which was already centuries old, regain its charm during 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. 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.

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 Kitab Jamasp fi Tawali’ al-Anbiya (the Book of Jamasp Concerning Horoscopes of the Prophets).

This work is a challenge to interpret. It is anonymous, and its place of production and extent of circulation is 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 descendants. All we know is that it was produced roughly somewhere in fifteenth-century Iran and has 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.

The text consists of the horoscopes of major figures of world history taken from biblical, Islamic, and Iranian traditions. The time period cov-
ered 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 prophecy. In short, it is a condensed history-prophecy of the world, one based on a cyclical concept of time in which conjunctions mark the coming and going of religiopolitical figures and changes in world affairs. It even uses the conjunction (qiran) as a measure of time equal to twenty years, stating the “prediction,” for instance, that the Prophet’s age will be three and one-sixth of a conjunction, that is, sixty-three years.

Its attribution to Jamasp notwithstanding, this Persian work is written from a Muslim perspective and is in fact an Alid polemic. Writing in an arcane-seeming Persian script, our pseudo-Jamasp tries to use the form, feel, and fame of the ancient Zoroastrian Jamaspnama to get across a new messianic message in old millenarian garb. Its “philo-Alidism” is clearly enunciated in the way Ali and his descendants are given a prime role in the future of the world. While the Prophet 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 (ba 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 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 (ba 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, fierce-eyed (surkh chashm), 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 (ba hujjat).
Pseudo-Jamasp presents Ali as a world conqueror. It 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 is another figure whose horoscope is as elaborate and fortunate as that of Ali. The world conqueror who receives one of the worst reviews, however, 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 lead a great campaign (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.

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 the Prophet, 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 shuns 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 a world conqueror and even, anachronistically, a turban-wearing Sufi. But this is precisely the outlook that shaped the 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 fabled two-pointed sword and trusty ride.\textsuperscript{137} 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 this point, the cast of characters that appear before the end of the world is borrowed from a mixture of Islamic apocalyptic traditions. The important ones included 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, pseudo-Jamasp asserted that the descendants 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. 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. 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.\textsuperscript{138} 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.\textsuperscript{139} 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, and that he had even ascended to heaven on a forty-step ladder. 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 descendants of the Prophet, consulting astrologers and soothsayers, and 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 sovereignty were shaped by the messianic myth of the Lord of Conjunction. This was a time of transition. The existing Mongol order was receding. 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, as a saint, messiah, or divinity, much as the followers of Nurbakhsh, Musha'sha', and Fazlallah Astarabadi had venerated these men. The milieu of the military camp, with its oral epic traditions and heroic ideals, encouraged enthusiastic and concrete modes of sacrality over textual religious 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 descendant of Ali, the awaited messiah.

In sum, Timurid claims to power were based on an engagement with the particular embodied forms of sacrality dominant at the time. Reports of this ritual theater 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—molds 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 Antichrist. 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.
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. 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.

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. 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 centers of the long-acting “civilizing process”—the cultivated manners, habits, and tastes—that shaped elite Persianate “social personality” across large swaths of Asia.

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 (1483–1530), grew up under the shadow of
Timur. Their careers, however, have drawn little comparative interest from historians. This is understandable, given 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. 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. Further, such a change in perspective enables us to view these two struggling dynasts as belonging not to two different strands of the past—Safavid Iran and Mughal India—but to the same historical milieu. Despite their diverse backgrounds and diverging careers, the two men 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, the historical image of these two men has been rendered in two very different historiographical veins. Babur, we are told, was 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.5 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 and death.6 The question, however, is: if these 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 the two dynasties 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 expectant quality to it: omens and portents were everywhere, new cosmologies were experimented with and novel rituals tried out, and 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 Shah Isma‘il’s charismatic reputation of being a divinity descended to earth as an embodiment of Ali. 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. To judge the import of these acts we must set aside the received categories of history, which locate Babur and Shah 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, one in which competition for sovereignty occurred in a ritual fashion that still bore the stamp of Timur, Lord of Conjunction. After all, Shah Isma‘il and Babur were fighting for the same territorial prize: the former dominions of Timur.

To see the two men’s sovereign ambitions in similar cultural terms, however, requires a double shift in perspective. On the one hand, Shah Isma‘il, whose image as a mystagogue and messiah appears strange to us, needs to be made more familiar. On the other hand, Babur, who seems familiar as a rational and pragmatic ruler, needs to be shown operating in a stranger realm. Given the messianic controversy surrounding Shah Isma‘il, it is easier to see him participating in a symbolic domain of sacred sovereignty similar to the one Timur had inhabited. However, Babur’s sober image as the wielder of rational forms of authority makes matters more complex. The main source for this no-nonsense image is Babur’s memoir, a rare first-person account written in Chagatay Turkish, which Stephen Dale in his wide-ranging study described as “preternaturally modern.” Indeed, reading Babur’s book at times feels as if one has stumbled upon early modernity in the guise of a well-read and well-mannered Turkish prince who possessed an ethos close to our own. 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. 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. Thus, one of Babur’s major spiritual achievements was narrated not during his lifetime but almost half a century later by his daughter, Gulbadan Banu. She related how her father had miraculously saved her brother Humayun’s life. As the young prince lay deathly ill, Babur 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” 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.

Even though Babur never achieved a sovereign stature equivalent to that of Timur, 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 that shaped it. 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. 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. Instead, such phenomena were investigated, classified, and verified by religious and political authorities. To grasp this as an important aspect of public life is a first step in appreciating that a considerable part of the social role of kingship involved being able and willing to confront and deal with “strangeness.”
THE STRANGENCY OF BABUR’S WORLD

In 1494, a “strange event” (waqi‘a ghariba) occurred in the bucolic valley of Fergana, situated about three hundred miles from Samarqand. 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.” This event would have gone unnoticed if it had not been for the keen diary-keeping habit of his son, Babur.17

This was an important moment for Babur, who began his memoirs with it: “In the month 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 for 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. 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, 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. 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. Herein 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 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.20

For example, take these two “strange” anecdotes. In relating a battle involving 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’ā) 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.”21 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.”22

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, which 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 the hidden pattern in a poet’s couplet.23 Late in his life, when he could afford to, Babur also patronized a famous “enigmatist” who had previously served Shah Isma‘il.24 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 that 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.\textsuperscript{25}

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 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).”\textsuperscript{26} Compare this with Timur’s encounter with an antinomian dervish, Baba Sangu, on his way to conquer Khurasan in 1385.\textsuperscript{27} 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.\textsuperscript{28}

Rather than judge these events as true or false or treat them as literary devices, the analytical challenge is to grasp the social process that turned such disparate cultural products—refined verses, dream visions, disembodied heads, pieces of meat—into common operators in a ritual domain. This perspective brings into focus a busy traffic in omens that 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 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.\textsuperscript{29} Such a system also gave a great deal of power to the brokers of 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 such as 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. 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 (also called Marghinan in Arabic) was famous for producing the author of the *Hidaya*, a famous work of Islamic jurisprudence used across Transoxania. But Margilan also supplied Transoxania with its most renowned exorcists, people who could overpower *jinns*. 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 both for a famous musician and its 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, such as 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” his deep knowledge of the country. 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).33 Kabul was a new territory for Babur. The excitement he betrayed at seeing Canopus (Suhayl), “a brilliant star low on the southern horizon”34 indicated that this may have been the first time he had come down this far south. Canopus was a navigational star and is 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.35

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 sugar, refined sugar, and spices. . . . Goods from Khurasan, Iraq, Anatolia, and China can be found in Kabul, which is the principal depot of Hindustan.”36

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.”37 Babur enumerated in detail the tribes who lived in his dominion, the places where highwaymen lurked, the passes through the mountains, and sites to ford rivers, and he 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 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.38 In the district of Alishang, one could visit the tomb of Noah’s father, Mehter Lam.39 In the district of Kunar, Babur circumambulated a shrine where a famous mystic, Mir Sayyid-Ali Hama-
Dani (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 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.”

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.”

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. Babur named three of his officers who possessed this skill. One of them worked up a thunderstorm on the 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.”

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-man 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.”

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, an eminently learned prince, made no such distinctions. 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. 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. 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. Babur, for example, once attributed a recurring earache to the cycles of the moon. 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 imbalances of humors in the physical body, they could predict rebellion and heresy as cosmically driven disorders in the body politic and 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. 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. We can imagine 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 struck fear into the heart of Babur’s officers. 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.

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 onto 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 and “copied and dispatched to the entire realm.” 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.”

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. 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, cosmic 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. The rituals Babur engaged in were not the empty gestures and silent words 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. He was, in other words, exercising his sovereign agency.
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. 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 local knowledge. Indeed, reading Babur’s memoir one is constantly surprised by how few barriers existed between him and the locals. For example, when he was ruling Kabul, Babur 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.” 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 both to contribute toward and tap into a network of news and opinion managed by various “knowledge communities.” 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. Their control over local knowledge created spheres of autonomy within the polity and as such provided a check on the ruler’s authority. Although the “strange” forms of knowledge these groups dealt in—divination, dream interpretation, astrology, apocalyptic verse, morality tales, miracle stories, and edifying epics—today do not
fit into “respectable” categories of religion or politics, at the time they played an important role in the dissemination of political messages and news as well as in the formation of social memory. 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 SAMARQAND

Although Babur is famous today for conquering Hindustan, it was really his early and sustained quest to become the master of Samarqand 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 Samarqand, a city that, he wrote, had been founded by Alexander, conquered by Arabs in the reign of the third caliph Usman, and made into his capital by Timur. It is difficult to overstate the attraction Samarqand 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.

The first time Babur took Samarqand 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—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 high religious authorities, including 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 was legendary. 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—Khwaja Qazi 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 Samar-
qand, 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 him 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." 

The case of the wealthy and saintly Khwaja Qazi shows that Samarqand, 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 Khwaja Qazi 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. In short, with their aristocratic connections and local, urban ties, these Sufis—sometimes literally—held the keys to the city and could act as kingmakers.

Unsurprisingly, then, in planning his next attempt on Samarqand in 1500, Babur once again turned to a Naqshbandi leader. This time it was Khwaja Yahya, a son of the renowned Khwaja ‘Ubaydullah Ahrar. Babur had high hopes of receiving saintly assistance, because he wrote “if the Khwaja agrees, Samarqand can easily be taken without fighting or battle.” 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 days, some said twenty days. Noyan Kukaldash said ‘We’ll take it in fourteen days.’” 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 Samarqand.72

Khwaja ʿUbaydullah 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 venerated by Timur himself. It was at Shaykh Maslahat’s shrine that Babur had found refuge in 1497 after having lost Samarqand the first time.73 So with the blessing of these two buried but still active saints, Samarqand fell in two weeks, miraculously, without even a fight.

This time around, Babur’s control over Samarqand 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. The year 1501 was a particularly ignominious one for him. Not only did he lose his prized city, but 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 Yaʿqub, 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!”74
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 Karon. Go, get him and come, for the royal throne belongs to him.’”

How should we treat the interconnected and patterned dreams of Babur and his men? Reading them in a text, we tend to view dreams as metaphors—as a more poetic way of describing reality. Or we dismiss them as propaganda meant to provide legitimacy and uphold ideology. To take dreams as fact feels like a deeply misplaced empiricism. Our uneasiness toward dreams may be explained by the fact that we, unlike our premodern Muslim counterparts, are neither reared from childhood to retain and recount our dreams nor trained as scholars in the science of dream interpretation. Conversely, in Babur’s time, dreams served as emotive metaphors and powerful propaganda tools precisely because dreaming was a social fact: dreaming was a widespread social practice that operated within the cultural logic of “strangeness” described earlier.

Dreams implied a prophetic connection with the invisible world and were considered a highly regarded source of truth. Oneirocriticism, dream interpretation, was both akin to and competitive with astrology as a divinatory science against which even the Islamic legal tradition had few arguments. By the time of the influential scholar Al-Ghazzali (d. 1111), the prophetic power of dreams was generally explained by Plato’s theory of the intellect: only when the physical senses were at rest during sleep and could not interfere with the perceptive power of the intellect could it perceive the noblest truths of the world of being. Supported by high philosophy, dreaming was also grounded in everyday discourse. Dreams were a serious topic of public discussion and frequently referenced in religious, political, and military affairs. Not all dreamers were of equal ability and not all dreams of equal value, however. Clear dreams, which required no interpretation, and especially those in which prophetic, saintly, or royal figures appeared, contained the highest truth content.

In sum, the ability to see clear, unambiguous dreams indicated a refined intellect and a pure soul. This gave dreaming a powerful ontological property. By bringing saintly and prophetic figures from the past into the present, dreams could bend time and transmute it, turning profane moments into sacred ones. When seen, dreams could sacralize social relations and, when
narrated, they could operationalize political alliances. For example, we saw in the case of Babur and the Naqshbandis how dreams transformed mundane political pacts into spiritual bonds and routine events of war into fulfillments of saintly prophecy. In terms of efficacy, dreams worked in two directions. On the one hand, a dream could touch and change the self of the seer and, on the other hand, it could articulate the self with networks of community. In the latter sense, dreaming was, oddly, a public ritual much like Babur’s declarative forsaking of wine. But in the former sense, dreaming could function as a lifecycle ritual that marked the crossing of socially prescribed thresholds in the development of the self. Babur fought countless battles in his life, but he narrated his dreams only during his early and desperate struggle for Samarqand. These dreams, then, must be viewed as marking the rite of passage of a budding Timurid sovereign. It is no accident that these visions occurred at a moment in Babur’s life when he was a dispossessed prince in search of dominion—a liminal condition that was an accepted part and expected phase of a Timurid prince’s political development.79

If Babur’s dreams were indeed rituals of sovereignty, then the role of Naqshbandis in them takes on a deeper significance. They reveal how deeply Naqshbandi Sufi families were embedded in the moral and political economy of Transoxania. Sovereignty over the region was theirs to grant. Samarqand could only be acquired through the spiritual intercession of past Naqshbandi saints and the material assistance of living ones. This makes it truly remarkable that in his third and final attempt on Samarqand in 1511, Babur abandoned the Naqshbandis and instead embraced their archnemesis. This was the Sufi brotherhood of the Safavids, which, under its youthful leader Shah Isma‘il, had moved beyond the role of kingmaker to claim sovereignty for itself. Between 1501, when he had taken the Aqqoyunlu capital of Tabriz in the east, and 1510, when he defeated the Uzbeks and conquered Herat in the west, Shah Isma‘il became the sole sovereign of Iran. But he was no ordinary king. He was also the perfect guide (murshid-i kamil) and the messiah. All the prominent Sufi and aristocratic families now faced the same stark choice. They could submit to the new order and accept the political and spiritual overlordship of the Safavid shah and shaykh. Or they could resist and be annihilated.

THE RISE OF SHAH ISMA‘IL

The rise of Shah Isma‘il was a cataclysm of a magnitude not felt in the region since the conquests of Timur. A twelve-year-old boy had achieved
over roughly ten years what no one else had been able to for over a cen­tury. Shah Isma‘il had brought eastern and western Iran under one rule
and launched an aggressive assault on Transoxania. His soldiers had ac­
complished this, moreover, with a ferocity and ruthlessness reminiscent
of Timur’s methods. It is not surprising that the founder of the Safavid
dynasty became, like the earlier Lord of Conjunction, a mythical figure in
his lifetime. This is in sharp contrast to Babur, who remained an “ordi­
nary” figure and about whom contemporary sources other than his own
memoir have very little to say. To understand the nature of Babur’s rela­
tionship with Shah Isma‘il, it is important to develop an appreciation for
the popular image and political stature of the latter. For, in the first de­
cade of the sixteenth century, when Babur was scraping together a living
by raiding Afghan villages and keeping his sovereign ambitions alive by
writing down his dreams in a diary, Shah Isma‘il was enacting the myth of
being a Lord of Conjunction, and news of his invincibility and miraculous
victories was echoing across Asia and Europe.

The earliest and richest accounts we have of Shah Isma‘il are from Ital­
ian and Venetian sources that refer to him as the “Sofi.” The Europe­
ans had been keenly following the politics of northwestern Iran, because
they sought an ally there against the powerful Ottomans, with whom
they competed for trade routes. They knew that Shah Isma‘il’s mater­
nal grandmother, the Aqqoyunlu queen Despina Khatun, was a Christian
princess from the small Greek kingdom of Trebizond on the Black Sea
coast. Consequently, their accounts were full of reports about the rise of
a new child-king, son of Martha, who may in fact be a secret Christian. It
was believed, erroneously, that in the internecine violence that broke out
after the death of Uzun Hasan, the Aqqoyunlu king, Shah Isma‘il had been
given refuge and taught the scriptures by a Christian Armenian priest on
an island on Lake Van. This “good priest, who professed to be an astrolo­
ger and to know the course of events from the aspect of the heavens, cast
his [Isma‘il’s] horoscope and foresaw that he would yet become lord of
all Asia.” The author of this account knew, however, that Shah Isma‘il’s
conquering career came to an abrupt end with his defeat by Ottomans at
Chaldiran in 1514. But even then, he observed that “if the [Ottoman] Turk
had been beaten, the power of Isma‘il would have become greater than
that of Tamerlane, as by the fame alone of such a victory he would have
made himself absolute lord of the East.”

Despite the mythical stature of the two conquerors, Shah Isma‘il’s rise
to power as Lord of the East is a very different story from how Timur the
Lame had become the Lord of Conjunction. When Shah Isma‘il appeared on the political stage, he already had a gilded lineage connecting him to Ali and to the Aqqoyunlu ruler of western Iran. But what made Shah Isma‘il different from any other general or prince was his position as the head of the Safavid Sufi order. This gave him a substantial advantage over other claimants to kingship—an ability to recruit and inspire devoted and loyal fighting men. The Safavid Sufi order had become militarized under Shah Isma‘il’s grandfather, Junayd, who had gathered a number of devotees among nomadic Turkmen tribes. Shah Isma‘il inherited this spiritual position from his own father, Haydar. In other words, he did not become a messiah but rather was born as one. In the eyes of his Sufi followers, Shah Isma‘il was Ali reborn and divine. It was said that his soldiers prayed in camp facing his tent and trusted him to protect their lives by his miraculous abilities. They were willing to sacrifice their lives for their adolescent perfect spiritual guide (murshid-i kamil). An European observer noted:

This monarch is almost, so to speak, worshipped, more especially by his soldiers, many of whom fight without armour, being willing to die for their master. They go into battle with naked breasts, crying out “Schiac, Schiac,” which, in the Persian language, signifies “God, God.” Others consider him a prophet; but it is certain that all are of opinion that he will never die.

The devotion of Shah Isma‘il’s soldiers toward him was something few princes could hope to possess. By contrast, Babur faced great difficulty throughout his life in raising an army of men loyal to him for an extended period of time. What Babur did not have was the elaborate recruitment and indoctrination apparatus of the Safavid Sufi mission (da‘wa). Two generations before Shah Isma‘il, the Safavids had developed an extensive network of preachers and proselytizers targeting the Turkmen tribes of Anatolia, the southern Caucasus, and Azerbaijan. This network of dervish agents was managed by a hierarchical organization of deputies (khalifa) and head deputies (khalifat al-khulafa). The message transmitted through this network was that the messiah had arrived and was rallying men of true faith to him. It was a message, moreover, that was designed to resonate with the Alid beliefs and practices already widespread in the region. The gist of these beliefs and practices was the spiritual primacy and divinity of Ali, who, it was expected, would periodically return to earth to end tyranny and establish justice. As mentioned earlier, heresiographi-
cal literature of the period termed such groups extremists or exaggerators (ghulat), in that they exaggerated the significance of Ali to the point of divinity. However, it is important to realize that for the population that was the target of Safavid agents (da‘i), these notions were not heretical in the sense of being a deviation from majority belief but, rather, a significant part of the norm. The “exaggerated” forms of Alid loyalty were prevalent not only in the nomadic Turkmen milieu but also in urban chivalrous organizations and brotherhoods of craft guildsmen across the region. The messianic movements of the previous century—Nurbakhshi, Hurufi, Musha’sha’, and others—had also paved the way for many of these “strange” ideas and practices to be systematized and made compatible with elite Sufi metaphysics and philosophy, which, it is critical to note, overlapped with the “sciences of strangeness” and the rituals they sustained. In sum, the Safavids did not arise suddenly out of a vacuum but rather evolved gradually—and in keeping with the times—from a sedate, urban, and largely Sunni spiritual brotherhood in Ardabil into a militant, aggressive, and undeniably ghulat mystical order that came to dominate Iran and nearly overtake Ottoman Anatolia.

As a child of about twelve in 1501, it is unlikely that Shah Isma‘il was directly in charge of the organization. Rather, control in the early years seemed to have been in the hands of one of his brother-in-laws, who was also a chief of the Safavid mission (khalifat al-khulafa). But Shah Isma‘il was a crucial symbol for the project as the spiritual guide and messiah. This we can judge from poetry attributed to him, written in a simple Azeri dialect of Turkish, which was used in Safavid missionary propaganda. This poetry is all we have from Shah Isma‘il, who, unlike Babur, did not leave behind a detailed narrative of his life. In these poems, Shah Isma‘il claimed to be the embodiment of divine truth (haqq), Ali, Jesus, the twelve Shi‘i Imams, and, importantly, of great warriors and emperors of the pre-Islamic Iranian past. It is significant that Shah Isma‘il’s verse, written under the pen name Khata‘i (Sinner), became widely adopted as devotional poetry and scripture in different Turkish-speaking Sufi communities and Alid sects in the region.

SUFI MOVEMENTS AND MESSIANIC EXPECTATIONS

One group that preserved the poetry of Khata‘i was the Bektashi Sufi order of Anatolia. The Bektashis were popular among Ottoman soldiers at least since the late fourteenth century and later became recognized as
the spiritual order that ministered to the crack slave infantry units known as the Janissaries. The fact that among the soldiers of the “Sunni” Ottomans there had existed a deep affinity for the messianic symbolism of their “Shi‘i” Safavid enemies makes for a complicated military history. For example, when the Ottomans defeated the Safavids in 1514 and captured the latter’s capital at Tabriz, they did not consolidate their claims. Rather, they quickly left the region, because they feared that their own soldiers were susceptible to Safavid propaganda.93 This case highlights the inadequacy of studying this period with labels such as Shi‘i and Sunni, based on doctrinal differences. To avoid being straitjacketed by these labels, we must pay more attention to patterned actions and practices of cultural actors—those “transient examples of shaped behavior”94 of interest to ethnographers—that informed a common social experience and provided a common social spectacle.

The effectiveness of the Safavid dervish missionaries becomes obvious once seen against the backdrop of the spectacle of “deviant renunciation” that had spread across Anatolia, Iran, Transoxania, and India during this period.95 There existed in large numbers bands of mendicant dervishes—variously referred to as Qalandars, Abdals, Rums, and Haydaris—who were mystics of a type quite unlike the princely Naqshbandi Sufis of Samarqand. Rather than hobnobbing with royalty and funding coups in pursuit of power and status, these renunciants strove to achieve the opposite effect of permanent social marginality. It was not necessarily class, birth, or even education that divided the conformist (bashar’) from the deviant (bi shar’i) mystics. Rather, it was how they lived, what they consumed, and the way they adorned their bodies, deliberately breaking as many of society’s taboos as possible.

Sixteenth-century reports about these groups relate that instead of keeping beards, these mystics shaved off all of their facial and body hair.96 They wore nose rings, pierced their bodies, carved out signs on their flesh, tattooed themselves, and went around naked, begging for food. They said they shaved all the hair on their face “to make the mirror of the face more brilliant.”97 They said they shunned clothing because that was the way of Adam, who wore nothing but a fig leaf when he was cast out from paradise. They slept on the ground and were awakened by a horn, the sound of the trumpet of Israfil, the angel who will announce the end of time and summon the dead. They eagerly awaited this moment, for they were already dead to the world, calling themselves the beheaded dead people (ser buride murde).98 They did not adhere to the prescribed rituals of Islam.
Instead, they lit a great fire in the evening, told stories, took intoxicants, and danced in circles, holding hands and singing. They “carried lamps and played tambourines, drums, and horns, at the same time screaming.” Suffice it to say, if any of these raucous and unruly friends of God entered a village, a city neighborhood, or military encampment, it would be difficult to take one’s eyes off them. And, what would one see? In all his glory, Ali!

Ali’s name or an image of his double-tipped sword Zulfiqar would be tattooed across their chests. They wore collars around their necks as slaves of Ali. They would carry a hatchet of Abu Muslim, the epic defender of the Alids, whose heroic deeds regaled and inspired people all over the region. Like Abu Muslim, they were ready to fight the enemies of Ali. They would swear vengeance for Ali’s family by reciting apocalyptic verse by poets such as Nesimi and Khata'i. They carried a horseshoe belonging to Duldul, Ali’s famous mule. When they begged for alms, they did so in the name of the King of Men (Shah-i Mardan), Ali. They would wear a tall conical hat with twelve gores signifying the twelve Imams, that is, Ali and his eleven rightful successors. On four sides of the hat would be written the Muslim profession of faith and the names of the Prophet, Ali, and his two sons Hasan and Husayn.

In sum, these antinomian dervish groups were the bodily instantiation of the messianic myth of Ali. As they moved across the land, they reinscribed this myth in social memory, reminding all who saw and heard them of its key symbols and narratives. They were ideally suited to do so, for they cut a figure that was awesome and jarring, eye catching and repulsive, sacred and dangerous. One can imagine the worry they engendered among those in authority, because these ascetics—drugged, armed, and hard to control—were often very popular among those not in authority. They presented a dilemma for kings. While rulers boasted in proclamations and edicts how they had put an end to such groups, in practice they deftly accommodated these spectacular deviants and used their gripping displays of religiosity to enhance their own charisma. Thus, when a screaming, naked dervish threw a piece of meat at Timur, the Lord of Conjunction wasted little time in declaring it an omen of victory. For all he knew, it was a gift from Ali.

As much as any text of prose or poetry, it was the visual, aural, and somatic culture kept alive by these antinomian mystics that gave Alid symbols and narratives the force of truth. Through them, the fantastic and miraculous tales of Ali and his partisans were made substantial and
real. There was a parallel and related development in elite culture at this time, in which Ali’s image as a hero of Islam was given a coherent symbolic and visual form. Beginning in the thirteenth century, after the Mongol invasion, Ali began to be depicted and painted in both historical and literary texts produced in Iran. In the fifteenth century, Ali’s painted image had developed standardized details—he was shown apart from the crowd as red-haired, veiled, and haloed, with his sword Zulfiqar and his mule Duldul. Notably, in European accounts, Shah Isma‘il’s physical descriptions match the painted image of Ali. The Safavid king was said to be a handsome and agile youth with red hair who, some said, veiled his face. With the air thick with the expectation of the rise of Ali’s heir and of Ali’s own bodily return, the fact that the lore surrounding Shah Isma‘il depicted him with features matching the popular and painted likeness of Ali is too striking to be ignored. Whatever may be the case, one thing is certain. Shah Isma‘il had little choice in how he would be imagined and remembered. The Safavid dervish missionaries and soldier devotees had already decided on the messianic template. Shah Isma‘il was destined to perform the role he had been born into as the legatee of Ali.

MAKING THE BODY OF IRAN SAFAVID

Shah Isma‘il’s conquests were achieved both by a whirlwind of savage violence and a scheme of flexible political accommodation. Later Safavid historians would have us believe that his first priority upon gaining the throne was the imposition of doctrinal Shi‘ism on the largely Sunni population of Iran. But the situation at the time was far more complex and interesting. Shah Isma‘il’s main power base was his Qizilbash soldier devotees, who considered him to be their perfect guide and messiah. They were not in the least interested in changing their religious ways, many of which were informed by the deliberately deviant practices of antinomian dervish orders. There was an immediate need, on the other hand, to put a Safavid stamp on the administrative structures and socio-political arrangements of previous rulers. The early Safavid response to these conflicting needs was to use a religious idiom of power that was not doctrinal and legalistic but symbolic and corporeal. In many ways, this was to be expected of a Sufi organization with well-established rituals of initiation, incorporation, and submission of disciples. Accordingly, the initial Safavid domination of the body politic of Iran took place not by
the imposition of a new code of law but via the enactment of a politics of the body.

The most visible symbol of the new order was the Safavid crown or taj known as the Taj-i Haydari (Crown of Haydar). According to Safavid tradition, Ali had come in a dream to Shah Isma'il's father, Shaykh Haydar, in 1487 and given him instructions to make a distinctive taj. This consisted of a hat topped by a tall red baton with twelve facets (tark), around which a turban could be tied. The red crown, whose wearers began to be called Red-heads (Qizilbash), was worn by the Safavid order as a mark of devotion to Ali and to his heir incarnate, the Safavid perfect guide (murshid-i kamil). Although called a crown, it did not mark the leader of a group. Rather, its function was the opposite, to incorporate the wearer into the body of the group. As the Safavid order became militarized, this practice was extended into the political domain. To become a partner in the Safavid project, one had to replace one's headgear with the Safavid hat. If later Safavid court paintings are any indication, this requirement was most vigorously and broadly enforced in the time of Shah Isma'il, when courtiers of every rank wore the red taj.

The donning of a new headgear must be seen as more than just a cosmetic change. The form of one's clothes, the shape of one's hat, and the type of symbols that decorated one's body was dictated by more than just aesthetic taste. Swapping one set of apparel for another meant adopting a new social personality and its attendant norms of comportment. Moreover, the significance of such an act was widely understood and reported. European accounts of the Safavids, for example, describe the shape of the red Safavid taj and relate how it was used in formal ceremonies of submission involving the defeated Uzbek princes who, it was said, exchanged their green "caftans" for the red ones of the Safavids. In effect, the imposition of the red Safavid crown must be seen within an ensemble of practices sustaining and sustained by a "highly corporeal religious imagination"—that is, an imagination focused on bodily submission, incorporation, and destruction.

An important corporeal practice involved the ceremony of the Chub-i Tariqat (Stick of the Path). In this ceremony, which one observer called a "wedding," courtiers were bonded to the Safavid shah by an officiant of the Safavid Sufi order. The rite was open to anyone the shah invited, including non-Muslims. The Venetian-Cypriote envoy Michele Membre, for example, was shown favor by Shah Tahmasb, the son of Shah Isma'il,
when he was asked to participate in the ritual. Membré described his experience as follows:

the *khalifa* [deputy] has a substantial wooden stick, and begins from the first to the last; one by one they all come for love of the Shah to the middle of the room and stretch themselves out on the ground; and the said *khalifa* with the stick gives them a most mighty blow on the behind; and then the *khalifa* kisses the head and feet of the one he has given the blow; then he himself gets up and kisses the stick and thus they all do, one by one; so, as I was sitting then came to be my turn, and the villain, who had a pair of cloth breeches, gave me a blow which still hurts.\(^\text{113}\)

Much like the red Safavid crown, the stick of the Safavid *khalifa* melded the bodies of the shah’s disciples into one obedient and orderly social body.

Another more grisly way of demonstrating loyalty with the shah consisted of the frenzied devouring of the body of his enemy. Reportedly, one victim of this ritual act was the Uzbek ruler Shaybani Khan, whose muddied and bloodied corpse was eaten by a stampeding crowd of Qizilbash soldiers when Shah Isma‘il said “whoever among our sincere soldiers (*qur-chiyan-i kathir al-ikhlās*) and special servants (*mulaziman-i kathir al-ikhtisas*) loves our imperial head (*sar-i navab-i humayun-i rəma*) should partake of the flesh of this enemy.”\(^\text{114}\) It has been observed that this transgressive act of cannibalism was a demonstration of the Qizilbash disciples’ loyalty to the shah in a deeply affirmative sense—by the consuming together of tabooed flesh—as well as in a negative sense, by the corporeal destruction of all other possibilities of sovereignty.\(^\text{115}\)

These bodily rituals used to uphold Shah Isma‘il’s sovereignty can be used to make sense of the larger pattern of social accommodation and annihilation that occurred in his reign. It is well known that organized Sufi orders declined under Safavid rule.\(^\text{116}\) However, this decline was gradual, and many mystical brotherhoods survived for generations. Their fate depended for the most part on how they responded to the new Safavid regime. For example, the important Ni‘matullahi Sufi order, which spanned Iran and South India, thrived for over a century by accepting the Safavids’ messianic claim. The Ni‘matullahis seems to have paid for Safavid patronage in the ecumenical coin of “strangeness.” Their founder, Shah Ni‘matullah Wali, who has been called the Nostradamus of the East, was famous for his mystical and divinatory poetry, which was used to predict the end of time and change in religion and politics.\(^\text{117}\) Under the Safavids,
the Ni‘matullahis produced proof that Shah Ni‘matullah’s verse had predicted the rise of the Safavids as the expected messianic order.118 As part of the accommodation, the Ni‘matullahis not only retained control over their major shrine complex in Yazd but also received choice posts in Safavid religious administration, married into the Safavid royal family, and even played an important role in dynastic politics.

Not all Sufi orders were so fortunate. Not even being openly Shi‘i guaranteed an order’s survival if its leaders refused to submit or developed dangerous ambitions. The Nurbakhshi brotherhood, for example, had strong Shi‘i leanings even before the rise of the Safavids.119 This may have been why Nurbakhshis received favor from Shah Isma‘il, who initially enlarged Nurbakhshi land holdings in Rayy. Even when Nurbakhsh’s son was tortured to death by Isma‘il for reasons that remain unknown, the family continued to hold sway in Rayy. It was only when Nurbakhsh’s grandson, Shah Qawwam al-Din, began to build castles and fortifications during Shah Tahmasb’s reign that he was arrested, executed, and the order suppressed. The suppression of a Sufi order meant the destruction of its shrine or its incorporation into an Alid-Safavid symbolic order. The place of Sufi shrines across Iran was taken over slowly during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by holy sites dedicated to the Shi‘i imams and their progeny. However, in the early Safavid period, shrine destruction and grave desecration appears to have been patterned not by a systematic imposition of juridical Shi‘ism but by a logic of imperial conquest and local resistance.

When the Safavids conquered Baghdad, their soldiers desecrated the grave of the famous Sunni jurist Abu Hanifa.120 His bones were dug up and burned. The same thing occurred with the graves of famous Naqshbandi figures, such as the famous saint and poet Jami, in Herat. One could argue that these acts showed a pattern of anti-Sunni acts of the Safavids. While there is no denying the dissonance between Qizilbash practices and those of Sunni Islam, such violence needs to be examined within the context of how armed resistance was punished and political vendettas settled. In the early Safavid period, this meant the destruction of the body of the local ruler or of the local holy site, which was often the grave of a revered saint linked to the ruler’s sovereignty.121 Moreover, this practice affected not only Sunnis but also rebellious Shi‘i, Isma‘ili, and even ghulat groups.122 Thus, when some of the Qizilbash rebelled against Safavid imperial policies aimed at restricting their power within the realm, one of the ways they were punished was by the destruction of the shrine
of Abu Muslim, the epic Alid hero who was a central figure in Qizilbash religious imagination.123

In sum, those who played by the new rules were incorporated into the Safavid symbolic order. Sunni and Sufi elites were encouraged to join the Safavid project on the condition that they demonstrated their loyalty by wearing the red headgear. Without the help of these established families, the Safavids would not have succeeded. This is why when Shah Isma‘il defeated Shaybani Khan and wanted to conquer Samarqand, he chose to enlist Babur, a Timurid experienced and motivated in taking this important city in Transoxania. The way Babur received a message of friendliness from Shah Isma‘il was again corporeal. Shah Isma‘il returned to him his sister Khanzada Begum—rescued from the camp of the defeated Uzbeks—whom Babur had surrendered to Shaybani Khan in Samarqand ten years earlier.

**BABUR THE QIZILBASH**

Babur’s memoir is mostly silent about the rise of Shah Isma‘il, containing only six brief but mostly respectful mentions of him. Moreover, Babur does not allude to Shah Isma‘il’s messianic pretensions or openly disparage his religion. This is surprising, given the savage treatment meted out to the population of Timurid Herat under the Safavids. Unfortunately, we do not have Babur’s account of the years in which Shah Isma‘il came east, defeated the powerful Uzbeks, conquered Herat, and enrolled Babur in his plans to take Samarqand and Transoxania. There is a large gap in Babur’s text from 1508 to 1519.124 In the extant portions, Babur passes little comment on Shah Isma‘il’s heretical reputation. Instead, he reserves his most venomous remarks for the Uzbek Shaybani Khan. From Babur’s perspective, the “Shi‘i” Shah Isma‘il Safavid had done him a great favor by eliminating the “Sunni” Uzbek who had for so long shamed the Timurids with his subjugation of their territories in Transoxania and Khurasan. This again shows how doctrinal labels are of little use in understanding the politics of the time. Yet religious symbols and rituals played an important role in royal affairs. To resolve this paradox, we need to focus less on doctrine and more on practice. This shift in perspective makes clear how well attuned Babur and his fellow Timurids were to the “strange” rituals of the Safavids.

Shah Isma‘il and his followers were not the only ones swept up in the messianic expectations of the time. Babur related how the people of
Herat, facing annihilation at the hands of the Uzbeks in 1507, also tried to seize the moment. But the Timurid princes of Herat were too refined and unwarlike to be given the role of divinely appointed saviors. Rather, it fell to the lot of an important Mongol nobleman, Zu’n-Nun Arghun, to confront the massive Uzbek army. Babur described the manner of his selection and motivation:

He held such a position of authority and importance in Herat that several Shaykhs and Mallas went to him and said, “We are in touch with the Qutb [axis mundi]. He has named you ‘Lion of God,’ (Hizibrullah) and you will conquer the Uzbeks.” He swallowed this praise and, throwing a shawl around his neck, said prayers of gratitude. When Shaybani Khan had defeated the mirzas one by one at Badghis, Zu’n-Nun, believing those words to be true, faced Shaybani Khan at Kara Robat with a hundred or 150 men. A large contingent came forth, seized them, and took them away. Zu’n-Nun was executed.

The unfortunate Zu’n-Nun Arghun was told that the hidden master saint of the age had named him the Lion of God (a famous title of Ali, recognizing his bravery in battle). Thus inspired, he rose up as a messianic champion to confront the Uzbeks with only a few hundred men. A miraculous victory was so widely expected that “the fortress was not made fast, battle weapons were not made ready, reconnoiterers and scouts were not sent to give information on the enemy’s advance, and the army was not adequately prepared for battle.” The man responsible for this scheme was a courtier, Kamaluddin Husayn, whom Babur called a self-declared Sufi (mutasawwif). It was plausibly a dream vision of the mystically inclined Kamaluddin, known for his deep knowledge of sainthood and kingship and for the divinatory science of jafr, that set the whole “strange” affair in motion. Babur admired the Mongol amir’s bravery but called him “a bit of a fool” for falling for such flattery. Nevertheless, Babur had nothing disparaging to say about Shah Isma’il, whose reputation as Ali reborn was well known. In fact, when the Safavid “Lion of God” defeated the Uzbeks three years later and conquered Herat, Babur willingly put on the red, twelve-gored crown of Haydar and joined the rank of Shah Isma’il’s Qizilbash devotees.

Babur was well aware that to join the Safavids meant becoming a disciple of the shah and submitting oneself to Qizilbash rituals. Indeed, some of these customs were not that different from Timurid norms practiced
in court and camp. For example, the Timurids also paid attention to the design of their turbans. In his memoir, Babur described in detail the way his father used to tie his turban and how he always wore it when holding court, even in the heat of summer, when he would usually don the lighter Mongol cap.\(^{129}\) The style of a man’s turban signified his allegiance to a group. During battle, when soldiers deserted and crossed over to the opposing camp, they did so turban in hand.\(^{130}\) Moreover, Babur was used to stringent bodily regimes that dominated the Timurid’s Mongol-style court ceremonies.\(^{131}\) His own military experience included expiatory and talismanic rites little different than those of the Qizilbash. He described battles in which fighting was “enjoined without armor”\(^ {132}\) and protective charms used.\(^ {133}\) His soldiers could be as rowdy and uncontrollable as the frenzied Qizilbash warriors. Discipline had to be imposed by shooting arrows into an unruly group or by summary dismemberment of two or three men. Once, such a disciplinary action led to the accidental death of a favorite storyteller of Babur’s son, Humayun.\(^ {134}\) While we do not know what stories this unfortunate man used to tell the prince and his men, it would be surprising if they did not include the heroic tales of Lords of Conjunction such as Abu Muslim and Amir Hamza.\(^ {135}\)

Like the Safavids, Babur also followed the wartime practice of desecrating graves. In one of his punitive raids against the rebellious Yusufzai and Dilazak Afghans, he destroyed a local shrine commemorating a dervish named Shahbaz Qalandar, who, Babur said, had led these tribes into heresy (ilhad).\(^ {136}\) Nevertheless, religious deviancy was not an impediment for Babur in seeking an alliance with the most notorious “heretic” of his time, Shah Isma‘il.

Babur had no delusions about Shah Isma‘il’s messianic claims. He mentioned how one of his cousins, a son of Husayn Bayqara, became “a devotee (murid) of Shah Isma‘il” and “died astray in that heresy (batalat o gumrahi) in Astarabad.”\(^ {137}\) When his own turn came, however, a contemporary chronicler politely wrote how Babur sent “eloquent ambassadors with generous gifts to the fortune-adorned threshold [of Shah Isma‘il] and made manifest his sincerity and fealty.”\(^ {138}\) In return, Shah Isma‘il provided military assistance and promised Babur control over any territory he could take from the Uzbeks in Transoxania. With Qizilbash help, Babur was able to conquer Samarqand for the third time in 1511. However, this time he would rule not as a Timurid sovereign but as a Safavid satrap. His cousin, Mirza Haydar Dughlat, who had accompanied him as a child, described how the populace of Samarqand greeted Babur with a display of
overwhelming joy. But their delight soon turned to consternation when they saw that he had adorned himself with the “garments” of the Qizilbash, which was “pure heresy, nay almost unbelief. . . . [The people] sincerely hoped, when he mounted the throne of Samarqand, (the throne of the Law of the Prophet) and placed on his head the diadem of the holy Sunna of Muhammad, that he would remove from it the crown of royalty, whose nature was heresy and whose form was as the tail of an ass.”

Babur disappointed the people of Samarqand. He did not take off the Qizilbash taj, with its tall red baton sticking out like “the tail of an ass.” Instead, he kept his agreement with Shah Isma’il and had coins struck with the names of the twelve imams and the Alid formula ‘ali wali allah (Ali is God’s appointee/friend/saint). Babur could not fight off the Uzbeks without Safavid help. So he “overlooked the gross errors” of the Qizilbash. We do not know what the Qizilbash did at Samarqand. But if their antics in Herat are any model to go by, it would have included extortion of treasure via torture; harassment of the clergy and lay people by forcing them to curse publicly the first three caliphs, who were considered rivals of Ali; and the desecration of the graves of Naqshbandi Sufi saints.

Babur could do little to check their aggression in the region and lost the support of the locals. For example, when the Safavid general Najm al-Din Thani ordered a general massacre (qatl-i ‘amm) of the people in the fortress of Qarshi, near Samarqand, which led to the killing of fifteen thousand people, including many locals, Babur could not prevent it. Afterward, when the Uzbeks attacked Samarqand, he went out to fight them. Upon returning defeated to the city, however, he was “unable to get a firm footing upon the steps of the throne” and had to bid “farewell to the sovereignty of Samarqand.” A pro-Uzbek author, Ruzbihan Khunji, who was present in Samarqand during Babur’s defeat, poured scorn on him for becoming a Qizilbash in the following verse:

That horde scattered again from the gates of Samarqand
Toward Hisar they fled like veiled women
Babur enjoyed sovereignty till he remained a Sunni
When he sided with a heretic (rafizi), he came to regret his decision.

Such were the insults the descendants of Babur had to face. Although his later conquest of Hindustan seems like a redeeming accomplishment, this view reflects our perspective more than that of sixteenth-century Mughals. Mughal rituals of sovereignty and symbols of kingship were
deeply informed by their knowledge of Safavid practices and of what Babur (and later his son Humayun) had to go through as disciples of the Safavid shah. Timurid sovereignty was severely undermined by Babur’s discipleship to Shah Isma‘il. As the next two chapters show, a considerable amount of ritual and symbolic effort came to be expended by Babur’s son and grandson, Humayun and Akbar, to restore Timurid sovereignty. However, here, the final question that will detain us is: with the expulsion of Babur from Transoxania and the end of Timurid rule in Iran, what happened to the cultural memory of Timur Sahib Qiran? Did it disappear with the rise of Ali’s heir? To answer this, we must examine how Shah Isma‘il saw himself as a king. Although we do not have his own views on the subject, we can infer a great deal from the actions he took once he became the ruler of unified Iran.

SHAH ISMA‘IL, THE LORD OF CONJUNCTION

While Shah Isma‘il was considered to be the embodiment of Ali by his Qizilbash devotees, his own ambitions were much broader and more “universal.” This can be seen in the way he named his sons. None of the Safavid princes have a Shi‘i or Alid name. They do not even have Arabic Muslim names. Instead, they have names of heroes from the epics of pre-Islamic Iran, the Shahnama (Book of Kings) and the Khawarnama (Book of Khawar): Sam, Bahram, Tahmasb, Alqasp, and Rustam. Notably, this is in sharp contrast to how his successor, Shah Tahmasb, named his own sons after Alid figures.146 Shah Isma‘il’s fascination with the Shahnama can also be judged from many other sources. As mentioned before, in his poetry Shah Isma‘il called himself the reincarnation of Islamic figures as well as of those from pre-Islamic Iran celebrated in the Shahnama: “I am Faridun, Khusraw, Jamshid, and Zahhak; I am Zal’s son (i.e., Rustam) and Alexander.”147 On the battlefield, he is said to have rallied his soldiers by shouting verses from the Shahnama. Oral legends of the manner of Shah Isma‘il’s birth bear a striking similarity to anecdotes about the birth of the hero Sam in the Shahnama.148 The pervasiveness and seriousness of these references to ancient Iranian lore makes it difficult to dismiss them as mere rhetoric.

Even if we set aside the puzzle of why an Alid messiah would inspire his men by invoking champions of Zoroastrian Iran, it is more difficult to ignore the naming of princes after heroes of a pre-Islamic past. This is because naming was not merely a rhetorical practice. Rather, it was a cos-
mologically informed act—an act with “strange” consequences and one that had to be performed with consultation and care. Babur, for example, named one of his sons “Hindal” because the boy was born while Babur was on his way to conquer “Hind” (India), a good omen. On the face of it, Shah Isma‘il’s deep commitment to the Iranian epic tradition is just as difficult to reconcile with his image as a promoter of doctrinal Shi‘ism as are the shockingly deviant practices of his Qizilbash devotees—that is, until we remind ourselves that this was the age of Lords of Conjunction.

In this age, the “time” of kingship was based on the cyclical motion of the cosmos, which was thought to dictate the rise and fall of dynasties and religions. Moreover, sovereignty was shared by and rotated among Lords of Conjunction—both prophets and kings, saints and conquerors. It was widely accepted that the Arab Islamic past had provided the world its great prophets and the Zoroastrian Iranian past its great kings. Whether it was in works of astrological history or in oral epic literature, figures from these two pasts were considered equally “historical” and coexisted interchangeably in popular and political imagination. There were certainly attempts to contain this confusion and to keep apart the two orientations in separate genres—the Arab Islamic one in the chronicle tradition and the Iranian Zoroastrian one in the epic and storytelling genre—but it would be a mistake to think that these attempts were successful, especially during this period. This is evident from the cultural production of Shah Isma‘il’s reign, which transcended these generic boundaries and blended the Iranian and Islamic orientations toward the past. This cultural production, moreover, was based directly on Timurid practices of kingship.

When Shah Isma‘il captured Timurid Herat in 1510, he acquired the best artists, poets, and writers of the eastern Islamic world. To celebrate his centennial feat—the reunification of Iran—he commissioned not chronicles but paintings and epics. In terms of painting, the most famous of all Safavid works remains the illustrated Persian epic, the Shahnama (Book of Kings). Work began on it in the early 1520s under Shah Isma‘il and was carried out for another twenty years or more under his successor Shah Tahmasb. The Safavid version of the Shahnama was produced and painted with such finesse, bringing together the “Turkmen” style of art associated with Shiraz and Tabriz with the eastern “Timurid” one of Herat, that to this day it remains unsurpassed as an example of Persian miniature painting. This was not merely a “secular” act of celebration, however. A painting in this pre-Islamic Iranian epic depicted the Prophet,
Ali, and his sons Hasan and Husayn together on a ship at sea, all wearing the Taj-i Haydari. It was as if Iran and Islam had become one under the sign of the Safavids.

Given the high cultural import of the “Book of Kings,” it is significant that in 1510 Shah Isma‘il commissioned a “personalized” epic to celebrate his own heroic deeds in the versified form of the Shahnama. Appropriately, it was called Shahnama-i Isma‘il (The Book of Kings of Isma‘il). In it, Shah Isma‘il performs the role of the quintessential epic hero who was more than a match for the Iranian champions of yore: he makes a drinking cup out of Isfandiyar’s skull, he uses the ring in Rustam’s ear as his lasso, and he scalps Jamshid and uses the skin to fashion a war drum out of the latter’s famous goblet (jam). As far as Islamic symbols are concerned, the descriptions of Shah Isma‘il contain heavy Alid and Sufi overtones: his sword is compared to Ali’s sword Zulfiqar, he is called the monument (yadgar) of the Prophet’s family and the star of the twelfth mansion of the zodiac, his position is equated with that of the mahdi, and his Sufis (sufiyan) and hereditary disciples (muridan-i ajdad-i u) are shown arrayed ready for battle. His plans to conquer the world follow the plot of other Lords of Conjunction, both epic (Hamza and Ali) and historical (Alexander, Chinggis, and Timur); they include the territories of Shirvan, the two Iraqs (Persian and Arab), Egypt, Georgia, Syria, Rum, Khurasan, and India. At one point, the story takes a legendary turn when the presence of demons (dev o dad) is reported in Isfahan and Shah Isma‘il sends a troop of soldiers to fight them off. But for the most part, the epic remains grounded in real events. This is not to say, however, that it is a historical narrative. The battle of Chaldiran against the Ottomans, which Shah Isma‘il lost, is not mentioned. The conquest of Samarqand, on the other hand, is mentioned, but Babur’s name does not come up. In short, as a mixture of fact and fiction, history and legend, this work defies characterization—unless, of course, we describe it as a narrative of “Lord of Conjunctionship” (Sahib Qiran). Indeed, the epic constantly refers to Shah Isma‘il as Sahib Qiran.

The large number of surviving manuscripts attests to the popularity of Shah Isma‘il’s epic among the kings and nobility of early modern India and Iran. In many of these manuscripts, moreover, this epic is paired with the earlier, similar work on Timur, the Herati poet Hatifi’s Timurnama (Book of Timur) on which it was modeled. The literary practice of celebrating the achievements of a living or recently deceased king in an epic—as opposed to commemorating a legendary emperor like Alexander—had
been pioneered by the Timurids. That Shah Isma‘il wanted to continue this literary practice can be seen in his choice of Hatifi as the first author of his personal Shahnama. Thus, the similarity between Timur and Shah Isma‘il was not lost on posterity. His son Sam Mirza, a well-known writer and anthologist, also called Shah Isma‘il the “late Sahib Qiran.”

Later Iranian and Indian historians did not have a problem recognizing the value of Shah Isma‘il’s epic. They used it liberally as a source of poetry, beautiful phrases, and even to describe “mythical” moments such as the versified correspondence between the young shah and his guardian, in which Isma‘il decides to make his initial messianic manifestation or “emergence” (khuruj). Most telling, however, is the observation of the traveler Michele Membre, who visited Iran in the decade after Shah Isma‘il’s death. He wrote that “mountebanks” sitting in town squares would read from books the tales of the “combats of . . . Shah Isma‘il.” Whether this book of stories was the above-mentioned epic of Shah Isma‘il, we do not know. But we do know that much like Timur, the founder of the Safavid dynasty had become a legendary and messianic sovereign in his own right.

CONCLUSION

These were strange times indeed. Babur, the heir of Timur, became a devotee of Ali. Shah Isma‘il, a son of Ali, became another Timur. If an artist of Timurid Herat was to depict our bafflement, he would do so with the stylized gesture of a forefinger raised to the lips. The goal of this chapter was to confound some of the received categories of Mughal historiography by bringing them into dialogue with those of Safavid historiography. This is necessary if we are to see what shape kingship was taking in the eastern Islamic world a hundred years after Timur.

What we find is a formative moment that was not yet part of either a Mughal future or a Safavid one. In this moment, a few major symbols were available for making a claim to power. One was Ali and another Timur. The Timurids, however, were by this time too weak to make effective use of either of these. Babur, for all his trying, remained a minor king for most of his life. The first quarter of the sixteenth century belonged instead to Shah Isma‘il, the descendant of Ali who conquered Iran and assumed the trappings of Timurid kingship. Oddly, our knowledge of the two men is inversely proportional to their fame. Babur, an unknown prince in his time, is intimately familiar to us because of the “historical” memoir he
left behind. Shah Isma‘il, the famous conqueror, remains impossibly remote, as a Sufi king about whom we have more legends, poems, and rumors than “history.” Between Babur’s history and Shah Isma‘il’s myths, however, we have enough to develop a composite picture of kingship.

From Babur’s detailed account, we get a sense of the ritual and symbolic realm a ruler had to negotiate. Even though he was a Muslim king ruling over a largely Muslim population, the aspect of religion that he had to interact with had little to do with law and doctrine. Instead, much of his time was spent in engaging with embodied symbols and performed myths. This aspect of kingship is difficult to recover from Babur’s writing, however, without developing an appreciation of the learned cosmology and the embodied practices of the time. Rather than being separated by social strata, elite knowledge and popular practices coexisted in harmony, one often reinforcing the other. An aspect of this coexistence can be explained by the shared participation of all classes in the religious life of the period dominated by shrine-based Sufism. This is also evident in the way rulers like Babur had to share power, prestige, and material wealth with local Sufi families. These bonds between princes and mystics were not merely those of pragmatic politics; they were also reinforced by religious education and popular rites.

From such a world, then, it is not difficult to imagine the emergence of a figure like Shah Isma‘il. As a regional Sufi leader with strong links to the local royal dynasty, he too was a product of the symbiosis of kingship and sainthood that had developed by this time. But he was not just a Sufi master. He was also born to perform a mythical role as Ali’s messianic heir. As we saw in the last chapter, Timur and his immediate successors had also tried to engage with the messianic myth of Ali. But they had lacked the institutional wherewithal to deploy it effectively. Shah Isma‘il, on the other hand, inherited an organization in which the Alid myth was already operationalized.

The Safavid missionary organization opens up a vista onto yet another realm of practice, that of antinomian mendicancy. These unruly mystics, notable for their affected marginality and exaggerated deviance, represented one more link between the wider social world and the realm of kingship. Many of the Alid symbols they kept alive provided a charismatic draw for kings, strong echoes of which can be found in the courtly paintings and royal epics of the time. In sum, we find a great deal of innovation in the style and practice of kingship, much of it derived from the institutions, cosmology, and rituals of the different types of Sufism that dominated the
social and religious life of this period. There was a tremendous willingness to invent new rituals and symbols or to adapt old ones to new situations. Doctrinal religious categories of Islam preserved in texts did not drive or constrain kings and sovereigns as much as symbols that were embodied and performed. Accordingly, rulers valued doctors of religion and ritual specialists less for their interpretation of law and doctrine and more for their "strange" and socially inflected knowledge of time and cosmology.

These insights have the potential to change radically the way the story of Mughal kingship in South Asia is told. Seen from the perspective of South Asian historiography, the Mughals entering from Kabul appear as another Muslim dynasty that brought Sunni Islam to India. Once there, the Mughals are said to have softened their Islamic ways and adapted themselves to the practices of their Hindu subjects. In this version of history, little consideration is given to the flexible, innovative, and evolving nature of Muslim kingship that the Mughals brought with them from the extremely diverse religious and social environment of Iran and Central Asia. In other words, we need to question how rigidly doctrinal or legalistic were these Islamic institutions of rule to begin with and emphasize instead their foundation of symbolic and corporeal practices, which were readily adaptable to the social and religious situation in India. This, then, is the task taken up in the remaining chapters, which focus on the establishment of Mughal rule in South Asia.