CHAPTER III

THE

KITABKHANA:

THE IMPERIAL

LIBRARY

The center of manuscript production and painting at Fatehpur-Sikri was the imperial kitabkhana (library). Although kitabkhana can be translated as library, in reality it was a much more complicated institution made up of several units devoted to a variety of functions. Some of its components were in private areas, such as the interior of the emperor’s palace, others were in more public places. Furthermore, its functions were not limited to a single city so that it was possible for the emperor to maintain branches simultaneously in other cities such as Agra and Lahore. The library of the celebrated Safavid bibliophile Sultan Ibrahim—Shah Tahmasp’s nephew and son-in-law—operated in this way and had branches in at least three cities: Mashhad, Qazvin and Herat. Portions of manuscripts written in one city were sent to another in order to be collated and gathered into a single text.¹

The precise location of the various parts of Akbar’s library at Fatehpur-Sikri remains a mystery. A brief remark by Monserrate complaining of the noise of the scribes, who were near the Jesuits’ new quarters suggests that at least some writing may have taken place adjacent to the part of the palace where the Jesuits were housed.² According to Abul Fazl, who has left us with a vivid account of Akbar’s library, another part of it was located in the harem:

His majesty’s library is divided into several parts; some of the books are kept within and some without the Harem. Each part of the library is subdivided, according to the value of the books and the estimation in which the sciences are held of which the books treat. Prose books, poetical works, Hindi, Persian, Greek, Kashmirian, Arabic, are all separately placed. In this order they are also inspected. Experienced people bring them daily and read them before His Majesty, who hears every book from the beginning to the end. … Among the books of renown there are few that are not read in His Majesty’s assembly hall, and there are no historical facts of the past ages, or curiosities of science, or interesting points of philosophy, with which His Majesty, a leader of imperial sages, is unacquainted. He does not get tired of hearing a book over again, but listens to the reading of it with more interest.³

In addition to storing books in the harem, the emperor also kept important manuscripts in the royal treasury.⁴ The use of the treasury as an extension of the imperial library suggests that it may have been the equivalent of a rare book room.

Libraries as separate entities first appeared in the Muslim world during the tenth century.⁵ By the twelfth century they were found throughout Iran, Iraq and Egypt. The books in these libraries were kept in various rooms and stacked one above the other in small compartments.⁶ Some libraries, such as that of the Persian ruler Azad ad-Dawla (940-983), were extremely large complexes composed of several buildings surrounded by gardens and lakes. Catalogues were kept of individual libraries—many of which had thousands of manuscripts—classifying their contents according to various branches of knowledge.⁷ Often numerous copies of a single manuscript were present in a library so that scholars could read corrupt passages in one manuscript by referring to another.⁸ The library of the Fatimids (909-1171) in Cairo had thirty copies of Khalil’s Kitab al-Ain and twenty copies of at-Tabari’s renowned Universal History.⁹ Manuscripts were acquired either by purchase or by “in-house”
production. Consequently library staffs usually included a director, at least one librarian, several attendants, and a group of professional copyists. According to Qazi Ahmad, a sixteenth-century Persian artist, Sultan Ibrahim employed in his library "excellent calligraphers, painters, artists, gilders and bookbinders." 

Akhbar's library—like many earlier Muslim libraries—served two related but separate functions. It was the place where imperial manuscripts were kept and it was also where many of them were produced. The creation of a Moghul manuscript involved a number of people performing a variety of tasks. Paper-makers were needed to prepare the folios of the manuscript, calligraphers to copy the text, gilders to illuminate the pages, painters to illustrate selected stories, and bookbinders to gather the individual folios of the manuscript and set them within protective covers. The range of these activities and the artists who undertook them can easily be seen in a series of drawings from an album page made for Jahangir ca. 1600 (fig. 4). In the upper right of the page a paper-maker is busily burnishing a sheet of newly laid paper with a highly polished stone. Opposite him a bookbinder, seated before a low table strewn with the tools of his trade, is energetically stamping the cover of a manuscript, while below him an artisan files the edges of a bound book held tightly by a wooden clamp. Below this figure another man works away with a saw to make an elaborate bookstand. An adze and other tools lie by his feet. At the bottom of the page a smoker blows with a long rod into a fire contained in an open pot. Next to him is a bar of gold to be melted down and used in gilding the pages of a manuscript. To his right a scribe sits cross-legged in front of his table, pen in hand, ready to write in a bound book.

A page from an illustrated manuscript of the Akhlaq-i Nasiri (Nasirian Ethics), a philosophical and ethical discourse written by Nasir ad-Din Tusi (1201-1274) in 1235 and copied for Akbar ca. 1550, shows the kind of environment in which these artists worked. The miniature (no. 19) depicts a scriptorium composed of a large building surrounded by a verandah set in the midst of a garden divided into four parts by cross-axial canals. Seated on the sumptuous carpets that cover the library's floor are a master dictating to a scribe, two painters, a paper-maker and a second scribe. Attendants stand on either side of the artists ready to serve them drinks from vessels resting on a low table at the edge of the porch. The sense of ease and luxury suggested by this scene, with its tranquil garden and fine appointments, represents the ideal setting for the creation of lavishly illustrated manuscripts and reflects the social status of the artisans.

Because Akbar, like his great ancestor Timur, was illiterate, his books were read out to him by professional reciters such as Naqib Khan, his brother Mir Stani, and Darbar Khan, whose father was Shah Tahmasp's reader. A simple system of accounting was used to keep track of what had been read to the emperor: "At whatever page the readers daily stop, His Majesty makes with his own pen a sign, according to the number of pages, and rewards the readers with presents of cash, either in gold or silver, according to the number of leaves read out by them." 

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While little is known about the paper-makers and gilders at Akbar's court, Abul Fazl has left us with detailed descriptions of the emperor's most important calligraphers and painters. Calligraphers held the highest social standing as the art of writing was considered more important than painting. A letter when properly written symbolized for the Moghals—as it did for all Muslims—a divine form containing magical powers. The carefully formed letters of the Arabic alphabet (in which Persian is written) thus represented "the portrait painter of wisdom; a rough sketch from the realm of ideas; a dark night ushering in day; a black cloud pregnant with knowledge; the wand for the treasures of insight; speaking though dumb, stationary, yet travelling; stretched on the sheet, and yet soaring upward." Akbar was extremely interested in the various scripts used by Muslim calligraphers and appears to have been especially fond of nastaliq, a manner of writing developed by Mir Ali at-Tabrizi at the beginning of the fifteenth century. The emperor's finest calligrapher was Muhammad Husayn of Kashimir (nos. 20, 25). Contemporary critics considered Muhammad Husayn, who was honored with the title Zarin Qalam (Golden Pen), the rival of Mir Ali of Herat. According to Abul Fazl the extensions and curvatures of his letters were perfectly proportioned. Other calligraphers of note, all of whom were Muslims with strong ties to Iran, included Mawlama Baqir (the son of Mir Ali), Abd al-Rahim who was given the title Asbarun Qalam (Ambergris Pen) in the seventeenth century, Abd as-Samad, who was known as the Shirin Qalam (Sweet Pen) for his graceful writing, Mawlama Dawri, also known as Sultan Bayazid, Abd al-Hay, and Nurullah Qasim Arsalan.

Akbar's painters—unlike his calligraphers—were of Hindu as well as Muslim origin and came from all over India and Iran. By the end of the sixteenth century, Abul Fazl was able to write of them:

More than one hundred persons have reached the status of master and gained fame; and they are numerous who are near to reaching that state or are halfway there. What can I say of India! People had not even conceived of such glories; indeed, few nations in the world display them (such glories). In addition to Mir Sayyid Ali and Abd as-Samad—the Iranian masters responsible for supervising the production of the Humayunama and the education of the emperor's artists—Abul Fazl singles out fifteen painters for their superior abilities. The two most
celebrated of these were Dastawan, the son of a palanquin-bearer, and Basawan. The former used to draw images and designs on walls.26 He received his formal training under Abd as-Samad. Unfortunately the darkness of insanity enshrouded the brilliance of his mind and in 1784 he committed suicide. Basawan, who was preferred by some critics to Dastawan, "excelled at designing (tarnab), painting faces (chatba kashita), coloring (rang-amazi), portrait painting (manind nigari), and other aspects of this art.27 Among the other artists mentioned by Abul Fazl are Kesri, Lal, Miskin, Farrukh the Quisnaj, Masbul, and Khur Ram.

By working in teams these painters were able to produce extensively illustrated manuscripts in a relatively short time. Between 1770 and 1780, for instance, at least eight manuscripts, with more than five hundred and thirty images, were made in the imperial atelier. For each miniature one man was responsible for its design while another—usually the designer's assistant—painted it. Sometimes a third person, either a colorist or a specialist in portraiture, would also collaborate on a painting. This assembly-line approach, developed during Akbar's years at Fatehpur-Sikri, was gradually abandoned in the 1790s as the emperor demanded more refined and consistent miniatures that reflected the individual skills of his artists.28

The emperor's interest in the creation of his manuscripts was intense and personal: he was the one who selected which scenes were to be illustrated24 and presumably suggested who was to paint them. In
addition to librarians such as Inayatullah, superintendents and clerks were charged with ensuring that the emperor’s demands were properly executed. They were also responsible for maintaining the library’s organization and keeping its studios well supplied.

A royal decree issued by the founder of the Safavid dynasty, Shah Ismail, in 1522, appointing the renowned Persian artist Bihzad director of his library, gives some insight into the specific obligations of the various members of an imperial studio:

All enlightened Amirs and incomparable Wazis and the secretaries of our world-protecting threshold and the envoys of our heavens-like court and the functionaries of royal business and the officials of our ministries, in general—and the stuff of the Royal Library and the persons mentioned above—in particular—must recognize the above mentioned Master as the director and superintendent. They must submit to his control and administration all activities of the library, and pay due consideration to all his administrative measures authorized by his seal and signature. There must be no disobedience or neglect of any orders or regulations he may make for the control and conduct of the Royal Library. He, for his part, must draw and depict upon the tablets of his heart and the page of his enlightened conscience the image of integrity and the form of uprightness.

Akbar’s literary interests were wide-ranging and numerous: individual paintings (nos. 22, 23, 24) and manuscripts—from Korans (no. 21), to poetic collections, ethical texts, and astrological treatises—were made for him. In addition to previously discussed works such as the Tutiyanma, the Asha of Amir Khusraw Dihlavi, the Humayunama, and the Akbari-i Naqsh, at least twenty-eight other major manuscripts were illustrated for Akbar during his reign. These can be divided into three broad categories: belles-lettres (including literary and poetical texts as well as calligraphic tours de force), general and dynastic histories, and translations from Sanskrit and other languages. The majority of these manuscripts fall under the category of belles-lettres. Nine of them can be safely attributed to the years during which Akbar was at Fatehpur-Sikri or shortly thereafter. These include:

A copy of the Amur-i Salamji (Lights of Canopus), dated 1570, now in the School of Oriental and African Studies, London (fig. 1). 18
A second, fragmentary, copy of the Amur-i Salamji, ca. 1575, in the Prince of Wales Museum, Bombay.
A Darumaama (Story of Darab), ca. 1580, in the British Library (fig. 6). 19

22. Murder Scene (Berlin Jahangir album) ca. 1572-80.

Often several copies of the same manuscript were made over a period of years, such as the *Amur-i Subah* which was illustrated at least three times for the emperor. Both the 1270 *Amur-i Subah* and the *Darabnama* have miniatures executed in a slightly more refined manner than the paintings of the *Hamzanama*. The former is a fifteenth-century Persian revision of the Arabic *Kahila wa Dimna* prepared by Husayn Vaiz al-Kashif for the Timurid ruler Sultan Husayn Mirza Bayqara (1470–1520). Written on brown-flecked paper, the manuscript has small panels of text with margins ruled in blue, green, and gold and twenty-seven miniatures. Although none of the illustrations is signed, they are all of fine quality. One of the most exciting aspects of the manuscript is the way the artists who worked on it extended their paintings beyond the margins of the text by adding an L-shaped border around the sides of their miniatures. In doing so they established a way of extending an image's space that remained the norm until the end of the sixteenth century.  

The *Darabnama* (fig. 6), the story of Darab, the son of Zal and the grandfather of Alexander the Great, was written by Abu Tahir Tarsusi, whose origins remain unknown. The manuscript, which is fragmentary, contains one hundred and fifty-seven miniatures on creamy brown paper many of which are attributed by marginal notation to Akbar's most important artists such as Basawan, Kesu, Madhu, Jagan, Mahesh, Tara, and Sanvalah, as well as Nanha, Miskin, and

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A second copy of the *Timurname* ca. 1551, now in the Chester Beatty Library.


A second *Divan* of Hafiz, ca. 1584 in the Raza Library, Rampur.

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The *Gulistan* (no. 25), a collection of moral tales, was written by the great Persian poet Mouslih ad-Din Sadi (1289-1319). The Royal Asiatic Society's manuscript was copied at Fatehpur-Sikri for Akbar by Muhammad Husayn Zarin Qalam. Each of the manuscript's one hundred and thirty folios is written in a elegant *nastaliq* on a cream-colored paper decked with gold. Extremely fine studies of birds and other animals are scattered throughout the manuscript's pages. At the beginning of the book, the artists are carefully organized and restrained, consisting usually of three or four per page. By the end of the text, however, whole flocks of birds are presented on a single page in swirling masses of brightly colored feathers that are as visually exciting as any image in Mughal painting. On the second-to-last folio of the manuscript is a miniature by Manohar, Basawan's son, depicting the artist and the scribe (p. 128).

During the second half of the 1580s, Akbar's taste became increasingly refined. The relatively large and bold images of such manuscripts as the *Ashiq and Darabnama* were replaced in poetic manuscripts by more sensitive and delicate paintings often executed in a minute scale. The *Keir Khamsa* of Nizami and the 1588 *Divan* of Anvari (nos. 26, 27) are typical of this new trend. Both are extremely small manuscripts-literally pocket books—illustrated by the emperor's leading artists. The fifteen miniatures of the *Divan* of Anvari, though not inscribed, can be attributed to Basawan, Shiv Das, Manohar, Mhebr, Abd as-Samad, Khem Karan, Naha, and Miskin. The *Divan*'s poems, written by the twelfth-century Persian panegyrist Awhad ad-Din Anvari, are copied on marbled paper in a fine hand that is consistent with the jewel-like quality of the miniatures.
While Akbar was at Fatehpur-Sikri, two developments occurred that had a profound effect on the types of manuscripts produced for the emperor: the creation of a bureau for the translation of works into Persian and the evolution of a new attitude toward history. The Translation Bureau, which was in operation by 1574, had its antecedents in the great libraries of the classical Muslim world. Through the efforts of the many people who worked in this department, a whole new group of manuscripts was produced for the emperor. Abul Fazl has left us with an excellent description of some of these:

At the command of His Majesty, Muhammad Khan of Gujarat translated into Persian the Taj, a well-known work on Astronomy. The Memoirs of Babur (Baburnama), the Conqueror of the world, which may be called a code of practical wisdom, have been translated from Turkish (Turkī) into Persian by Mirza Abu-l-Rahim Khan, the present Khan Khanan (Commander in Chief). The History of Khurasan, which extends over the last four thousand years, has been translated from Kashmiri into Persian by Mawlana Shah Muhammad of Shahabad. The Muqarn al-Baidan, an excellent work on towns and countries, has been translated from Arabic into Persian by several Arabic scholars, as Mulla Ahmad of Thatab, Qasim Beg, Shaykh Munawwar and others.36

In all, at least fifteen works were translated into Persian for Akbar, often by his leading courtiers, such as Abu al-Rahim, the Khan Khanan (Army Minister) and son of Bayram Khan, and Abu Fazl (who prepared a new rendition of the great Arabic fable Kifla wa Damra which he called the Ilay-yi Dansiri). Four of these translations from Sanskrit are either dated, or
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At the command of His Majesty, Muhammad Khan of Gujarat translated into Persian the Tajāk, a well-known work on Astronomy. The Memoirs of Babur (Bahārumāl), the Conqueror of the world, which may be called a code of practical wisdom, have been translated from Turkish [Turk] into Persian by Mirza Abū'l-Rahām Khan, the present Khan Khanān (Commander in Chief). The History of Kashmīr, which extends over the last four thousand years, has been translated from Kashmiri into Persian by Maulana Shah Muhammād of Shahābad. The Sayyid al-Bulūsan, an excellent work on towns and countries, has been translated from Arabic into Persian by several Arabic scholars, as Mulla Ahmad of Thathrā, Qasim Beg, Shaykh Munawwar and others.

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In 1583 Badaunī was again ordered to translate a work from Sanskrit to Persian. This time he was assigned the great Indian epic Mahābhārata which became known in Persian as the Rāmāynā (Book of Wars). The project was completed in 1584 after which Badaunī immediately undertook the translation of the Rāmāynā, Hinduism's other great literary epic. Illustrations by the imperial studio's best artists accompanied both the Rāmāynā (fig. 7) and the Ramayana. During Akbar's last year at Fatehpur-Sikri Mawlana Shīrī began a translation of the Hariṇāma (nos. 28, 29) a genealogy of Hari, the Hindu god Vishnu, that focuses on the life of Krishna. Only twenty-eight miniatures appear to have survived from this copy of the manuscript, though originally there would have been many more. Translation of the manuscript must have been relatively quick as Mawlana Shīrī died in a battle in Kashmir in 1586. Among the other works translated into Persian from Sanskrit for Akbar were the Nāl Damayantī (by Farsī) and the Jāg Bāsbāt (no. 30). Farsī's translation of the Jāg Bāsbāt (the story of Rama and the Yoga-teaching of Vasiṣṭha) which was illustrated in 1602, and the forty-seven miniatures in this manuscript represent some of the finest late-
The process of translating manuscripts into Persian involved several people. Specialists in the relevant languages would make direct translations, usually under the supervision of one person. After these were completed another person, generally a poet of distinction, was commissioned to prepare a final version in flowing verse. Badamani has left us with an excellent description of how this was done for the *Mahabharata*:

After this Mullā Shīrī and Naqīb Khan together accomplished a portion, and another was completed by Sultan Hāji of Thanesar by himself. Shāhī Fāzī was then directed to convert the rough translation into sections. The Hāji aforesaid revised these two sections, and as for the omissions which had taken place in his first edition, those defects he put right, and comparing it word for word with the original, one hundred sheets were written out closely, and the work was brought to such a point of perfection that not a fly-mark of the original was omitted.  

Akbār used the translation department both as a means of increasing his knowledge and awareness of the world and as a way of educating (and perhaps chastising) various members of his court. Badamani, for example, who as an extremely orthodox Muslim was constantly provoked by being ordered to translate
sixteenth-century Mughal paintings produced by Akbar's artists.

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Hindus, he gave directions to write an explanation of the Mahaabharata, and for several nights devoted his attention to explaining the meaning to Naqib Khan, so that the Khan might sketch out the gist of it in Persian. On the third night the emperor sent for me, and desired me to translate the Mahaabharata, in conjunction with Naqib Khan. The consequence was that in three or four months I translated two out of the eighteen sections, as the purer absurdities of which the eighteen thousand creations may well be amazed... But such is my fate to be employed on such works. 49

At the same time that the Mahaabharata, Harivamsa, and Ramayana were being translated for the imperial kirtikhanam, Akbar ordered the compilation, copying, and illustration of a series of historical manuscripts. These included the Tarikh-i Alfi (The History of One Thousand Years), the Tarikh-i Khwando-i Timurriya (The History of the House of Timur), the Chingi-numa (The History of Chingiz Khan), the Baharanama, and the Akbarnama. The first of these projects undertaken was the Tarikh-i Alfi. In 1582 the emperor asked his courtiers to prepare a new history of the Muslim world in anticipation of the millennium of the hijra calendar, which was approaching in 1592-3. Seven people were ordered to begin work on the Tarikh-i Alfi, as it came to be called, compiling information from "the date of the death of the last of the Prophets [Mohammad] (the blessing of God be upon him and may he give him peace!) up to the present day, and to mention therein the events of the whole world." 50 According to Badauni, Akbar:

assigned the first year to Naqib Khan, the second to Shah Fathullah and so on to Hakim Humani, Hakim Ali, Haji Ibrahim Sarhindi (who had just then arrived from Gujarat), Mirza Nizam-ul-din Ahmad, and myself. And after that another seven years, and in this way the distribution of 35 years was provided for. 51

Progress on the manuscript, which was given an introduction by Abul Fazl, 52 was not as rapid as anticipated and consequently, at the recommendation of Hakim Abul Fath, the project from the thirty-sixth year on was turned over to Mulla Ahmad of Thatta. The completion of the Tarikh-i Alfi was then entrusted to Asaf Khan Jafar Beg. After Asaf Khan had prepared the rest of the manuscript Badauni was ordered to "proceed to Lahore, to revise the composition, compare it with other histories, and arrange the dates in their proper sequence." 53 Badauni managed to edit two or the three volumes in one year and presented his completed work to Akbar at Lahore in 1593-4, almost exactly twelve years to the date after the manuscript was begun. Only twenty-six illustrated pages appear to have survived from the Tarikh-i Alfi—all from

Sanskrit works such as the Mahaabharata and Sangha-ban Baratii into Persian. His lengthy comments on the translation of the Mahaabharata reveal both Akbar's attitude towards Indian literature and the author's mixed feelings about his work:

Among the remarkable events of this year (1584) is the translation of the Mahaabharata, which is the most famous of Hindu books, and contains all sorts of stories and moral reflections, and advice... The following considerations disposed the emperor to the work. When he had the Shalmanus and the story of Amir Hanzalah, in seventeen volumes transcribed in fifteen years, and had spent much gold in illuminating it... it suddenly came into his mind that these books were nothing but poetry and fiction; but that since they were related in a lucky hour, and when their star was in the set of passing over the sky, they obtained great fame. But now he ordered that those Hindu books, which holy and astrid sages had written, and were all clear and convincing proofs... be translated into Persian. Accordingly he became interested in the work, and having assembled some learned
episodes between the reigns of the Caliphs Harun ar-Rashid (786-809) and al-Mutazz (860-69) — suggesting that originally the manuscript must have contained as many as three hundred paintings. Three features distinguish these miniatures: the large size of the folios they are painted on (4 by 25 cm.), the occasional incorporation of several scenes on the same page, and the relationship of the images to the text. A page from the Tarikh-i Afh, now in the Cleveland Museum of Art, (No. 31) is typical of the manuscript. It is divided into four horizontal registers on one side and two on the other. On the first side three scenes are depicted, while on the second there are two. As one image leads into another a somewhat confusing kaleidoscopic effect is created. The miniatures, though, are not meant to be seen as individual paintings but as specific illustrations to the text which forms the focal point of the page. In later manuscripts, such as the Chitragitana and the Akbarnama, this relationship is reversed and the images become paintings that can be understood independently from textual references as opposed to simple illustrations.

The history of the Muslim world described in the Tarikh-i Afh provided Akbar with a broad background against which to measure his own accomplishments. The emperor’s interest in history, however, went beyond a desire to simply know the past. Through the commissioning of a series of manuscripts tracing the deeds of his most illustrious ancestors as well as his immediate forebears, Akbar attempted to define the historical significance of his own dynasty. The first of these dynastic histories to have been written was the Tarikh-i Khudavan-i Timuriya (fig. 8) whose first miniature was painted by Daswanth, who committed suicide in 1584. The work is a history of Timur and his descendants and was produced at Akbar’s request to add a more popular name Timurnama (The History of Timur) is therefore misleading. Indeed, a third of the manuscript, from folios 238 through 331, is devoted to a detailed account of the early Moghals.

Over forty folios describe the first nineteen years of Akbar’s reign and provide us with a great deal of information not included in other manuscripts. The author, for instance, states that both Mir Sayyid Ali and Abd al-Samad taught Humayun how to paint, affirming the emperor’s direct interest in the arts. Unfortunately the copy of the manuscript that has survived is not complete and we know neither the name of its author nor the sources upon which it was based — although the author does refer to the Zafarnama in the introduction and the Bahrumana towards the end of the book. We do know, however, that it must have been considered a major project by the emperor, on the scale of the translation of the Rasmnama, for a number of Akbar’s most important artists such as Basawan, Daswanth, Nanha, Mistin and Madhu the Elder, worked on the one hundred and thirty-seven extant illustrations. These miniatures, unlike those of the Tarikh-i Afh, dominate their pages. They are intended to be dramatic portraits of crucial events in the life of the Timurid dynasty that can be comprehended independently of any written text.
Badauni had already started chronicles of Akbar's reign. It was Abul Fazl's intention to,
write in four volumes a record of the transactions of the royal house during one hundred and twenty years, which are
four generations, that it may stand as a memorial for those
who seek knowledge in justice, and with the Institutions of
His Majesty (Ain-i Akbāri) as the concluding book, pur-
pose the completion of the Akbarnāma in these five vol-
tumes.47

Abul Fazl's goals, which were ambitious and predi-
cated on Akbar living for an unlikely number of years
(four cycles of thirty years each), were never fully real-
ized. What was accomplished, however, remains a
lasting memorial to the greatness of Akbar's reign and
the most important text of the period. By 1602, when
Abul Fazl was assassinated by Rajput horsemen acting
on Prince Salim's orders, only two of the proposed five
volumes had been written. The first volume, com-
priased of a brief description of Akbar's ancestry and an
account of the first thirty years of the emperor's reign
(to September 1572) was presented to Akbar in 1596.48

In a miniature by Gowardhan recording this mo-
mentous event, Abul Fazl kneels before Akbar in an-
ticipation of the emperor's praise, a copy of his
manuscript held delicately in his hands.49 Two years
later a second volume was presented to the em-
peror, bringing the narrative of his rule to the
forty-second year (1597) and including a detailed
record of his rules and regulations.50 This account,
known today as the Ain-i Akbāri, and never illus-
trated, is usually treated as a third volume to the
manuscript. The magnitude of the author's accom-
plishment is suggested by the following lines from the
Ain-i Akbāri: “Firdausi [the author of the Shāhnāma]
took thirty years of labour to secure eternal excotation,
while I have borne with seven years of toil for the sake
of everlasting glory. He fused his worth into the cast of
verse which is a matrix of determinate shape, and I
have strung into writing, gems of purest water
through the infinite expanse of prose.”51

Although Abul Fazl may not have been actively at
work on the Akbarnāma until 1590, there is evidence
that he had begun researching the manuscript as early
as 1587–88. In that year Jawhar Aḥsanbhi wrote his
memoirs of Humayun's reign in response to an imper-
ial decree that, "those who from old service remem-
bered, with certainty or with admixture of doubt, the
events of the past, should copy out their notes and
memoranda and transmit them to court."52 This or-
der53 was issued in the thirty-third year of the Divine
Era (1587–88).54 Despite Akbar's orders several coun-
tiers did not respond and in 158955 "a second com-
mand shone forth from the holy Presence-chamber; to
Badauni had already started chronicles of Akbar’s reign. It was Abul Fazl’s intention to, write in four volumes a record of the transactions of the royal house during one hundred and twenty years, which are four generations, that it may stand as a memorial for those who seek knowledge in justice, and with the Institutions of His Majesty [Abu-i Akbar] as the concluding book, pur- posed the completion of the Akbarnama in these five volumes. 

Abul Fazl’s goals, which were ambitious and predicated on Akbar living for an unlikely number of years (four cycles of thirty years each), were never fully realized. What was accomplished, however, remains a lasting memorial to the greatness of Akbar’s reign and the most important text of the period. By 1622, when Abul Fazl was assassinated by Rajput horsemen acting on Prince Salim’s orders, only two of the proposed five volumes had been written. The first volume, comprised of a brief description of Akbar’s ancestry and an account of the first thirty years of the emperor’s reign (to September 1573) was presented to Akbar in 1566. In a miniature by Govardhan recording this momentous event, Abul Fazl kneels before Akbar in anticipa- tion of the emperor’s praise, a copy of his manuscript held delicately in his hands. Two years later a second volume was presented to the em- peror, bringing the narrative of his rule to the forty-second year (1597) and including a detailed record of his rules and regulations. This account, known today as the Arab-i Akbari, and never illu- trated, is usually treated as a third volume to the manuscript. The magnitude of the author’s accomplishment is suggested by the following lines from the Arab-i Akbari: “Firdausi [the author of the Shahnama] took thirty years of labors to assure external execution, while I have borne with seven years of toil for the sake of everlasting glory. He fused his worth into the cast of verse which is a matrix of determinate shape, and I have strung into writing, gems of the purest water through the infinite expanse of Firdausi.”

Although Abul Fazl may not have actually been at work on the Akbarnama until 1590, there is evidence that he had begun researching the manuscript as early as 1585-88. In that year Jawahir Afsabuz wrote his memoirs of Humayun’s reign in response to an imperial decree that, “those who from old service remem- bered, with certainty or with admixture of doubt, the events of the past, should copy out their notes and memoranda and transmit them to us.” This or- der was issued in the thirty-third year of the Divine Era (1587-88). Despite Akbar’s orders several cour- tiers did not respond and in 1589 was “a second command shone forth from the holy Presence-chamber; to wit—that the materials which had been collected, should be fairied out and recited in the royal hearing, and whoever might be written down afterwards, should be introduced into the noble volume as a sup- plement.” At least two other members of the em- peror’s court responded to the emperor’s call for in- formation concerning the events of the first years of the dynasty: Abu-i Akbar’s son, Gobal Khan Begum (Humay- umnama), and Bayazid Biyat, the superintendent of the imperial kitchen (Tazkira-i Humayun in Akbar). It is also possible that Abu-i Rahim’s translation of the Baburnama was in response to this decree.

In preparing the Akbarnama, Abul Fazl also had access to the detailed information contained in docu- ments of the imperial Records Office which had been established at Fatehpur-Sikri in 1574-75. Akbar ap- pointed fourteen clerks—one for each day of the week—to this office. They were charged with writing down, the orders and the doings of His Majesty and whatever the heads of the departments report; what His Majesty eats and drinks; when he sleeps, and when he rises; the etiquette in the State hall, the time His Majesty spends in the Harem; when he goes to general and private assemblies … when he marches and when he halts; the acts of His Majesty as the spiritual guide of the nation; vows made to him; his remarks; what books he has read out to him.

The importance of the records office for Abul Fazl’s work can be gleaned from a passage in the Akbarnama:

I obtained the chronicle of events beginning at the sixteenth year of the Divine Era … and from its rich pages I gathered the accounts of many events. Great pains too, were taken to procure originals or copies of most of the orders which had been issued to the provinces from the Ascension up to the present date which is the dawn of tomorrow’s morning. Their sacred contents yielded much ma- terial for the sublime volume.

After gathering his data, Abul Fazl made five drafts of the Akbarnama before he was satisfied with it. Faziy was supposed to further revise these drafts in order to render them into harmonious and elegant prose. The latter died in 1591, however, having worked on only the first ten years of the initial volume. While we do not know the exact chronology of the manuscript, progress must have been fairly rapid as Badauni refers to it as early as 1590 and Nizam ad-Din Ahmad in 1602-03. Two profusely illustrated copies of the Akbarnama have survived: one generally attributed to the 1600s (now in the Victoria and Albert Museum) and containing one hundred and seventeen illustrations of events between 1560 and 1578 (Nos. 4, 14, 15, 16, 17, 23) and the other now shared between the Chester Beatty Library and the British Library except for several dispersed pages. The latter (datable to around 1605 or slightly later on the basis of a marginal inscription) was copied by Muhammad Husayn Zarin Qalumano (No. 18) and has one hundred paintings cover- ing Akbar’s reign through March, 1586. The numerous miniatures of these manuscripts depict in bold detail the events that shaped the emperor’s life from the birth of his son (No. 14, fig. 2) to the battles he won (No. 4) and the activities of his court (No. 17). Al- though the miniatures in the latter Akbarnama tend to follow those of the earlier one, the number of illus- trations and the subject matter of certain paintings vary between the two.

32. Akbar at the Chidir Shriine in Ajmer (Akbarnama, ca. 1590).
During the late 1580s and 1590s two other historical manuscripts were illustrated for Akbar: the Baburnama and the Chingiznama. The former was translated by Abd ar-Rahim from Babur's original Turk, and presented to Akbar on November 34, 1589. At least four copies of the manuscript are known—all illustrated by artists from the imperial ateliers—suggesting that it was greatly admired by the emperor and his family. The first of these copies (now dispersed), which may have been the manuscript actually presented to Akbar, can be attributed to around 1589 and originally contained one hundred and ninety-one illustrations (nos. 33, 34). Subsequent copies were made ca. 1591 (British Library), ca. 1593 (State Museum of Oriental Cultures, Moscow) and the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore), and in 1597-98 (National Museum of India). Although all of the illustrated manuscripts of the Baburnama are based on Abd ar-Rahim's translation, several earlier translations had been made such as Zayn ad-Din Khwâli's, done during Babur's lifetime, and Mirza Payandah Hasan Ghaznavi's of 1574. The illustrations of the manuscript—which follow the text closely in the earliest copy and deviate from it in the latter ones—can be divided into two groups: narrative events such as “Babur Restoring
During the late 1580s and 1590s two other historical manuscripts were illustrated for Akbar: the Baburnama and the Chingiznama. The former was translated by Abd ar-Rahim from Babur's original Turkī, and presented to Akbar on November 24, 1589. At least four copies of the manuscript are known—all illustrated by artists from the imperial ateliers—suggesting that it was greatly admired by the emperor and his family. The first of these copies (now dispersed), which may have been the manuscript actually presented to Akbar, can be attributed to around 1589 and originally contained one hundred and ninety-one illustrations (nos. 33, 34). Subsequent copies were made ca. 1591 (British Library), ca. 1593 (State Muscum of Oriental Cultures, Moscow and the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore), and in 1597-98 (National Muscum of India). Although all of the illustrated manuscripts of the Baburnama are based on Abd ar-Rahim's translation, several earlier translations had been made, such as Zayn ad-Din Khwāli's, done during Babur's lifetime, and Mirza Payandah Hasan Ghaznavi's of 1584. The illustrations of the manuscript—which follow the text closely in the earliest copy and deviate from it in the latter ones—can be divided into two groups: narrative events such as "Babur Restoring

33. Babur Restoring Ulugh Beg's Garden at Istalif (Baburnama, ca. 1589).

34. Feast at Sultan Jalal ad-Din's House at Kairāb (Baburnama, ca. 1589).
Ulugh Beg's Garden at Istalif (No. 38) designed by Miskin and painted by Gwai, and depictions of the flora and fauna of India. The latter images reflect Babur's intense interest in his environment and establish an attitude towards nature shared by almost all of his descendants.

The Chingiznama (Nos. 2, 35, 36, 37), like the Tariikh-i Khwandam-i Timurisya, describes the life of one of Akbar's most revered ancestors. It actually forms part of the Jami at-Tavarikh, the extraordinary world history written by Rashid ad-Din (1247-1313) around 1307. The Mughal copy of the Chingiznama, dated May 23, 1596, though incorrectly referred to as the Jami at-Tavarikh after its parent manuscript, focuses uniquely on the life of Chingiz Khan and his immediate descendants as can be seen in "Chingiz Khan Dividing His Empire Between His Sons" (No. 35) designed by Basawan and executed by Bhim Gujjarani.

Taken as a group, the historical manuscripts made for Akbar follow a logical progression. The earliest one, the Tariikh-i Afif, examines the great kings of Islam. The next one, the Tariikh-i Khwandam-i Timurisya, traces the history of one dynasty in particular. Finally, the later manuscripts (with the exception of the Chingiznama) glorify the lives of Akbar and the Mughals, the last of the Timurids. Within the context of these manuscripts, the Akbarnama is without doubt the most revealing as it both defines Akbar's world as he wished it to be seen and established his relationship to the past. Although the manuscript was begun after the emperor had moved from Fatehpur-Sikri to Lahore, it is clear that his years at Fatehpur-Sikri played a major role in the formation of his character and attitude towards history. It was there, for instance, that he established most of the institutions described in the Ain-i-Akbari and consciously set about documenting, in minute detail, the events of his reign. The city also left a strong imprint on the visual memory of the emperor's artists, who were able to paint its buildings and accurately describe events that took place there long after they had presumably moved to the Panjab. Basawan, for instance, was able to recall the punishment of Masud Hosayn in 1573 (see p. 48 and No. 17) in even greater detail than Abul Fazl, while Kesu the Elder (No. 14) and Tulsi the Elder (Nos. 15, 16) were able to depict with precision the gateways, palaces and surroundings of Fatehpur-Sikri even though such detail is not found in the text.

Indeed, the presence of several illustrations in the Victoria and Albert Museum's copy of the Akbarnama...
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Taken as a group, the historical manuscripts made for Akbar follow a logical progression. The earliest one, the Tarîkh-i Ajîb, examines the great kings of Islam. The next one, the Tarîkh-i Khan'ân-i Timûrîya, traces the history of one dynasty in particular. Finally, the later manuscripts (with the exception of the Chingiznama) glorify the lives of Akbar and the Mughals, the last of the Timurids. Within the context of these manuscripts, the Akbarnama is without doubt the most revealing as it both defines Akbar's world as he wished it to be seen and established his relationship to the past. Although the manuscript was begun after the emperor had moved from Fatehpur-Sikri to Lahore, it is clear that his years at Fatehpur-Sikri played a major role in the formation of his character and attitude towards history. It was there, for instance, that he established most of the institutions described in the Ain-i Akbari and consciously set about documenting, in minute detail, the events of his reign. The city also left a strong imprint on the visual memory of the emperor's artists, who were able to paint its buildings and accurately describe events that took place there long after they had presumably moved to the Panjab. Basawan, for instance, was able to recall the punishment of Mazud Husayn in 1575 (see p. 48 and no. 17) in even greater detail than Abû Fazl, while Kesu the Elder (no. 14) and Tulsi the Elder (nos. 15, 16) were able to depict with precision the gateways, palaces and surroundings of Fatehpur-Sikri even though such detail is not found in the text.

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38. A Cow and Calf (ca. 1570).

39. Two Mullahs (ca. 1565-70).

40. Dervish (ca. 1570-75).
that do not follow the text closely raises the possibility that some of the miniatures in the manuscript were either originally intended for an earlier biography of Akbar or painted prior to the actual writing of the book. Since Abul Fazl began researching the manuscript at least two years before he started to write, it is conceivable that a number of miniatures—of either general interest, such as the "Construction of Fatehpur-Sikri" or of particularly memorable events like the "Punishment of Mansur Husayn"—were worked on during this period and then inserted into the book at appropriate places. The lack of text on these images as well as their formal qualities, which relate more to paintings of the late 1580s, if not earlier, than they do to miniatures of the 1590s, further supports this possibility."

In addition to the manuscripts they illustrated, the artists of the imperial atelier painted numerous individual images. The earliest of these miniatures (No. 38) can be attributed to the first years of Akbar's stay at Fatehpur-Sikri. These were either portraits (Nos. 39, 40, 41, 42), studies of local flora and fauna (No. 43), or landscape studies (No. 44) which grew out of the Mughals' awareness of their environment. Sometimes, as in "A Flowering Pomegranate Tree" (No. 43), an intense observation of nature mixed with mythical figures leads to an amusing contrast between reality and fantasy. But for the most part these studies tend to be precise depictions of the animals and plants that caught the attention of the emperor or his artists. The birds (No. 45) and the family of cheetahs (No. 46), both curiously painted on cotton, are superb examples of this tradition.

In the Ain-i Akbari, Abul Fazl records that "At His Majesty's command portraits have been painted of all of His Majesty's servants and a huge album has been
43. A Flowering Pomegranate Tree
(ca. 1570-75).

44. Landscape Fragment (ca. 1581-90).

45. Two Birds in a Landscape (Berlin Jahangir album) ca. 1580-85.
made. While these portraits "gave the dead a new life and the living an eternity" they also provided the emperor with a visual record that enabled him to "see" the various members of his court without having to read about them. In doing so they reflect the same attitude towards administrative detail and interest in the activities of the empire that prompted the establishment of the Records Office and they may well have been begun around 1574 as a visual equivalent to the documents of that office. Differences in size and setting suggest that at least two major portrait albums were formed: one with relatively large figures painted against light green backgrounds (no. 47), and one with smaller, usually finer, figures placed within landscapes (no. 48). There are, as well, many other portraits that do not seem to belong to either of these groups. While it is possible that all of these images once formed part of a single album, it is more likely that they did not and there is no reason why several albums could not have been assembled, one for the emperor and others for his leading courtiers and perhaps even for the women of the harem.

Although the genre of portraiture was not a Mughal innovation, the Mughals' emphasis on verismilitudine distinguishes their images from the more generalized types found in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Persian painting. Taken as a whole, the portraits made for Akbar give us a unique glimpse of the many people who were part of the emperor's court. From artists (no. 49), to dancing girls (no. 50), and Chaghatay women (no. 51), as well as noblemen (no. 52) and soldiers (no. 53), these portraits provide us with a
vivid picture of life in Akbar's India. The custodian of the imperial harem, Razia Darbari (No. 54) appears in a miniature of the mid-1580s as a man of great power and stern disposition, dressed in red and blue robes that barely conceal his muscular arms and strong limbs. According to Abu Fazl, he was the son of Raja Soja, a Shaykhawat Raijput.66 Shih Nawaz Khan adds that:

Raja Razia's through his good fortune became a favourite of Emperor Akbar, and excelled his peers in intimacy and trust. As his good nature and understanding were apparent, he gradually rose in position of trust, and was put in charge of the royal seraglio... He was long lived, and had 11 sons, each one of whom had many children.67

In 1602, Razia was raised to the rank of commander of 2,500 men and 1,250 horses indicating his importance at court.71 Under Jahangir he served in the Deccan and was not only promoted to a commander of 3,000 but also granted an imperial flag.72 In another portrait, Tansen, Akbar's greatest musician (No. 55), can be seen leaning on a staff, bells dangling from his waist. He is shown in this painting as a man of about forty years with a long aquiline nose and sharp well-defined eyes. In 1562, Akbar sent Jalal ad-Din Qurchi to lure Tansen away from his patron Ram Chand of Panja. The latter received the royal message and recognized the sending of an envoy as an honour, and went back with him suitable presents of elephants of fame and valuable jewels, and he also gave Tim Safi suitable instruments and made him the chief-mole of his gifts. As he had an upright nature and an acceptable disposition he was cherished by a long service and association with H. M., and great developments were made by him in music and in composition.73

Tansen spent most of his time under Akbar at Fatehpur-Sikri, where he perfected his talents. When he died on April 26, 1586, Akbar ordered all his musicians and singers to accompany Tansen's body to his grave and to make melodies as if it were a marriage.74

The women of Mughal India are also revealed in detail in these portraits. The courtesan (No. 50) with her mirror and many rassels was painted sometime in the late 1570s or early 1580s. Could she have been an employee in the suburb known as Shyanta pura (Devil's Town) that Akbar constructed outside of Fatehpur-Sikri for the city's growing population of prostitutes? In order to maintain control over the inhabitants of this area and pleasure-seekers from the Court the emperor, appointed a keeper, and a deputy, and a secretary for this quarter, so that any one who wished to associate with these people, or take them to his house, provided he first had his name and condition written down, might with the consent of the imperial officers have connection with any of them he pleased. But he did not permit any man to take dancing-girls to his house at night, without conforming to these conditions.75

Despite these measures the emperor's couriers continued to see the prostitutes and dancing-girls of the city without official permission. Eventually Akbar was forced to call several well-known prostitutes from Shyanta pura to his palace in Fatehpur-Sikri in order to inquire about their seductions.68 Among the noblemen uncovered in this way was Raja Birbar, one of Akbar's closest companions and friends, and a man of allegedly outstanding virtue.77

Although the emperor's library was the most important center for production and collection of books in India, it was not the only one. A number of Akbar's courtiers maintained libraries, some containing as many as four or five thousand books, while others even had the capacity to produce illustrated manuscripts. Their miniatures, however, are invariably painted in a rougher, less sophisticated manner than those of imperial manuscripts. Among the noblemen with the largest libraries were Jaya (see Chapter IV), Abd ar-Rahim Khan Khanan and Mirza Aziz Koka. As many as five calligraphers, including Abd ar-Rahim al-Haravi and Maulana Baqir, both of whom eventually went to work for Akbar, and eight painters were employed in the Khan Khanan's library which was also a gathering place for large group of scholars, poets, and writers.69 A copy of the Ramayana began in 1578-79 and completed in 1598-99, based directly on the translation of the manuscript prepared for Akbar, containing one hundred and thirty well executed paintings, suggests both the size and importance of the Khan Khanan's library.79

The earliest dated sub-imperial manuscript extant, however, is the Khamsi Saar (No. 56), an astrological treatise copied for Mirza Aziz Koka at Haipur by Muhammad Yusuf. The manuscript, which contains twelve miniatures, was completed on November 7, 1583 and reflects the growing power and wealth of the leading members of Akbar's court due to the stability and prosperity of the emperor's years at Fatehpur-Sikri. As one of Akbar's foster brothers and good friends, Mirza Aziz was in a unique position to benefit from the enhanced conditions of the empire. He was renowned for amusing comments: "A man said something, and I thought it was true. He was vehement about it, and I began to doubt. When he swore to it, I knew it was a lie."68 Mirza Aziz was also an accomplished calligrapher and a pupil of Maulana Baqir, the son of the great Persian master of nasta'liq, Mir Ali.80
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The women of Mughal India are also revealed in detail in these portraits. The courtesan (no. 50) with her mirror and many tassels was painted sometime in the late 1570s or early 1580s. Could she have been an employee in the suburb known as Shaytanpura (Devil’s Town) that Akbar constructed outside of Fatehpur-Sikri for the city’s growing population of prostitutes? In order to maintain control over the inhabitants of this area and pleasure-seekers from the Court the emperor,

appointed a keeper, and a deputy, and a secretary for this quarter, so that any one who wished to associate with these people, or take them to his house, provided he first had his name and condition written down, might with the counsel of the imperial officers have connection with any of them be pleased. But he did not permit any man to take dancing-girls to his house at night, without conforming to these conditions.**

Although there has yet to be a detailed study of imagery in Akbari manuscripts, it is clear that the emperor often followed older patterns. It has recently been shown that within the Islamic tradition of book illustration different types of texts tended to evolve different illustrative traditions, with text and paintings generally transmitted as a complete unit.** The major distinction lies between historical manuscripts characterized by their greater number of illustrations, larger format, and bolder manner of painting, and poetical texts whose illustrations are far fewer in number but extraordinary in terms of quality. Under Akbar’s patronage the same pattern is visible. The two miniatures illustrated here from the pocket-sized Dīnav of Avrari (nos. 26, 27) are among only fifteen spread throughout the manuscript’s three hundred and fifty-four folios, but one hundred and thirty-two large paintings are distributed through the three hundred and eighty-eight surviving folios of the almost contemporary Tarikh-i Khandan-i Timurisnya (fig. 8). Just as Akbar appreciated the inherent qualities of different Arabic scripts in the field of calligraphy, he did not look for identical qualities in illustrations from different types of texts. None of the paintings on the history-laden pages of the Tarikh-i Afī (no. 31) would ever have been intended to match the intimate precision of a miniature such as the “Boat and Landscape” (no. 23) from an unidentified poetic manuscript. Nevertheless, in addition to the traditional scenes of enchantments, battles, and sieges, official celebrations, and hunting excursions, a new imagery evolved based on drawing from life and techniques found in European works of art. It is the interaction between these polar poles of aesthetic experience that guided the development of the visual arts under Akbar’s patronage.

56. Mercury in Gemini (Kitab-i Saat, 1584).