seditious nature or desiant appearance is conveyed by a nickname such as Shahrashob ('Disturber of the City,' cat. 30, 34) or Kajlast ('Crooked Hand,' cat. 66). Women are always lauded for their beauty and grace, whether they trade upon their royal station or streetwise wiles. Accordingly, an opposing princess-turned-heroine bears the appellation Malak Makh ('Angel Moon,' cat. 63), while even a hardened female operative is elevated by the moniker of Khosh-Khuram ('One Who Walks Elegantly,' cat. 66).

The collection of Hamza stories begins, as these popular romances generally do, with a short section describing events that set the stage for the appearance of the central hero. In this case, the place is Ctesiphon in Iraq, and the initial protagonist is Buzurjmihr, a child of humtle parentage who displays both a remarkable ability to decipher ancient scripts and great acumen in political affairs (see fig. 13). By luck and calculated design, Buzurjmihr displaces the current vizier, and attaches himself first to the reigning king, Qubad, and then to his successor, Anoshvan. Nonetheless, a bitter rivalry has been seeded, for the widow of the wicked dead vizier bears a son she names Bakhktak Bakhkyar, and he in turn becomes a lifelong nemesis of both Hamza and Buzurjmihr. The latter soon relates a vision to Anoshvan that a child still in embryo in Arabia will eventually bring about his downfall; Anoshvan responds in Herod-like fashion, dispatching Buzurjmihr to Arabia with an order to kill all pregnant women. Emerging unscathed by this terrible threat are Hamza and Umar Umayaya, who is destined to be Hamza’s faithful companion.

Unlike most Persian heroes, Hamza is not born to royalty, but is nonetheless of high birth, the son of the chief of Mecca. An auspicious horoscope prophesies an illustrious future for him. Hamza shows an early aversion to idol-worship, and with the aid of a supernatural instructor, develops a precocious mastery of various martial arts. He soon puts these skills to good use, defeating upstart warriors in individual combat, preventing the Yemeni army from interdicting tribute to Anoshvan, and defending Mecca from predatory—but not religious—foes. Anoshvan learns of these sordid exploits, and invites Hamza to his court, where he promises him his daughter Amlar-Nigar in marriage. The girl is thrilled at this match, for she has long yearned for Hamza, and has had one soulful but chaste evening with him.

First, however, Anoshvan sends Hamza to Ceylon to fend off a threat from Landhaur, and thence onto Greece, where Bakhktak Bakhkyar has insidiously poisoned the king against him. Hamza, of course, proves his mettle in these and other tests, but his marriage to Amlar-Nigar is forestalled by the treacherous Costaham, who arranges her nuptials with another. Hamza is seriously wounded in battle with Zubin, Amlar-Nigar’s prospective groom, but recovers to ally himself with some fairies, supernatural creatures engaged in their own struggle against elephant-eared demons known as the Qaf, on the promise of the fairies’ assistance against his opponents. Hamza prevails again, and is rewarded with some legendary weapons, a three-eyed horse produced by the union of a demon and a fairy, and the hand of a fairy-named Asma, with whom he has a daughter. Though life among the fairies presents untold pleasures and challenges, it does not slack Hamza’s desire for Amlar-Nigar, to whom he vows to return. True to his word, he does so in Tangiers, albeit after eighteen long years, and eventually Hamza and Amlar-Nigar are married. Such a long interlude among the fairies seems capricious at first, but it is hardly so, for it was all prophesied for Hamza upon his birth.

While Hamza and his allies navigate various shoals of courtly intrigue, they also wage a prolonged war against infidels. Although the ostensible goal of these conflicts is to eradicate idolatry and convert opponents to Islam, the latter is usually related with little fanfare at the end of the
episode. Champions often proclaim their faith in God as they take to the battlefield, and sometimes reproach unbelievers for failing to grasp that the Muslims’ past military success is prima facie evidence of the righteousness of their cause. However standard and overt this proselytizing is in the formal triumphant speeches in the text, surprisingly few religious references are admitted into the illustrations of the Hamzanama manuscript. The most explicit is a painting in which idols fall to the ground and sea creatures churn the sea in delight at the birth of the Prophet (cat. 22). Another work shows Hamza returning home to greet his father at Mecca, a holy city identified visually by the Ka’ba. Having vanquished adversaries and tracked down long-lost lovers in their own region, Persian heroes roam about, often undertaking long voyages to foreign lands to find new sources of adventure. To judge from the many paintings in which seafaring ships appear, the favorite means of travel was by ocean, to destinations as far-flung as Greece, the Caucasus, India, Ceylon, and Abyssinia. Although Hamza in fact never left the Arabian peninsula, in legend he arrives at an endless series of strange lands, a staple feature of entertainment in popular romances. In these exotic locales, which are often described as islands, Hamza and his companions come across many a marvelous creature, such as witches, demons, and dragons. They frequently manhandle their adversaries, of course, but sometimes they are able to convert them simply with intimidating displays of their physical prowess, whether unleashing a deafening roar or singlehandedly hoisting an elephant overhead (cat. 52). Even heroes falter occasionally, however; so many a story is devoted to imprisonment, both feigned and real. Sometimes a hero’s friends liberate their imprisoned comrade from purportedly inescapable fortresses or dungeons by conventional means, such as a tunnel; at other times, they do so with the aid of magic formulas hidden in the most unlikely places, such as among the feathers of a slain bird. There is magic aplenty in this world of heroes. It regularly produces miraculous escapes from tight spots by heroes and their enemies, whether in the form of sudden flight on thousands of magical flying urns (cat. 37), or that of deus ex machina: a helping hand reaching down from the clouds to save a rascal from the clutches of his foes (cat. 69). In short, the strange, occasionally bizarre nature of the stories often begs the audience to suspend disbelief, an act few listeners are inclined to resist.

Despite its widespread popularity throughout the Islamic world and particularly in India, the Hamzanama is presently known only in two manuscripts made in the subcontinent. One, with 189 paintings, was produced in the mid-fifteenth century in one of the Muslim kingdoms of northern India. Nothing about this earlier manuscript predicts the narrative choices and astounding visual impact of the magnificent copy commissioned by Akbar a century later. Zumurrud Shah, for example, is conspicuously absent from the Sultanate manuscript, but figures prominently in the Mughal one. The small illustrations of the fifteenth-century work are simply conceived and executed, with a few rudimentary figures crowding out almost all other elements in each composition. Similarly, when shortly after the completion of the Hamzanama project Akbar ordered an illustrated copy of a very comparable popular romance, the Dastanba (“Story of Daras”), he did not call upon the imperial Mughal workshop to create anything beyond the ordinary, either in the size of the manuscript or in the technical quality of its illustrations. Hence, it seems apparent that while the performance tradition of this type of text raised the possibility of a large-scale manuscript format, it was the exceptionally auspicious conjunction of a dynamic and visionary patron and the very recent assembly of talent from the furthest reaches of the rapidly expanding Mughal empire that occasioned this monumental work.
The first six rulers of the Mughal dynasty — the ‘Great Mughals’ as they were known in the West — were all fascinating and singularly gifted individuals, and among them Akbar (1542–1605) has been regarded as the most outstanding, even by thinkers who are critical of the notion of kingship and its impact on society (fig. 1). Most has been written on Akbar’s reign than on any other period of Mughal history; only the interest devoted to his great-grandson Aurangzeb (1618–1707), the last of the Great Mughals, who is seen as his negative counterpart and under whom the empire began to disintegrate, comes close. Akbar has become such a popular subject of research and has been studied from so many different angles not only because of his personality and dynastic context but also because his reign covered perhaps one of the most dynamic periods in Indian history, a time of profound social, intellectual and religious transition. Students of Mughal India have increasingly become interested in the manner in which Akbar dealt with these developments and was influenced by them. In India it is felt that his own influence reaches into our times; he has been considered a founding father of the Indian nation, a unifier who brought large parts of the subcontinent together under a single government. Akbar’s tolerant stance toward all religions, striving in particular to reconcile his Hindu and Muslim subjects, has lost none of its exemplary appeal, especially today, in times of increasing communal tension.
Fig. 1
Dynamic group portrait of Akbar between his son Jehangir and his grandson Shah Jahan, to whom he transfers the Timurid crown. From the Minto albums. Painted by Rehmat, Mughal, 1650-51. 29.77 x 20.15 cm. Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, Ms. 1, no. 19.

Fig. 2

Fig. 3
The capture of Sultan Bayezid I of Turkey by Akbar, circa 1530. 39.3 x 31.8 cm. The British Library, London, Oriental and India Office Collections, Johnson Album 1, no. 2.

Akbar has not failed to capture the imagination of the West. In eighteenth-century Europe, when 'the Great Mughal' had become a synonym for oriental absolutism, Akbar even appeared in opera; he lent his name to a tyrant king in Zenobia, composed by Pasquale Anfossi after a libretto by Gaetano Sebastian and staged in Venice in 1782. At the end of the twentieth century, Akbar became known to a wider Western public mainly through the arts patronized by him, which were featured in several general exhibitions on Mughal art.1

AKBAR’S ANTECEDENTS
When Akbar came to the throne in 1556 at the age of thirteen, there was little to foretell that by the end of his reign in 1605 the Mughal empire would extend from Kabul to the Deccan and from the Arabian Sea to the Gulf of Bengal, and that the Mughal padishah or padishah (commonly translated as 'emperor') would have become the third player in the 'triumvirate of giants of South and Southwest Asia, the Great Turk [the Ottomans], the Great Sufi [the Safavids], and the Great Mughal.' Indeed, Akbar’s reign began inauspiciously: his father Humayun (1508–1556) had famously died from a fall down the stairs of his library, having only recently returned to Delhi from exile in Iran to wrest back from his rival Sher Shah Sur the Mughal dominions in India which had been conquered by his father Babur (Fig. 3).
After moving from Samarkand via Kabul into India, Babur (1483-1530) had vanquished the Delhi sultanate in 1526, with the Zafarnama literally in his hands. In that work, completed in 1424-25, the historian Sharafud-din Ali Yaqub had described and extolled the conquests of Timur. Babur’s famous ancestor, who had taken Delhi in 1526. Timur, or Tamerlane as he was known in the West, had brought large parts of Asia, from Samarkand to Anatolia, under his sway in a neo-Mongolian drive of conquest. Living up to his Latin nickname, Oremus tenor, he had won himself the favor of Europe at the battle of Ankara in 1402 by defeating Sultan Yildirim Bayezid so devastatingly that the Ottomans were kept from taking Constantinople for another fifty years. The Mughals always felt superior to the Ottomans because of the humiliation of Bayezid, whom Timur had captured and, so the historical rumor goes, taken in a cage on his way back to Samarkand (fig.3), using him as a step when mounting his horse. The Ottomans could not improve their reputation in Mughal eyes even when they claimed, wrongly of course, to have conquered Vienna, as the Turkish admiral Sidi Ali Reis did when a shipwreck brought him to the court of Humayun in 1554.

The Mughals were at all times more closely engaged with the Safavids, the descendants of the Sufi shaykh Safuuddin and the third Muslim superpower in Asia, not only because they were their immediate neighbors but also because as shahs of Iran they were the heirs of the ancient kings of Persia, the Achaemenids and Sassanians, who had long since been accepted by Islam as model rulers and exemplary kings. Persian was the language of the Muslim courts of Asia, and Persianate culture formed the life of the ruling elite at those courts and in the cities.

As the latest of the three superpowers to emerge, and as an elite minority ruling over a vast territory of peoples of different creeds and cultures, the Mughals were particularly driven to legitimize themselves, and they relied above all on their impeccable Turko-Mongolian lineage. Babur’s claim to the title and status of padshah was bolstered by the fact that he descended not only from Timur but also, on his mother’s side, from the even greater pan-Asian force, Chingiz Khan, who in turn had inspired Timur. The attitude of the Mughals toward Chingiz was ambivalent: on the one hand, they were proud of their Chingizid blood; on the other, they preferred to be associated with the more recent and more refined Timurids. For the people of India, however, they remained the ‘Mongols’ (Magyul, Mughals), the Europeans followed suit and gave them the dynastic title Giao Mogor, Gorte Mogol, Grand Moghol, or Grossmogul.

Timur’s sons and successors had established a splendid, courtly culture of Persianate orientation centered first at Samarkand and then, toward the end of the fifteenth century, at Herat in present-day Afghanistan. It was reflected by smaller Timurid principalities like that of Farghana, where Babur was born. But this background does not explain Babur’s astonishing career as an adventurer and ruler, nor how he became the author of the Bahunama (probably begun around 1494), an outstanding autobiography at any time, and in particular for a Central Asian prince of the sixteenth century. He comments with candor and in almost Proustian detail on wide-ranging subjects, from his youthful infatuation with a boy in his encampment to his peregrinations and campaigns in Central Asia and India to the flora and fauna of newly conquered Hindustan. Babur’s matter-of-fact, rational approach seems to have laid the foundation for Akbar’s thinking, in which reason was the driving force, and it remained a characteristic of the Mughal dynasty in general, at least until Aurangzeb.

In Hindustan, as the Mughals called northern India, Babur overthrew the Lodhi dynasty (1420-1526), the last rulers of the Delhi sultanate which had shrunk throughout the fifteenth century while regional sultans asserted themselves. Especially in areas far from Delhi, such as Bengal and
Kashmir (which was always a place apart), the sultans had presented themselves as rulers in Indian terms and had interacted with the local societies and cultures. The Mughal horizon widened further with Humayun’s exile in Iran, where he took refuge with Shah Tahmasp in 1544. This involuntary sojourn intensified the Mughal’s contact with Persian culture and inspired the distinctly eccentric Humayun to further enrich the Mughal myth of kingship, which he had begun to develop in India, with borrowings from ancient Persian concepts. It seems that his intentions were widely known: Mulla Abdul-Qadir Badauni tells us that when Humayun was in Mashhad in 1544, a pilgrim whispered in his ear: “So you are again laying claim to omnipotence!” This was a reference to the circumstance that Humayun used generally in Bengal [Bengal] to cast a veil over his crown, and when he removed it the people used to say, Light has shone forth. Thus Humayun associated himself with Indian and Iranian practices of sun-rulership and with the old Iranian concept of the divine effulgence of the king, none of which was forgotten in Islamic times. The learned theologian, poet and moralist Davani, for instance, who visited Persepolis in 1576 with Sultan Khallil, the son of the Turkman ruler Uzun Hasan, claims that the mythical Persian king Jamshid, after having constructed Persepolis had caused a golden throne, studded with shining jewels, to be placed on the columns... and sat on it in state. At sunrise he ordered the throne to be turned towards the sun, and the eyes of the onlookers were dazzled by the brilliancy. Saying that they beheld two suns, one in the sky and the other on earth, they knelt down... and thenceforth he was surnamed Jamshid, his name being Jam and shid meaning ‘Sun’. The concept of divinely illuminated kingship was to become a leading idea in the Mughal myth of rulership. Back in India, Humayun must have thought of the legendary carpets and throne of the Sassanian Khusraws when he designed a large cosmological carpet of concentric rings on which his court had to sit according to origin and rank, with the emperor ‘like the Sun’ in the center.

AKBAR AS UNIVERSAL RULER
Realizing that the concept of divinely illuminated kingship was also part of Indian tradition, Akbar elaborated on Humayun’s associations between the ruler and the sun; he appeared at sunrise like a traditional Indian king or a Hindu deity for public viewing (darshan) and his subjects prostrated themselves before him. He even went so far as to pray to the sun, as his heavenly counterpart (fig.4). Jahangir (1569–1627) and Shah Jahan (1592–1666) were to develop further the idea of Mughal sun-rulership, which was abolished by the orthodox Aurangzeb because he disapproved of it as un-Islamic. It is possible that these ideas reached the court of Louis XIV and inspired him to formulate his own version, which provided the myth of European absolutism.

Such multicultural concepts held a special attraction for the Mughals in their attempt to legitimize themselves as padshahs of a highly diverse empire: the very status of a ruler might work as a unifying factor equally if not more important than his religion or cultural background. In India, Muslim rulers had long since been integrated into the social order of the Hindus, they were treated on the same terms as Indian kings, even as mythological heroes or gods. This phenomenon can be observed particularly in Bengal from the early fifteenth century onward and in Kashmir at about the same time. The historian Shriyara Pandita, who completed the section of the Rajatarangini written by Janaraj, compares Sultan Zaynulabidin (Shri Jainabhadina, r. 1210–70) with Indra...
and celebrates him as an incarnation of Vishnu. In the sixteenth-century Sanskrit work Bhumichandrika-charita, ‘Sahi Shrimad Akhobara (Akbar)’ is projected as Rama. From the disapproving Badauni, we learn that his emperor lent an open ear to such associations.

Brahmans collected another set of one thousand and one names of ‘His Majesty the Sun’, and told the Emperor that he was an incarnation, like Ram, Krishna, and other infidel kings. The Mughal myth of kingship acquired a distinct Sufi dimension when Akbar was declared the Perfect Man (imam al-kamil) who establishes Universal Peace (sulh-i-ikhtilaf) between Muslims and Hindus. From one who sought the blessings and support of Sufi saints, of Shaykh Salim Chishti of Fatehpur Sikri and of Shaykh Mu'inuddin Chishti of Ajmer, Akbar became a spiritual authority in his own right. Thus the old dichotomy between the power of Sufi saints and the worldly authority of the sultans was resolved in the imperial person of Akbar. To this end his alter ego, friend, advisor, biographer, and (as Richard Eaton has put it) principal ideologue, Abu'l Fazl (1555–1622) idealized even the historical Akbar in a neoplatonic construct: everyone of his apparent actions underlies
a true spiritual meaning. This gives his Akbarnama (1589–95), despite its aim of historical authenticity, a mystical and mythical dimension.

Akbar not only associated himself with historical, mythical and spiritual kingship to strengthen his own authority as a ruler, but also widened this frame of reference and sought access to the contemporary firmly of rulers of the world. He states this explicitly in a letter, still little studied, which he wrote in 1582 to King Philip of Spain, whom he tried to win over to an alliance against the Ottomans:

we are, with the whole power of our mind, earnestly striving to establish and strengthen the bonds of love, harmony and union among the population, but above all with the exalted tribe [of] princes [sultans], who enjoy the noblest of distinctions in consequence of a greater share of the divine favour; and especially with that illustrious representative of Islam, the matchless [sufi] the emblem of divine illumination and propagator of the Christian religion, who has not to be praised or made known [i.e. Philip], and, as the word in account of our propinquity, the claims whereof are well established among mighty potentates, and acknowledged to be the chief condition for amicable relations.16

But Akbar did not come to the family of kings as a humble supplicant. In a letter of 1592 to Shah Abbas, he admonished the Iranian ruler for his intolerance in religious matters, and he expressed the opinion that his avowance toward different religions and cultures gave him the right to rule above them all:

as it has been our disposition from the beginning of our attaining discretion to this day not to pay attention to differences of religion and variety of manners and to regard the tribes of mankind as the servants of God, we have endeavoured to regulate mankind in general.17

Akbar implied that he was superior to rulers like Philip II or Shah Abbas, because they accepted only one religion and acted merely within one culture while his tolerance gave him the moral authority to take care of all mankind. Thus he was a true universal king.

AKBAR'S RELIGIOUS POLICIES

On the political level, Akbar unified large parts of India in several military campaigns, bringing Malwa (conquered 1566), the Rajput states (1566–69), Gujarat (1572), Bengal (1576), Kashmir (1586), and Khandesh (1601) under Mughal rule and securing the northwestern frontier by recapturing Kabul and Qandahar (1595). At the same time, the emperor (fig. 5) and Abu Fazl sought to consolidate the political unification by a policy of cultural reconciliation. Religion was a main issue in this project.

Akbar had a deep personal interest in spirituality, which he tried to reconcile with Mughal rationalism. He first identified with Islam, with Sunni orthodoxy, but, frustrated by the diverging opinions of the ulama, he established in 1575 the Ibadatkhanah ("House of Worship"), where an increasing range of religions was discussed, with Shiites, Hindus, Parsees, Jains, and Christians all participating.20 But Akbar wanted to explore beyond the interpretations of the preachers and decided to have the source books of different religions translated into Persian, the language of the Mughal court and empire. He established a translation bureau (maktabkhanah) for which every talent was recruited, even such unwilling ones as Badauni, who had entered court service at the end of April 1574 and who, when ordered by Akbar to translate Sanskrit texts, hoped that God would allow that "the translation of atheism is not atheism."21

Akbar went even further in his search for the true religion, natural to all men, and in the late