

**THE NEW YEAR'S FESTIVALS AND THE SHRINE OF 'ALI IBN
ABI TALIB AT MAZAR-I SHARIF, AFGHANISTAN**

by

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is his own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

ABSTRACT

This study examines the customs and origins of three spring festivals at the shrine of 'Ali b. Abi Talib, Mazar-i Sharif, Afghanistan; namely Nauroz, Janda Bala and Gul-i Surkh. Since these festivals are not part of the Islamic religious calendar, we seek to locate their origins in the pre-Islamic religions of Iran and record the contemporary traditions of these festivals. Since the festivals are assimilated to a shrine dedicated to the fourth Caliph of Sunni Islam, we examine the processes which gave rise to this juxtaposition and how it came about that this shrine came to be considered a rival to Najaf.

The Saljuq and Timurid discovery narratives are examined (Chapters 1-2) in their wider religious and cultural context, followed by an examination of Afghan folklore related to Nauroz and the pre-Islamic religious traditions of Bactria (Chapters 3-4). We conclude that an important impetus for the founding of this shrine is the fact that, until the arrival of Islam, Bactra had been the paramount pilgrimage and cult centre of the region. Over the millennia, whilst the dominant religious tradition had changed, Bactra adapted to such ideological fluctuations in order to maintain its dominance of the lucrative pilgrimage traffic. Marginalised by Islam, whose heroes and foci of pilgrimage lay in the Arab world, the alleged discovery of the body of Hazrat 'Ali at the site, provided an acceptable Islamic framework for the revival, or continuation, of indigenous Bactrian New Year customs.

Our examination of Gul-i Surkh, or 'Red Rose', festival (chapters 5-6) finds a parallel in the Armenian Vardavar festival. Originally this festival appears to have been derived from a blending of Iranian and Babylonian religion in Bactria, namely the cults of Anahita, Adonis/Tammuz and customs associated with the Iranian hero, Siyawush. Janda Bala (Chapter 7), on the other hand, appears to be rooted in ancient Vedic and Shamanistic tradition. All three festivals, though, we argue, also represent different aspects of ancient Indo-Aryan and Babylonian fertility rites connected with the spring and vernal equinox.

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PREFACE

The inspiration for this research project originates from two periods of residence in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, during the 1970s and early 1980s, which in total amounted to just under six years. During this time in Afghanistan, I encountered for the first time popular Islamic culture, or 'folk Islam', as exemplified in shrine rituals. Following a visit to Mazar-i Sharif and Balkh in 1978, during which I attended the Nauroz celebrations at the shrine of Shah-i Mardan, I determined to devote time to a study of the origins^{of} these New Year festivals and how they came to be associated with an Islamic shrine. However, it has only been in the last few years that personal circumstances, combined with a unique opportunity to undertake further formal study in a university environment, have allowed me to devote time to this subject.

In undertaking this study, there were three primary objectives.

- (i) To understand more fully how the shrine at Mazar-i Sharif came to be accepted by the majority of Sunnis in Afghanistan as the authentic burial site of 'Ali b. Abi Talib, and to examine the process which allowed them to reconcile this belief with the well-documented history of the Commander of the Faithful which contradicts this claim.
- (ii) To record whatever remained of the traditions and customs of the New Year festivals at the shrine and more specifically those of Janda Bala and Gul-i Surkh. As a corollary to this, to establish the reason why these unique festivals came to be associated with a shrine dedicated to 'Ali b. Abi Talib.
- (iii) Given the fact that both the Janda Bala and Gul-i Surkh appeared to be unique survivals of one, or more, pre-Islamic traditions, to attempt to identify the origin of these traditions in the religions of Iran and Central Asia.

This present study is thus phenomenologically and descriptively based, rather than a case study in the sociological, anthropological or psychological role played by the shrine or its festivals in one specific locality, or a particular religious or social grouping.

There is a chronic lack of any systematic description of shrine cults in modern Afghanistan and what there is tends to be unsystematic and far too brief. Nor has there been any serious scholarly attempt to analysis the relationship of these customs to ancient cultures or other religious traditions of the region. Given that much of the indigenous

tradition associated with these festivals has already been lost, as well as the volatility of the current political situation, the adoption of a phenomenologically-based methodology for this thesis, I believe, is therefore justified on the basis that it is always better, in the initial stages of construction, to lay a bare foundation of facts, rather than trying to cover a non-existent structure with the ornate roof of theory.

Much of the descriptive material is based on field work and interviews, which sought to record and preserve whatever remained of the oral tradition and local custom of the festivals which take place in connection with the shrine of Mazar-i Sharif every Nauroz. Such an undertaking was deemed to be particularly apposite since over the last century and a half much of the indigenous traditions of the Turco-Tajik population of northern Afghanistan has disappeared as a result of Balkh's incorporation in the state of Afghanistan in the latter half of the last century. In more recent times this process has been further accelerated by two decades of civil war, which has resulted in the exodus, or enforced exile, of all but a handful of the older generation of intelligentsia, combined with the detrimental effects of the Sovietisation of education inside the country and the lack of anything other than rudimentary, *madrassa*-based, religious education for Afghan refugees in Pakistan.

It was one of the hopes of the present research that it would be possible to locate old men who had inherited traditions regarding the culture and origins of Gul-i Surkh and Janda Bala from their forefathers, or some local intellectual who had made a particular point of preserving the customs of these festivals. After several field trips and many interviews, both in the cities and amongst mountain communities, it is evident that little remains in folk memory concerning such ancient customs. Most sources interviewed gave a very standardised account of the traditions of Gul-i Surkh and Janda Bala which added very little to information already obtained in previous discussions. Unfortunately, now the Taliban have taken charge of the Northern Provinces, this attrition of indigenous culture will accelerate, as the new lords of the north reaffirm Pushtun hegemony over the Uzbek, Turkman and Tajik population and impose their particularly narrow-minded version of Islamic radicalism, derived from a theological culture originating from the N.W Frontier and the Indian subcontinent. If the Taliban remain in control for any length of time, it is highly likely that the celebration of Janda Bala and Nauroz will be interdicted on the grounds that they are unIslamic, thus diminishing the drawing power of the shrine and, within a generation, even what little is left in folk memory concerning the New Year festivals will have been forgotten.

The discovery narratives related to the founding of the shrine of Shah-i Mardan at Mazar-i Sharif, first under the Saljuqs and subsequently during the reign of the Timurid ruler, Sultan Husain Baiqara, have been published by McChesney (1991), who discusses

these accounts in the context of their contemporary Islamic political and ideological background. However, his work fails to locate the shrine and its relics in the broader context of the history of religion, nor did the framework of McChesney's study encompass an examination of the shrine's festival tradition. This present study, therefore, complements, rather than competes with, McChesney's study of the evolution of the shrine into a shrine-state and, in more recent times, into a national institution.

In our examination of the authentication narratives, which occupy the first two chapters of this work, we examine the wider religious context out of which the foundation of the shrine emerged, with the intention of throwing light on the vexed question of how the Muslim population of Balkh and thus surrounding territories, came to adopt an idiosyncratic version of early Islamic history by asserting that the grave in Balkh was that of 'Ali b. Abi Talib. That this should happen once, to parody Wilde,¹ might seem a misfortune, but that it should happen twice, looks like carelessness. Yet this is exactly what did happen. On two occasions, separated by over four hundred years of history and under two quite different governments, the same site came to be widely recognised as being the last resting place of 'Ali b. Abi Talib and much money and effort was spent establishing a suitably ornate structure over the sacred relics.

This process of acceptance, or, in a minority of cases, acquiescence, can only properly be comprehended when it is realised that for centuries prior to the arrival of Islam, Balkh, or Bactra as it was then known, had been the hub of religious power and pilgrimage. At one level, therefore, the discovery of the remains of Shah-i Mardan, provided a suitable Islamic context for the reassertion of an ancient pattern of pilgrimage which had been disrupted by the arrival of Islam, whose own prophets, heroes and saints were not indigenous to the area, but rather represented an alien, and distant culture drawn from the Arabian peninsula and the Middle East. The unexpected uncovering of what appeared to be the mortal remains of one of Islam's greatest heroes, a relative of the Prophet and one of the four 'Rightly-Guided' Caliphs, provided an unexpected Islamic pedigree for Balkh and its predominantly non-Arab population. Nor can it be a coincidence that the original discovery of the remains of 'Ali b. Abi Talib, in 530/1135-6, took place during a period when Iranian culture and literature was experiencing a renaissance. At the same period, major developments in the Shi'i theology of the Imamate took place (cf. Ayoub, 1978; Hussain, 1982), developments which can be seen as but another aspect of this overall revival of Iranian culture. In this movement, the Imams, and the 'Holy Family' (*Panj Tan*), in particular began to assume less the character of the champions of Islamic orthodoxy and more of the role of ancient Iranian epic heroes, the *jawanmards* (see, Corbin., 1990; Curtis, 1993).

¹ O. Wilde, *The Importance of being Earnest* (1895) Act. 1.

This broader context of cultural reaffirmation provides us with one explanation for why the celebration of ancient Iranian festivals came to be assimilated as part of the ritual of the shrine at Mazar-i Sharif. This process of indigenisation, however, went even further at Shah-i Mardan. In al-Gharnati's original discovery narrative, we can detect the exploitation of ancient religious tradition in the authentication process. Furthermore, the role and character of 'Ali b. Abi Talib, by dint of his association with Gul-i Surkh and Janda Bala, becomes intertwined with Bactrian fertility cults, Adonic redemption myths and Iranian heroes, or *jawanmards*. At another level, 'Ali assumes the role, once held by the goddess Ardivi Sura Anahita, the Greek Athena and the Buddhist Vaisravana Deva, as the *tyche* of the Hazhda^h Nahr, or 18 Canals. For today Mazar-i Sharif is the spiritual heart of this most fertile of agricultural regions, just as Bactra and the religious complexes of Zariaspa or Nava Vihara had been in pre-Islamic history. Later, in the Timurid period, the process of indigenisation of the cult of Shah-i Mardan was further enhanced with the invention of an elaborate translation myth which involved the Shi'i Imams and the Khurasanian hero, Abu Muslim.

Mazar-i Sharif, and its association with Shah-i Mardan thus provides the inhabitants with the requisite Islamic context for the perpetuation of three ancient Iranian spring festivals, Nauroz, Janda Bala and Gul-i Surkh. The celebration of Nauroz, of course, is not confined to Mazar-i Sharif and is celebrated throughout Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia, parts of the Middle East, Turkey and the Caucasus. Its customs, traditions and origins have been well documented in mediaeval Islamic sources² and discussed at length by specialists in Iranian culture and religion.³ This is not the case where either the Janda Bala or Gul-i Surkh is concerned. The *janda* is raised, copycat fashion, at a select number of shrines with Imami connections in Afghanistan, whilst Gul-i Surkh is, in the modern world, unique to the Hazhda Nahr and Mazar-i Sharif. For this reason alone, therefore, the shrine of Shah-i Mardan has an importance for the history of religions which can be accorded to very few other Islamic shrines in Central Asia, Iran or the Indian subcontinent. For the purpose of this present study, we have limited our discussion of Nauroz traditions in chapter 3 and elsewhere, to only those aspects of the festival which throw light on its relationship to the Janda Bala and Gul-i Surkh and the shrine of Shah-i Mardan.

During the course of the research into the festivals of Gul-i Surkh and Janda Bala, it has become evident that an exhaustive study of the origins of either of these festivals could form the basis of a separate thesis. Furthermore, any such comprehensive research would require of the scholar who embarked on it to possess an unusual, even extraordinary, knowledge of the religions and languages of ancient Iran, Armenia, Babylonia, Greece,

² E.g. al-Biruni, *The Chronology of Ancient Nations* (Transl. Sachau), 199-204.

³ Cf. Boyce (1984 & 1975, i:171)-3; B.A. Donaldson (pp.20-23).

India and Central Asia, to name but some of the most important cultures which influenced Bactria over the millennia. Given the statutory constraints of this present work, there is neither the time nor the space for such an exhaustive study nor does the author pretend to possess the kind of linguistic abilities required for such an undertaking. Rather, our comparative study of the origins of Gul-i Surkh (chapters 5, 6) and the Janda Bala (chapter 7) festivals, seeks to suggest possible cultural and religious roots out of which the present festivals of Gul-i Surkh and Janda Bala arose and the conclusions offered are presented as the first tentative steps of an ongoing process, rather than presuming to offer definitive answers to very complex problems.

Unfortunately, the very uniqueness of the Janda Bala and Gul-i Surkh tradition in the modern world hampers our endeavours to trace the roots of these festivals. Had there been other shrines in Central Asia, Iran, India or the Middle East where these traditions were extant, one would have to rely far less on fragments of oral tradition which have survived in northern Afghanistan. Such a diffusion of the tradition, furthermore, would have made it that much easier to identify specific religious and cultural traditions from which these two festivals derive. Unfortunately, this is not the case and whilst the history of Mazar-i Sharif and its association with 'Ali b. Abi Talib is covered in a number of mediaeval Islamic sources, the first reference to the festival of Gul-i Surkh at the shrine does not appear until the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Peshchereva's (1927 & 1963) detailed record of the 'Tulip Festival' in the Ferghana Oasis, which was still being observed in the early decades of this century, provides some comparative material and it may well be that three or four centuries ago the Bactrian Gul-i Surkh was celebrated in the same manner. Unfortunately, while Peshchereva's work is invaluable, it fails to address the wider issue of the religious or cultural origins of the festival and discussion of the symbolic nature of the rituals is perfunctory. A further problem presents itself in determining the origin of both Gul-i Surkh and Janda Bala inasmuch as the little we know about ancient Bactrian religion is highly fragmentary and subject to much debate amongst scholars. Controversy, too, dogs Zoroastrian studies, especially the early period. Despite some caveats about her dating of Zoroaster's life and area of ministry, I have relied heavily on Boyce's monumental three volume study of Zoroastrianism when it comes to trying to grasp the intricacies of early Iranian religion. As far as archaeology in the Balkh area is concerned it is still in its infancy and has tended to be heavily oriented to finding traces of Alexander the Great or the Kushans. Certain cultic traditions which survive at other shrines in and around Afghanistan have provided some pointers in our search for the origins of the festivals, as well as myth and motifs found in the epic histories and romances of pre-Islamic Iran.

It is evident from our study that the shrine and festivals of Mazar-i Sharif provide students of the history of religion with a number of important paradigms. Firstly, it reveals much about the way in which ancient customs perpetuate themselves by a process of fusion, synthesis and redefinition. Secondly, the survival of Janda Bala and Gul-i Surkh, as remnants of an ancient and probably more widespread tradition, gives the lie to the belief that Islam is intolerant of all expressions of religious tradition other than its own. The *modus vivendi* which has existed over the centuries between the shrine's Islamic tradition, as exemplified in its being dedicated to 'Ali b. Abi Talib, and the festivals of Nauroz, Janda Bala and Gul-i Surkh, has much to teach us about the processes of Islamisation. Far from being aggressively iconoclastic, we see in the shrine of Shah-i Mardan how, at the local level at least, there is a pragmatic adaptation of Islamic history to accommodate traditional culture and local custom. The continuation of certain pre-Islamic cultic traditions was redefined in an Islamic guise and thus tolerated, in exchange for a general submission to Islam and the abandonment of the use of images. A similar process has been noted by Brown (1981) in his study of early Christian relic cults and it is likely, given the similarity of world view between these two traditions, that the Islamic concept of the shrine owed much to the Christian tradition which was well established in the eastern Mediterranean and Byzantine empire when the Islamic conquests took place.

At Mazar-i Sharif, this process of redefinition went much further than at most other shrines, inasmuch as the redirecting of ancient custom required the rewriting of a particularly important part of early Islamic history. Yet even this revisionist version of the burial of 'Ali b. Abi Talib was accomplished with little more than token opposition from the religious elite of Balkh. Nor can the process of authentication of the relics be dismissed merely as an outbreak of mass hysteria amongst the religiously illiterate masses. It is clear from both the Saljuq and Timurid discovery narratives that this realignment of Islamic history was endorsed, indeed actively promoted, by the most senior political, religious and literary figures. In the latter scenario, Sultan Husain Baiqara himself, supported by his Wazir, 'Ali Sher Nawai, and his Poet Laureate, 'Abd al-Rahman Jami, to name but a few prestigious individuals involved, put the weight of their authority behind the authentication process.

The shrine is thus a classic example of what Brown (p. 34) calls the "privatisation of the Holy." In both the Saljuq and Timurid discoveries, we see the relics being manipulated by various elites and power groups for their own ends, in which historical fact was subservient to political expediency. For the discovery of the remains of Hazrat 'Ali came at a convenient time for both the Saljuqs and Timurids of Balkh. Not only did their unearthing provide each regime with a means to rally support against opposition, both from within and from without, but was exploited ruthlessly as a tool of legitimisation by rulers whose

claim to sovereignty was based on raw conquest or military opportunism. Not only so, but by actively endowing and promoting the cult through acts of state sponsorship, a much needed fillip was provided by the pilgrimage trade in a region which had fallen on hard times.

SOURCES AND THEIR EVALUATION

Field Work

During 1977/78, some formal research on shrines and pre-Islamic survivals in northern Afghanistan was made during my period as Fellow of the British Institute for Afghan Studies. In March 1978 I attended the Nauroz festival at Mazar-i Sharif and witnessed the Janda Bala ceremony. In the spring and summer of the same year two field trips were undertaken to Maimana and the subdistrict (*wulswali*) of Gurziwan. I did not return to the area again until the spring of 1993, following the fall of the government of Dr. Najibullah which led to the establishment of the autonomous Uzbek-dominated 'Northern Province of Afghanistan' (*Wilayat-i Shamal-i Afghanistan*) under General 'Abd al-Rashid Dostam. At the same time, visits to Uzbekistan for academic purposes became, if not easy, then at least far more possible, than in former years. As a consequence, between 1993 and 1998, and despite the continued civil war in Afghanistan, several field trips were possible. Those visits undertaken whilst registered with the university were:

March-May 1993: Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. A preliminary feasibility survey which encompassed Tashkent, Bukhara, Samarkand, Mazar-i Sharif and Balkh. During the weeks spent in Uzbekistan I met with university lecturers and professors in Tashkent and Samarkand and Uzbek refugees from Northern Afghanistan. I witnessed the revival of the Nauroz festival in Samarkand and visited the shrine of Baha' al-Din Naqshband, amongst other historic sites. Having crossed by land from Termez to Hairatan, I spent some two weeks in Mazar-i Sharif and Balkh.

March-April 1994: Herat city and Badghis Province (Laman; Qala'-yi Nau; Qadis; Langar). The visit included a number of shrines in and around Herat during Nauroz, whilst in Badghis I inspected a number of pre-Mongol archaeological sites and Sufi centres.

April-May 1995: Mazar-i Sharif; Balkh; Faizabad and locations in and around the Hazhda Nahr; Aqcha; Andkhui (shrines of Baba Wali; Charda Ma'sum; Shah-i Mardan); Sar-i Pul (Imam-i Kalan; Imam-i Khurd); Sayyad.

March-May 1996: Kabul (including Sakhi Jan shrine); Mazar-i Sharif; Balkh and the Hazhda Nahr; Khwaja Katal shrine; Pul-i Khumri.

Sept-Oct. 1996: Kabul (briefly); Mazar-i Sharif; Maimana (including shrine of Imam Sahib); Gurziwan *wulswali* (Sarchakan, Ghulbiyan, Kauliyan); Darzab (overnight).

July-August 1997: Mazar-i Sharif; Imam Sahib of Juzjan province (shrine of Baba Hatim); Shibarghan (various shrines and mosques); Sar-i Pul (Imam-i Kalan; Imam-i Khurd); Darra-yi Suf; Bamiyan.

April-May 1998: Bamiyan; Yakolang; Kabul.

As well as periods inside Afghanistan, time was also spent in Pakistan (mainly Peshawar and Islamabad) meeting with foreign and Afghan scholars and in the Afghan Refugee Information Centre (ARIC) library in Peshawar.

All the field work was conducted as an adjunct to short-term consultancy commissioned by Non-Governmental Organisations, United Nations relief and development organisations or photographic assignments which made it possible to use Red Cross (ICRC) and UN plane flights. Though internal travel was easier than it had been when there was a central government, travel in and out of the country, and particularly to Mazar-i Sharif, was problematic. Poor weather conditions, intense demand for the plane seats (particularly heavy around the Nauroz period), the bombing of airports, flare-ups on the front lines and, since 1996, unrest in the Mazar-i Sharif itself, meant days, even weeks, were spent in Peshawar waiting for flights. After the defection of General Malik of Maimana to the Taliban in 1997, access to the northern provinces was severely restricted and from the spring of 1998 it became impossible for all but a select band of foreign aid workers to travel to Mazar-i Sharif.

The most unfortunate consequence of this logistical problem was that despite numerous attempts during the course of this research, it proved impossible to be in Mazar-i Sharif at Nauroz to witness the festivals in person. In 1996, having been refused a seat on the ICRC plane to Mazar, I travelled by road to Kabul on 20 March in the expectation of observing the Nauroz ceremonies at the shrine of Sakhi Jan. However, this year was a Leap Year and local rules governing intercalation in the Afghan solar calendar, meant that the *janda* had been raised on the morning of the 20 March.

The failure to personally attend the Nauroz festival in Mazar was offset by the availability of video footage and still photographs of the event taken by expatriate friends. As time spent in Mazar usually coincided with the forty days of Gul-i Surkh, the events of each year's Nauroz festival were still fresh in peoples' minds and it was possible to photograph the *janda* in the forecourt of various shrines, as well as to watch pilgrims performing their devotions before it and in the shrine of Shah-i Mardan. I had already witnessed the raising of the *janda* at Mazar-i Sharif in 1978 and the accounts of more recent Nauroz ceremonies differed little from my own recollection of this event. In the spring of 1976, I attended the Nauroz celebrations at Sakhi Jan, Kabul, whilst in the summer of 1989 I had paid a brief visit to Hamzabad, on the border of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, which had previously been dedicated to Shah-i Mardan.

As mentioned above, the search for knowledgeable old men and intellectuals who had a particular knowledge of the traditions of Gul-i Surkh and Janda Bala did not come up to initial expectations. The *ishans* at the shrine in Mazar-i Sharif universally regurgitated their garbled version of the authentication narrative which confused al-Gharnati's account with that of Khwandamir. The Dostam-appointed *mudir*, though an Ansari, was reluctant to be probed in any depth about the history or culture of the shrine, possibly because he was afraid of showing his ignorance. He had been in the position for only a few years and held the post by virtue of his political affiliation. As such, he was out of touch with the oral folklore traditions which presumably existed amongst the Ansari *ishans* at the shrine up to 1889, when Amir 'Abd al-Rahman Khan nationalised the *rauza*, deposed the Ansaris who had managed its affairs since the days of Sultan Husain Baiqara and subsequently had all 120 of them brutally, and publicly, executed, in the Murad Khana bazaar in Kabul.⁴ The *mudir*, and the shrine authorities in general, showed a certain anxiety, too, about the presence of a non-Muslim in the shrine's precincts, doubtless fearing lest radical Islamic elements might exploit the presence of a foreigner and accuse the authorities of allowing the sacred Islamic portals to be desecrated. Hence visits to the shrine itself were brief, though frequent, and timed to occur when there were relatively few people around. The officials at the nineteenth century mosque, which lies within the precincts of the shrine, were much better informed and provided many details about the preparation of the *janda* prior to Nauroz. Finally, after many attempts, an influential friend succeeded in gaining admission for me to the shrine's inner sanctuary, but the visit was brief and I was unable to take photographs or interview the attendants.

Various efforts were made to locate individuals who claimed to have been healed during the festival but this proved impossible. It was easy to find those who claimed to know people who had been healed from serious afflictions during the ceremony, but despite repeated requests for an interview with these acquaintances, none ever came forward. In the spring of 1996 Balkh Television was said to have interviewed a man who had had his sight restored during the Janda Bala, but the video footage had been erased and the person concerned could not be located.

The intellectual community of Balkh and Mazar-i Sharif were more willing to discuss the issue of the Nauroz festivals' pre-Islamic origins, but after a few interviews it was clear that, with a few exceptions, there was very little any one else could add to what was already known. Amongst those intellectuals who provided useful information about the Nauroz festivals and assisted in many other ways are: Asadullah Walwalji, editor of *Andi-sha*, who was instrumental in introducing me to a circle of Uzbek and Tajik intellectuals

⁴ Colonel Warburton to H. M. Durand ('Turkistan Atrocities'), 21 July 1889, India Office Library and Records, Secret Letters and Enclosures from India, L/P&S/7/58, 145-147.

and journalists. I have referred to this group in my footnotes as the 'Andisha Circle', since a number of round table discussions about the shrine, Nauroz and Gul-i Surkh were held in Walwalji's office. Ishaq Nigargah, formerly lecturer in Kabul university, as well as other members of his clan, provided me with a number of salient pieces of folklore, various additional verses of the ballad, *Mullah Muhammad Jan*, as well as introductions to several knowledgeable individuals and valuable references to a number of Persian works related to Nauroz and Balkh. Sayyid Muhai al-Din Gauhari, great-grandson of Sayyid Ishan Uraq, sometime ruler of Mazar-i Sharif for the Amir of Bukhara and *pir* of an important sub-order of Naqshbandiyya Sufism, provided information about Sufi orders in northern Afghanistan as well as introductions to religious elites, particularly the spiritual heirs of Khalifa Darulaman in Khwaja Katal. Agha Toghra, formerly Member of Parliament for Maimana during the reign of Zahir Shah, facilitated my work in the shrine at Mazar-i Sharif and provided introductions to government officials. 'Abd al-Karim Toghali, a local historian from Andkhui, Dr. Habibullah Habi and Dr. Rahim Ibrahim of the Faculty of Dari literature and language, Balkh University provided information on *ishans*, Sufism and folklore. Isma'il Akbar, editor of *Neda-yi Islam*, kindly provided me with several pages of hand-written notes concerning various shrines and traditions associated with Hazrat 'Ali and folk practices related to Gul-i Surkh and Janda Bala. Other historical and folk lore material were provided by: Dr. Wahidi, formerly editor of the Afghanistan Historical Society and currently (1998) head of the Anjuman-i 'Ali Sher Nawai in Shibarghan; Agha 'Kishlaqi', President of the Ministry of Information and Culture, Juzjan province; 'Abd al-Ghafar Baiyani, formerly of the Farighunid Publishing House, Shibarghan; Majid Bai and Engineer Ya'qub of Ghulbiyan in Gurziwan; Agha 'Matin-i Andkhui' and Dr. Barna Asifi of Maimana. Some of the notes taken in Maimana and Gurziwan during 1997 and 1978, and which have remained unpublished to this point, have been incorporated into the thesis.

Oriental manuscripts and publications

The discovery of the remains of 'Ali b. Abi Talib during the Saljuq period and their subsequent recovery in the reign of Sultan Husain Baiqara, are related in nearly contemporary Arabic and Persian sources and examined by Prof. McChesney in his book, *Waqf in Central Asia* (Princeton, 1991). The first discovery, however, is based on a single Arabic source, that of the visiting Andalusian pilgrim, al-Gharnati.⁵ Though there are difficulties with this work, there seems to be sufficient independent confirmation of certain historical references in his account to justify the belief that the outline of events as recorded in his travelogue are broadly correct. Certainly McChesney (1991) accepts al-Gharnati's account at face value. The Timurid refounding of the shrine is found in several accounts, all

⁵ Abu Hamid al-Gharnati, 1925, '*Tuhfat al-albab wa nukhbat al-a'jab*,' ed., G. Ferrand, *JA*, ccvii, 145-48.

penned within half a century of the events they record.⁶ However, whilst the earliest known account, that of Lari, is laconic and concerned with a plain historic narrative of the discovery, the works of Isfizari and Khwandamir (who followed closely the version propagated by his spiritual master, 'Abd al-Rahman Jami), clearly interpolate material that is hagiographic rather than historic.

Within a generation of the refounding of the shrine the hagiographic account of Khwandamir came to be accepted as the standard authentication narrative. According to McChesney, Muhammad Salih Wirusaji included this account, along with other details about the ancient names of Balkh and legends associated with it, in a preface to his *Haftad Mashayikh-i Balkh*, which was composed in 1003/1594-5.⁷ Unfortunately, the library of the Afghan Historical Society, where the manuscript McChesney used in 1968/69 was housed, was pillaged in 1992 and the printed edition of this work which I obtained in Kabul in 1996 (dated 1971/1350 S) does not contain this extended introduction. Mahmud b. Amir Wali Balkhi's, *Bahr al-asrar*, completed in 1050/1640, refers to Wirusaji's work and relies heavily on Khwandamir's version of the discovery. Amir Wali does, though, include a discussion of the history of Naubahar and provides useful information about the physical structure of the building (McChesney, 1991:103).⁸ No mention is made in this work, or that of Wirusaji, to Gul-i Surkh or Janda Bala. Indeed, I have been unable to locate any reference to these festivals in relation to Mazar-i Sharif in any Persian source prior to 1813, when it is mentioned in passing by 'Meer' Izzat Ullah, a British native agent.⁹ However, in Mahmud b. Amir Wali's mind the shrine of Khwaja Khairan was far more closely associated with the tradition of Naubahar and Zoroastrianism than it is today.¹⁰ If, as would seem likely, the Nauroz festivals were celebrated at the shrine at this period, it might explain this association in the *Bahr al-Asrar*. Amir Wali does record that one of the most important pilgrimage times at the shrine was during Muharram, which suggests that Shi'i rites were permitted at the sanctuary during the reign of Nazr Muhammad Khan (McChesney, 1991:103-4).¹¹ This seems to be the only occasion when specifically Shi'i rituals were permitted within the precincts of the shrine, though this was probably a short-term phenomenon, a concession on the part of Nazr Muhammad Khan to Safawid sentiment, since the Persian monarch had helped him to regain control of Balkh

⁶ 'Abd al-Ghafūr Lari, 1971 (1349 S), *Tārīkhcha-yi Mazar-i Sharif*, ed. Mayil Harawi, Kabul; Mu'in ai-Din Muhammad Zamchi Isfizari, 1959-60, *Rawzat al-jannat fī awsaf madinat-i Harat*, 2 vols., ed. Saiyid Muhammad Kāzim-i Imam, Tehran; Ghiyas al-Din Khwandamir, 1954 (1333 S), *Habīb al-Siyar*, Tehran, vol. IV, 171-73.

⁷ On the basis of a critique of this work kindly provided by Prof. McChensey.

⁸ BA, 4th part, vol. 6, fols316a-319a, British Library Oriental and Indian Collection, Persian Mss no. 575.

⁹ *Travels in Central Asia, 1812-13*. For the background to Izzat Ullah's mission to Bukhara see, Alder (pp.122-4).

¹⁰ Today popular tradition universally locates the site of Naubahar to the area immediately around Takht-i Rustam, south of the modern paved road, just before the Balkh turn off.

¹¹ BA, *loc. cit*, fol 319b.

following the Mughal conquest of the *wilayat* in 1056/1646 (Lee, 1996:49-52; McChesney, 1991:108ff).

Afghan histories dealing with the nineteenth century history of Afghanistan, such as Faiz Muhammad Katib's *Siraj al-Tawarikh* and Mirza Ya'qub 'Ali Khafi's, *Padshahan-i Mutd^{sakh}khir-i Afghanistan* include many references to Mazar-i Sharif, but they mostly deal with the political history of the city-state of Mazar-i Sharif which emerged following the conquest of Balkh by Nadir Shah Afshar (1737-1747). This aspect of Mazar-i Sharif has been covered both by McChesney (1991) and in my previously-published work on the history of Afghanistan (Lee, 1996). In the present century, Hafiz Nur Muhammad's, *Tarikh-i Mazar-i Sharif* is our most important source for the history of the shrine. Written in 1946, the *TMS* summarises both discovery narratives and includes the texts of numerous *waqf* documents, now lost, related to the shrine (see McChesney, 1991). Despite rumours to the contrary (McChesney, 1991:71n), the shrine itself has no archival material or manuscripts. Nur Muhammad includes a short paragraph on Gul-i Surkh, publishes a number of poems composed in honour of the shrine, a list of gravestones found in the precincts as well as photographs of the shrine. Mohammad 'Ali (1958:200-1) mentions Gul-i Surkh and the miraculous properties of the Nauroz festival in passing but makes no mention of the Janda Bala whilst summarising the discovery narratives. In an earlier passage (pp. 95-6) he discusses Mazar-i Sharif's association with Naubahar, Balkh's connection with Zoroaster and Buddhism and the fact that red 'tulips' bloom in the deserts in the spring. However, when in a subsequent book (1969, pp. 55-6), he introduces the subject of Nauroz, he makes no mention of Mazar-i Sharif or of Gul-i Surkh.

European Manuscripts and Publications

Up until the publication of McChesney's study (1991) on the history and religious endowments, there was no scholarly study of the shrine at Mazar-i Sharif, though Golombek's paper (1977) did seek to address the historical problem of how the shrine came to be dedicated to 'Ali b. Abi Talib and suggests a date for the Saljuq inscription which is still preserved today in the shrine. McChesney's study, therefore, has proved an invaluable resource for the present study, inasmuch as it contains numerous references to oriental histories of the area and includes English translations of the discovery narratives. McChesney's study, however, by its very nature, has little to say about the Nauroz festivals. It is not the intention to go over ground already covered by McChesney, though the authentication narratives are examined in some detail in the first two chapters as part of our wider examination of the issue of continuity of pre-Islamic tradition and our enquiry into how it was that 'Ali b. Abi Talib came to be so closely associated with Balkh.

Numerous references to Mazar-i Sharif as a city-state are found in the Political and Secret Department annual files of the India Office (L/P&S/5 and 7), since the ruler of this amirate, who was also the *mutawalli* of the shrine of Shah-i Mardan, played an important role in the wars with Dost Muhammad Khan and his descendants from 1849 onwards. Unfortunately, very few of these India Office records contain any mention of the New Year festivals. Occasionally native agents and British officers visiting the area provide a laconic and garbled summary of the discovery narrative, presumably gleaned from the *ishans* at the shrine. Again, McChesney (1991) uses the published versions of these accounts, whilst I have already discussed and published the most important unpublished India Office records in another place (Lee, 1996).

None of the early European travellers through Afghanistan, such as Moorcroft (1979), Stirling (1991), Burnes (1834), Harlan (1842 & 1939), or Ferrier (1857), make any mention of the Mazar festivals, though all visited the town at one time or another in the first half of the last century and sometimes give a vague, inaccurate account of the history of the shrine. Harlan (1939:32-3) draws a rather unpleasant picture of the *mutawalli* of the shrine, Shuja' al-Din Mazari, as an unscrupulous, grasping and self-aggrandising individual. But by this time, at least in European eyes, the ruler of Mazar-i Sharif was not so much famed for his guardianship of the most important shrine of the region, as notorious for his alleged and probably unfounded, part in the death of Moorcroft and Guthrie in 1825 (Lee, 1996:121-2). Of all these early travellers, Burnes (1834, i:232-3) is the most culpable, since he claims to have not just visited the shrine but, "went round it as a pilgrim" and was even granted access to the inner sanctum. Yet despite the fact that he was on an intelligence-gathering mission for the East India Company, he made not the slightest attempt to put this most important of religious centres of power into its socio-political context. He gives no coherent account of the physical appearance of the shrine and fails completely to explain what its association with 'Ali is, let alone provide any information on the festivals or rituals which took place at the sanctuary. Ferrier (1857:209-10), too, is more of a hindrance than a help. He has the dubious honour of being the first in a long line of European writers to claim that the shrine was Shi'i. It is not until Vambery (1864) that any European traveller to Mazar refers even indirectly to the Nauroz and Gul-i Surkh festivals. This lack of interest in what was the most important Islamic pilgrimage site between the Hindu Kush and the Amu Darya is in stark contrast to the number of pages devoted to the city of Balkh by these same adventurers. But then Balkh, after all, was supposed (erroneously, in my view) to have been the site of ancient Bactra, and these travellers were far more interested in standing in the footprints of Alexander the Great than they ever were about a *qadamga*^h of 'Ali just down the road. Grodekoff (pp. 44-5), who passed through

Mazar-i Sharif in 1878, records that 'Russian' pilgrims still visited the shrine and repeats the Abu Muslim legend in a footnote.

The most important European source in the last century, remains the various reports of the Afghan Boundary Commission of 1884-1886. The resulting *Gazetteers*, as well as the journals of individual surveyors and reports of the mission are housed in the India Office Library. Many of these surveys and some of the journals were published in the highly secret and restricted five volume report entitled, *Records of the Intelligence Party of the Afghan Boundary Commission*. All these sources provide us with a vital resource for the study of the social, economic and religious life of what was then known as Afghan Turkistan. Surveyors' reports contain frequent references to shrines and religious elites in Afghan Turkistan, though the official *Gazetteer* entry on the shrine at Mazar-i Sharif, whilst summarising the accounts of Vambery, Grodekoff and the Boundary Commission Surveyors, adds very little to our understanding of the actual Gul-i Surkh and Nauroz festivals. However, one of the Commission's officers, Maj. C.E. Yate (1888) had an interest in Islamic architecture and archaeology and his published journal contains considerable detail of the shrine's exterior and interior structure. However, whilst he records that miracles were said to take place at the shrine "every April" he fails to link up these wonders with the Nauroz festivals:

In the present century, we are as badly served for first hand accounts of the Nauroz festivals, though many travellers to the town usually record general details about the shrine's appearance with summaries of the by now, standardised discovery myth. Byron's (1981) account of the region, written in 1934, is important inasmuch as it took place during the period of Gul Muhammad Mohmand's governorship; an individual who is universally execrated by the Turco-Tajik population of Afghan Turkistan as being responsible for a systematic attempt to Afghanise the area and who bulldozed many of the old towns and their bazaars, replacing them with a uniformly dull cruciform town plan based around a central square or park.

Two firsthand descriptions of the Janda Bala ceremony are found in N. H. Dupree's *The Road to Balkh* (pp. 48-56), and *Guide to Afghanistan* (1977:390-2) which include mentions of the festival of Gul-i Surkh, though with little detail about its traditions. Both accounts are supplemented by photographs of the *janda*-raising. As late as 1978, Louis Dupree (1978:105-6) who, amongst other scholarly activity spent many years accumulating folk lore in Afghanistan, admits that little was known about the origins and traditions of Janda Bala and Gul-i Surkh (which he confuses with Nauroz), though he is the first to suggest a link between these traditions and ancient Aryan fertility rites.

The lack of such accurate descriptions of the Nauroz festivals at Mazar-i Sharif, whether Oriental or European sources, makes it impossible to establish whether the present customs and traditions are representative of those of previous generations. There are two passing references (Olufsen, 1902; Sukhareva, 1966) to the celebration of Gul-i Surkh at the shrine of Baha al-Din Naqshband, Bukhara, being celebrated in the early decades of the present century, but neither author goes into detail about the customs of this festival. What these references lack, however, is made up by two detailed accounts of the *lala* festival in Ferghana, recorded by the Soviet ethnologist, E.M. Peshchereva (1926 & 1963).

Little systematic work has been published on popular religious culture in Afghanistan and Central Asia until the last two decades (see, L. Dupree, 1976; Utas, 1980). One of the most comprehensive surveys of shrine cults and popular religion of N.E. Afghanistan is found in the report of the Danish Pamir Expedition (Olufsen, 1904). The religious tradition of the Kaffirs of the Hindu Kush, which provides us with some clues to the origins of the Gul-i Surkh and Janda Bala, have been much studied and these findings are systematised in Jettmar's (1986) two volume work. A number of studies of shrines and Sufism in Central Asia, India and Pakistan, such as Ansari (1992); Baldick (1993); Bennigsen & Wimbush (1985); Currie (1989), to name but a few, have provided an important comparative context, as have studies of relic cults in early Christian Europe (cf. Blethel, 1972; Brown, 1981; Geary, 1979; Rollason, 1989), which is surely where the Islamic tradition of authentication and translation originated.

TRANSLITERATIONS

Oriental words and place names with a received equivalent in standard English have not been rigorously transliterated (e.g. Samarkand not Samarqand; Herat not $\text{H}\overset{a}{\text{r}}\text{at}$; shaikh not shaykh; Caliph not Khalifa—except when the term refers to the head of a Sufi Order). Arabic, Persian and Turkic words are only rigorously transliterated with under and overstrikes, when they appear as direct quotations from texts, poetry or ballads, or where their meaning is a subject of discussion. References to oriental books, manuscripts, song titles, are untransliterated in text and footnotes, but a full transliteration of Arabic and Persian works, along with their authors' name(s), appear in the bibliography. For Arabic, I have adopted the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* transliteration system with the following modifications:

ج = j rather than dj چ = ch rather than č ق = q rather than ƙ

Persian words and geographical names, even when derived from Arabic, are transliterated according to pronunciation current in Afghan Dari (e.g. *Ghiyas al-Din* not *Ghiyath al-Din*; *rauza* not *rauda*; *qazi*, not *qadi*; *nazr*, not *nadhr*). I have followed W. Ball's system of Persian transliteration from his *Archaeological Gazetteer of Afghanistan* (1982, p. 8), with the following modifications:

The Persian h , "silent 'h'" = a

The *izafi* appears as -i after consonants and -yi after vowels

The Dari vowels /i/ and /e/, not found in Iranian Persian, appear as e and é respectively.

Russian transliterations are based on the system used by the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*.

REFERENCE SYSTEM

The Harvard reference system has been used throughout this work. References to unpublished manuscripts, Encyclopaedia and early Oriental works are referenced in footnotes. In the case where one or more English translation of an oriental text is used, the translators name appears in brackets after the reference.

DATES

Where two dates are given, the first is AH, the second AD. I have followed the convention of Afghanistan Studies where AH equivalents for dates after AD 1747 are omitted. When the Afghan solar (*shamsi*) calendar is referred to, the AD date appears first followed by the *shamsi* date in brackets followed by 'S': e.g. 1997 (1376 S).

ABBREVIATIONS

Journals and Reference works

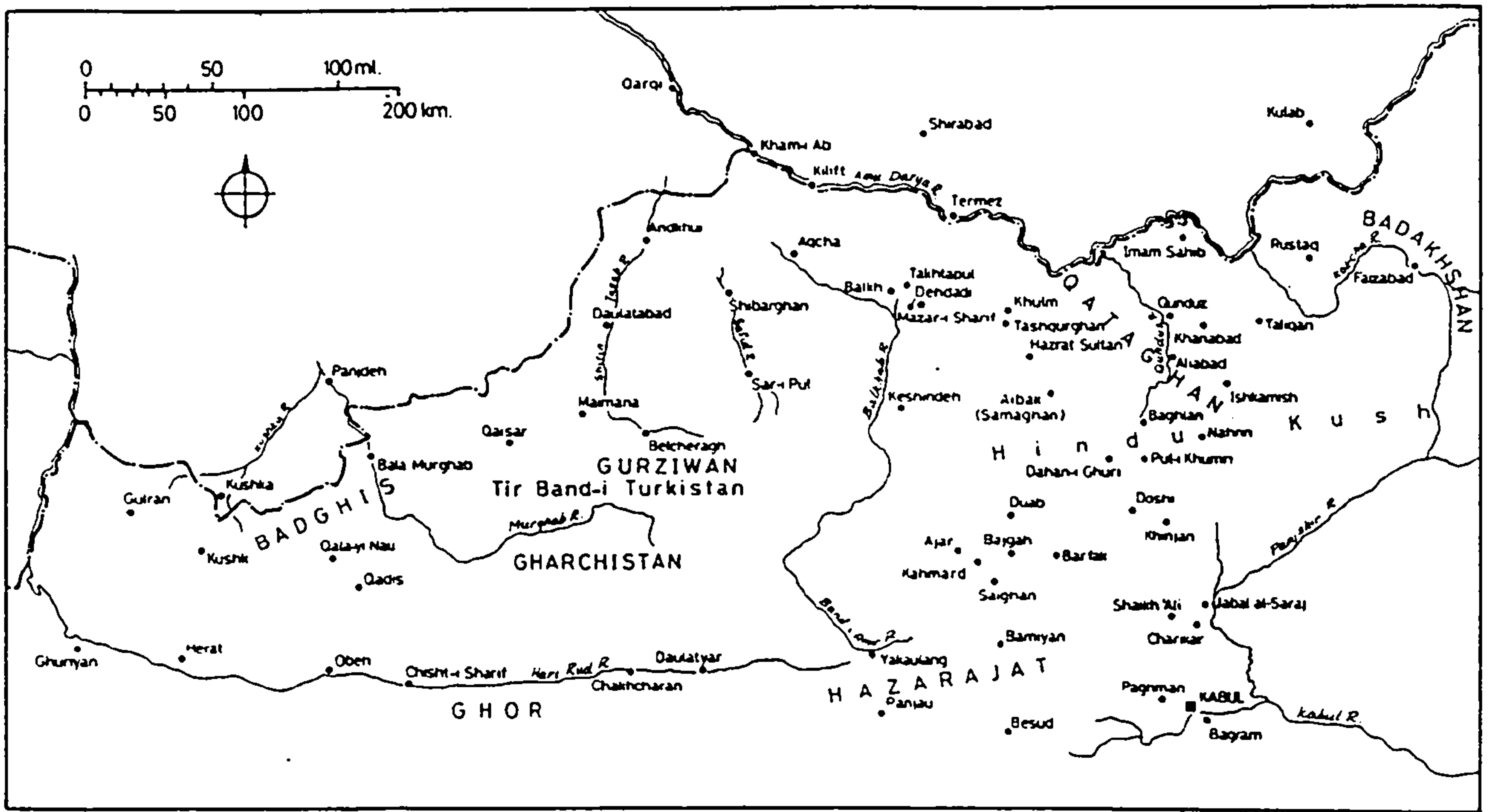
- BBIPS — *Bulletin of the British Institute of Persian Studies*.
 BSOAS — *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*.
 CHI — *Cambridge History of Iran*.
 EI(1) — *Encyclopaedia of Islam, 1st edition*.
 EI(2) — *Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd edition*.
 EIr — *Encyclopaedia Iranica*.
 JA — *Journal Asiatique*.
 JAOS — *Journal of the American Oriental Society*.
 JRA — *Journal of Religion in Africa*.
 JRAS — *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*.
 JRASB — *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal*.
 MW — *The Muslim World*.
 RSS — *Religion, State and Society*.
 SAS — *South Asian Studies (Journal of the Society of S. Asian Studies)*.
 SEI — *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*.
 SI — *Studia Iranica*.

Oriental texts and manuscripts

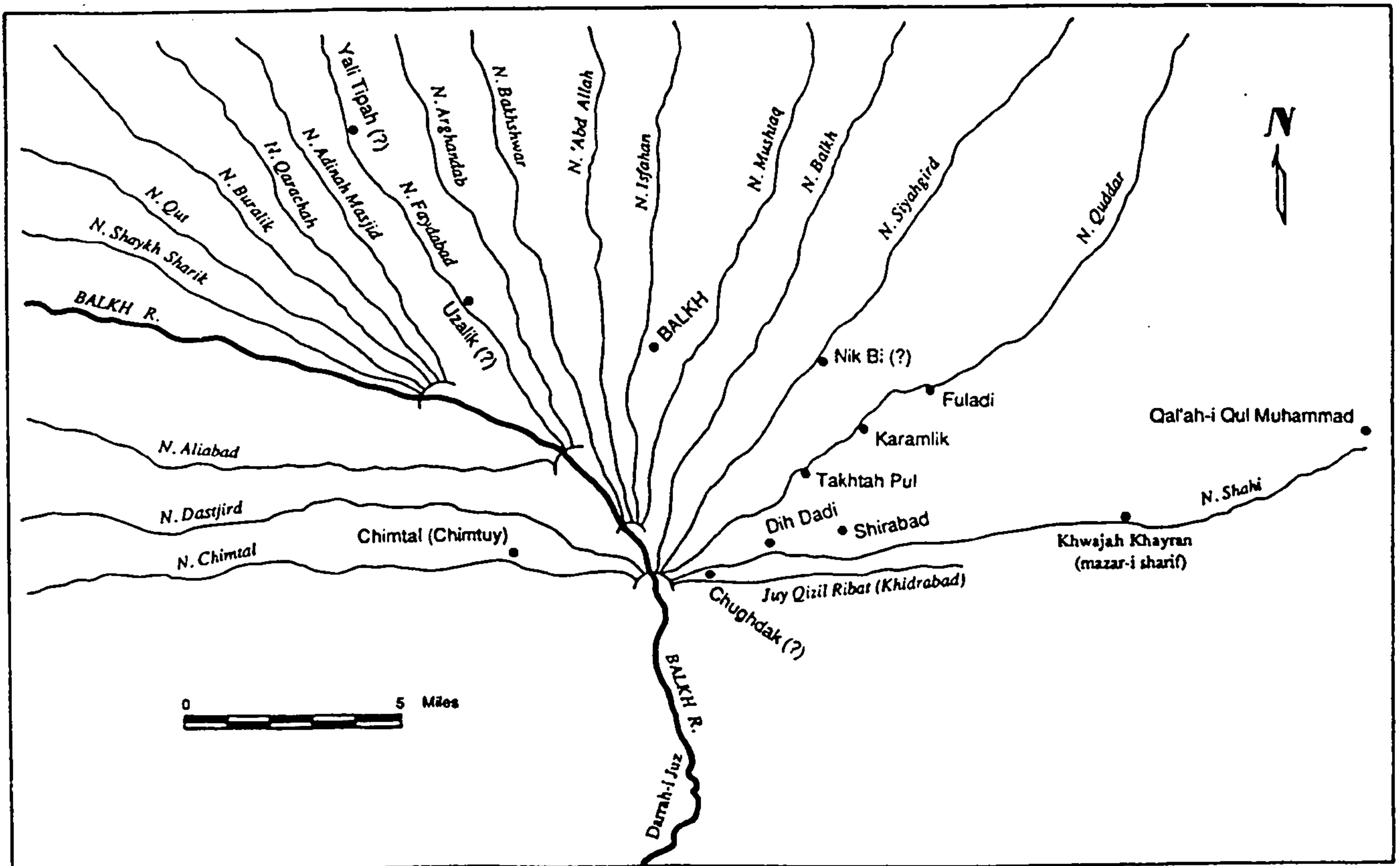
- CAN — al-Biruni, *Chronology of Ancient Nations*.
 BA — Mahmud b. Amir Wali Balkhi, *Bahr al-Asrar*.
 BN — Zahir al-Din Babur, *Babur Nama*.
 BRWW — Hüen Tsiang, *Buddhist Records of the Western World*.
 DDS — Lucian, *De Dea Syria*.
 EAE — al-Tabari, *Early Arab Empire*.
 HA — *Hudud al-'Alam*
 HMB — Muhammad, *Haftad mashayekh-i Balkh*.
 HS — Khwanadamir, *Habib al-siyar*.
 NAN — Muhammad Kazim, *Nama-yi 'alam-ara-yi Nadiri*.
 PMA — Khafi, *Padshahan-i muta'akhirin-i Afghanistan*.
 SN — Firdowsi, *Shahnama*.
 ST — Faiz Muhammad Kātib, *Saraj al-tawarikh*.
 TA — al-Gharnati, *Tuhfat al-albab*.
 TB — Narshakhi, *Tarikh-i Bukhara*.
 TM — Hafiz Nur Muhammad, *Tarikh-i Mazar-i Sharif*.
 TMS — Mawlana 'Abd al-Ghafur Lari, *Tarikhcha-yi Mazar-i Sharif*.
 TN — Juzjani, *Tabaqat-i Nasiri*.
 VR — Fakr al-Din As'ad Gurgāni, *Vis u Ramin*.



MAP 1: Afghanistan and Central Asia



MAP 2: Northern Afghanistan



MAP 3: The Hazhda Nahr (18 Canals) of Balkh c. 17/18th century (from McChesney, 1991)



PLATE 1: The shrine of 'Ali b. Abi Talib, Mazar-i Sharif, spring 1996



PLATE 2: Pilgrims entering the inner shrine during the 1996 Nauroz celebrations

CHAPTER 1

THE SALJUQS AND AL-KHAIR

Under normal circumstances, the establishment of a new shrine in the mediaeval Islamic world, especially on the remote fringes of the empire, would have hardly created much of a stir in the Dar al-Islam since, by this time, shrines as a focus of religious devotion were endemic and as much a part of the everyday life of Muslims as they were for Christians in Europe. Yet the discovery made near Balkh in or around 530/1135-6, was so extraordinary that it called into question a widely accepted historical tradition related to one of the most important figures of early Islam, 'Ali b. Abi Talib (d. 40/660), the Fourth Caliph and cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad.

In c. 530/1135-6 a certain religious pressure group in the villages around Balkh (Maps 1, 2), at that period a distant frontier post on the margins of the Eastern Islamic Empire, claimed that they had had dreams which led them to unearth the uncorrupted remains of 'Ali b. Abi Talib. Despite the fact that there was nothing which could be regarded as historical evidence to back up the claim and that Najaf, in Iraq, was already reckoned by most Muslims to be the last resting place of 'Ali, a shrine was erected over the spot and within a short space of time pilgrims from as far afield as Samarkand, Khwarazm and Persia were visiting the site and had come to regard it as the authentic grave of the Imam.

Even more extraordinary is the fact that despite the vicissitudes of conquest, destruction and neglect, and the problem of its historicity, this cult not only sur-

vived, but today is arguably the most important shrine in Afghanistan. Such is the popularity and devotion surrounding the place, now called Mazar-i Sharif (Maps 2,3), that thousands of pilgrims not just from Afghanistan, but Pakistan, Iran and many Middle Eastern countries too, gather at the shrine to celebrate the Persian New Year, or Nauroz,¹ which is the most important annual festival held at the cult centre. As such, the stories, myths and cult that grew up around the shrine at al-Khair/Mazar-i Sharif provide us with a fascinating insight into the methods and techniques developed to satisfy the needs of localised religious devotion and how Islamic hagiography constructs the framework of mythological justification around relics, whose authenticity has little or no historical evidence to validate them. Indeed, in the case of al-Khair/Mazar-i Sharif, the authentication of the relics went ahead in defiance of Islamic traditions concerning the grave of 'Ali b. Abi Talib. As such, the study of the shrine, festivals and cult at Mazar-i Sharif provides a graphic example of how this dichotomy, between sacred and profane history, is reconciled in order to satisfy the demands of religious fervour. At the same time, the presence of the shrine and the tensions which the very presence of the shrine created, were exploited, on occasions quite ruthlessly, to serve the ends of sectarian and political elites. Furthermore, both the location of the shrine of 'Ali and its annual festivals supplied the necessary legitimisation whereby ancient, pre-Islamic, Bactrian religious traditions could be continued into the Islamic era. The shrine of Mazar-i Sharif provides us with a well documented model of how such saint and relic cults facilitated the process of Islamisation through the absorption, adaptation and integration of 'alien' but indigenous religious tradition.

¹ Nauroz is a fixed feast, based on a pre-Islamic calendar which dates back to at least Achaemenid times and falls when the sun enters the zodiacal sign of Aries, i.e. on the vernal equinox. For a discussion of the Zoroastrian/Persian calendar and the changes to it over the millenia, see Boyce (1970); De Blois (1996).

The discovery of the tomb at al-Khair appears as an appendix in Abu Hamid al-Andalusi al-Gharnati's, *Tuhfat al-albab*,² which relates to his pilgrimage through the Middle East and Khurasan. Written some two decades after al-Gharnati had visited Balkh, his account provides us with a detailed record of how the shrine of 'Ali b. Abi Talib was first established.³

We conclude this book with some wonderful stories (*ḥikāyāt 'ajiba*) about the Commander of the Faithful, 'Ali b. Abi Talib—May God honour him! One of the most wonderful stories concerns the tomb of his—on whom be peace—and its appearance in the year 530 [AH] in the vicinity of Balkh in a large village called al-Khair. A number of the village's righteous people (*min ahlihā al-sāliḥīn*)⁴ saw the Prophet—on him be peace—in a dream in which he said to them, "My uncle's son, 'Ali b. Abi Talib, is [buried] in this place." And he pointed out a spot near the village. The dream recurred and the number of people who experienced it increased until more than four hundred people, all of them righteous people of al-Khair and other places (*mawāḍi' ukhar*),⁵ had seen it.

So they went to Qumāj, the ruler (*ṣāhib*) of Balkh during the time of [Sultan] Sanjar, and related to him what they had witnessed and heard from the Prophet—God's peace and prayers be upon him. He convened the 'ulama and told them what [the "righteous people"] had said and they had witnessed. The 'ulama responded, "The Prophet—on him be peace—said, 'Whoever sees me, truly sees me, for Satan cannot take my form.'" Then one of the jurists (*faqīh*),⁶ amongst them said, "Amir, this is absurd and the Messenger of God does not say absurd things. 'Ali b. Abi Talib was killed in al-Kufa. People disagree as to where he was buried; some say he was buried in Kardhadhūdah. Still others that he was buried at al-Ghadir and a shrine erected on the site. So how could he have come to Balkh, a distance of a thousand *farsakhs*⁷ and more? This is absurd."

At this the people left. But at midnight, that jurist came out of his house accompanied by his children and associates and crying to be brought to the Amir Qumaj. Weeping and appealing for help, he was admitted to the presence of Amir Qumaj, who said, "What's the matter with you?" He replied, "Oh Amir, look at my face and body." They examined him by the light of a candle and saw that his face and body were black and blue from being beaten with a stick. He began to weep and Amir Qumaj said, "Oh, imam and shaykh, who did this to you?" He replied, "I was sleeping at home when a group of 'Alawites appeared bearing signs and tokens and all in white. There were young men, middle-aged, elderly, and children. They said, 'Are you the one who called the Messenger of God—on him be God's prayers and peace—a liar? And you say the Commander of the Faithful is not here?' Then they seized me and dragged me out all the while cursing me until they brought me to an open tomb. There I saw the Commander of the Faithful, 'Ali b. Abi Talib, sitting in the tomb. His hair and beard were white. They said, 'Is this not the Commander of the Faithful?' They then began to kick and hit me until I was sure I was going to die. I turned and said, 'Oh Commander of those who believe in God. Have mercy on me.' At this he gave a sign to them with his hand and they let me go. Then I woke up and all my limbs felt as if they were broken. I begged God's forgiveness and repented of what I had said."

² al Gharnati, *TA*, 145-47.

³ After McChesney (1991:27-8). I am grateful for a number of significant revisions to McChesney's translation provided by Dr. E. Sirriyeh.

⁴ McChesney (1991) has "leading citizens," but "righteous people" is correct and has been substituted where this phrase is used throughout the account (after E. Sirriyeh).

⁵ McChesney has "another place" but the noun is plural.

⁶ "Lawyers," McChesney (1991).

⁷ One *farsakh* (or *farsang*, *parsang*) is approximately 5 kms.

When he heard this, [the amir] arose and with his troops went out to that sacred spot. They dug down where the Prophet—God's peace and prayers on him—had directed them to. They discovered a tomb on which were two marble panels (*lawḥān*) and the Commander of the Faithful within. He was completely intact and even his shroud was whole. The amir and all the 'ulama saw him. Beneath his side, they found a piece of red brick on which had been written with a finger: "This is one who loves [*muḥibb*] the Prophet, 'Ali—May God honour him."⁸

A large *mashhad* was built over him,⁹ finer and more beautiful than the *mashhad* at al-Ghadir. The piece of brick was placed in a silk/brocade purse and hung in the *miḥrāb* of the shrine. Most of those who had had the dream are still alive (*ba'd fī 'l-ḥayāt*).¹⁰ People visited it from all the cities of Khurasan as well as Balkh and Samargand. Amongst the most marvellous of tombs is the tomb of the Commander of the Faithful that appears in the vicinity of Balkh. And it was not known to anyone until after [the year] 500 [A.H.].¹¹

Al-Gharnati's account is both extensive and shot through with evident enthusiasm for the discovery. It is clear that the Andalusian writer accepted the authenticity of the site and seeks to reinforce the visionary authentication sequence by claiming that many of the "righteous people" who had had the visitation and dreams were still alive at the time of writing. It is important to bear in mind, however, that certain internal problems in the narrative suggest that his account should be treated with a certain amount of caution. First of all, al-Gharnati never claims himself to have been an eyewitness of these events, though he does imply that his narrative is based on the recollections of at least some of the "righteous people" who forced the Balkh authorities and the 'ulama' to authenticate the grave. At least twenty years had elapsed between al-Gharnati's visit to Balkh and the penning of his account, sufficient time to have allowed these individuals and other devotees of the shrine to have developed the discovery narrative into an elaborate miracle story which, amongst other things, sought to deflect the kinds of criticism levelled against the shrine's authenticity by sceptics personified in the Balkh *faqih* of al-Gharnati's re-

⁸ Or "show him regard" (Golombek, 1977:335).

⁹ McChesney has, "He built a large shrine on the spot."

¹⁰ McChesney has "lived long lives" but this is an erroneous translation (after E. Sirriyeh).

¹¹ Nur Muhammad *TMS*, 33-42. In the late nineteenth century, al-Gharnati's account was still being repeated to enquirers by the shaikhs of the shrine, though it had mutated to incorporate elements of both the Saljuq and Timurid tradition, see for example Yate, (p. 28); Byron (pp. 240-1) and many others.

cord. Such a process of mythologisation of history we know took place subsequently under the Timurids of Herat following the rediscovery of the grave.¹² Certain internal problems suggest some confusion of sources, for example the ‘Doubting Thomas’ is shown an open grave in his vision of ‘Ali, but the next day Qumaj and his troops went to the area and are said to have “dug down” at the spot shown in the vision and only then found the remains of the Imam.

The narrative appears as a kind of appendix at the end of the *Tuhfat al-albab* and is not included in the section dealing with al-Gharnati’s time in Balkh. This could indicate that this section was added either at a later date than the rest of the work or, alternatively, it has been appended by a copyist of the autograph. Such hagiographic appendices, however, are not unusual and are found in Christian narratives of relic discoveries. The Byzantine historian Sozomen, for example, in his narrative of the reign of Theodosius II, includes at the end of his work an account of the translation of the relics of Zechariah (Brown:92). François de Blois,¹³ noting that the Arabic of this section is rather more ornate and flowery than the plainer narrative style used in the earlier travelogue, suggests that it may be a later insertion by a copyist sympathetic to Shi’ism or who had heard the story and decided to include it at the end of al-Gharnati’s account. Furthermore, the ‘stock’ account of the defeat of the bookish jurist by the inspiration of the visionary, fits in well with traditional hagiographies which tend to include a confrontation between the proponents of external law and interpretation¹⁴ and gnostic subjectivism.¹⁵ The introduction of Alawites in this section is somewhat out of character too, since there is

¹² Timurid sources claimed that al-Gharnati obtained his information about the discovery from the Samarkandian traditionalist, Imam Abu Hafs ‘Umar b. Muhammad (McChesney, 1991:30). This seems to have been a Timurid invention designed to reinforce the authenticity of the site. The Timurids of Herat had similarly exploited the reputation of Shaikh ‘Abdullah Ansari, whose grave was at Guzargah outside Herat, for similar purposes, see Subtelny (1994) and chap. 2 below.

¹³ Verbal communication during a discussion of the *TA* in the Royal Asiatic Society.

¹⁴ *zāhir*.

¹⁵ *bātin*.

some question as to whether this sect had any followers in the Balkh area, and casts further doubt on the date of this passage though, as we shall discuss below, there is a possible explanation for this reference.

On the other hand, certain facts in the account which can be cross-referenced encourage us to believe that the narrative is based on local sources and that its essential elements contain a core of facts which are probably based on information al-Gharnati acquired during his travels in Balkh. Amir Qumaj, ruler of Balkh for Sultan Sanjar, was formerly a slave¹⁶ of Sultan Sanjar who was killed at Ragh-i Zar, between Herat and Firozkoh, in or around 559/1163, during a battle with the Ghurid ruler, Ghiyas al-Din.¹⁷ We also know that during the Saljuq period other elaborate shrines associated with the 'Alids and Shi'i Imams were being constructed in the Balkh area (see below; Bivar, 1974). Furthermore, it can be shown that aspects of the confrontation between the visionaries, the '*ulama*' and the state authorities reflect a tension which was part of a general battle for the hearts and minds of the Muslims of Central Asia during this era. The village name, al-Khair, is certainly authentic, for the name of the site survived, albeit in a modified form, as Khwaja Khairan down to the Timurid period and even into the present day. Al-Gharnati's narrative includes a detailed description of the grave, what was found inside it and the interior of the Saljuq shrine. As we know that the Andalusian visited Balkh during his travels, it is reasonable to conclude that he prayed at the shrine and that his description of the building is based on first hand experience. Doubtless it was in Balkh, too, where al-Gharnati was regaled with the recollections of some of the "righteous people" who were still living at the time of his pilgrimage. At the same time, it is to be expected that in the intervening years since

¹⁶ *ghulâm*.

¹⁷ see, *CHI*, v, 163.

the discovery and al-Gharnati's arrival, the historical element in the discovery narrative had been elaborated and expanded both by eye-witnesses of the event and the devotees who subsequently attached themselves to the shrine. Thus al-Gharnati's record, if based on stories gleaned during his stay in Balkh, would not preclude the possibility of interpolation by local people who sought to emphasise the prestige of their shrine by elaborating on the historical facts.

Al-Gharnati's narrative shows that the debate over the authenticity of Najaf as the true burial site of 'Ali b. Abi Talib continued to rage even on the remotest frontiers of the Muslim world. Though today it is almost universally accepted by Muslims that Najaf, some ten kilometres from Kufa in Iraq, is 'Ali b. Abi Talib's last resting place, this was not the case in the first centuries which followed the Imam's assassination in 40/661. At the time of 'Ali's death, the actual place where he was buried was said to have been kept secret by his followers, for at the time he was at war with the Umayyad Caliph, Mu'awiya, and it was feared that if his grave was known the body might be exhumed and desecrated by his enemies (Le Strange, 1904:76-7).¹⁸ Consequently, over the ensuing decades there was considerable doubt as to the whereabouts of 'Ali's remains and al-Gharnati's account shows a good knowledge of the various locations which featured in the dispute.

Apart from the site at Najaf, it was claimed by some that he was buried in the town of Kufa itself, in a corner near the *qibla* of the Friday mosque (D.M. Donaldson:54; Le Strange, 1905:77). Another tradition stated that his body had been secretly interred in Medina near the grave of Fatima, 'Ali's wife and daughter of Muhammad (D.M. Donaldson:54).¹⁹ Others believed Qasr al-Imara to be the

¹⁸ L.V. Vaglieri, 'Ali b. Abi Talib'; E. Honigmann & C.E. Bosworth, 'al-Nad̲jaf'; *EI*(2), i, 385, *EI*(2), vii, 859-60.

¹⁹ Donaldson, *loc. cit.* states that this tradition persisted down to the sixteenth century. Cf. Honigmann & Bosworth, *loc. cit.*

authentic location.²⁰ In the fourteenth century Mustawfi promoted, apparently for the first time, a legend that linked the official authentication of the Najaf site to the 'Abbasid Caliph, Harun al-Rashid (170/786-193/809) (Le Strange, 1905:76-7).²¹ According to his account, in 175/791 Harun went hunting in the Kufa area where he chased his quarry into a thicket but despite all attempts, the Caliph was unable to persuade his horse to follow the beast into the bush. When enquiry was made regarding this unusual circumstance, the local people informed him that this was the burial place of 'Ali b. Abi Talib and consequently its sanctuary was inviolable for man and beast. Harun al-Rashid is said to have ordered the site to be dug, the body of the Imam was discovered "lying there wounded" (D.M. Donaldson:57) and a shrine immediately erected over the spot (Le Strange, 1905:76-7). Al-Tabari and other early Arabic historians do not mention this event under the year in question and Mustawfi's account suggests a belated attempt by the Shi'a to end the debate about 'Ali's last resting place by the creation of a myth in which a Caliph, not particularly noted for his Shi'i sympathies (Kennedy, 1981:128),²² unwittingly becomes the instrument by which Najaf's authenticity is established. Interestingly enough, the circumstances surrounding the burial and rediscovery of the tomb of 'Ali as recorded by Mustawfi, bears a strong resemblance to al-Gharnati's earlier account of the discovery at al-Khair.²³

In 236/850-51, the anti-Mu'tazilite Caliph, al-Mutawakkil (232/847-247/861), discovering that the villages around the tomb of Husain were one of the strongest centres of 'Alid underground activity:

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Vaglieri, *loc. cit.*

²² The discovery myth, involving a 'king' and hunting, has strong Mazdean and Iranian mythology overtones. Kufa was once part of the Sasanid empire, centred on Hirah with its two palaces of al-Sadir and al-Khwarnak. The later edifice is said to have been built for the famous hunter, Bahram Gur, and was used as a hunting lodge by the Caliphs, see Le Strange (1905:75-6).

²³ Mustawfi records that healing of the infirm and crippled are said to have taken place here on "the Night of Revival" in the same manner as at al-Khayr, a tradition which continues in both

... ordered that the grave of al-Husayn b. Ali and the residences and palaces surrounding it be destroyed. The site of his grave was to be ploughed, sown and irrigated, and people were to be prevented from visiting it. It is reported that an agent of the security police announced in the area: "Whomever we find near al-Husayn's grave after three days we shall send to the prison." People fled and refrained from going to the grave.²⁴

No mention, however, is made of Najaf, a tomb to 'Ali, or of pilgrimage to the site being prohibited, which one would expect to have been included in Mutawakkil's anti-Shi'i ordinance if Najaf was, indeed, recognised by then as the site of the Imam's last resting place. In fact, it is not until half a century later that a building of any substance appears to have been erected over the Najaf grave site under the patronage of Abu al-Haija', also known as 'Abdullah b. Hamdan b. Hamdun, governor of Mosul from 292/904 (d. 315/926) (Le Strange, 1905:77; Peters:47).²⁵ In 366/977 the Buyid ruler erected a mausoleum over the grave, though pilgrimage to the *mashhad* at "al-Ghani" is mentioned as early as 360/970-1.²⁶ Within a generation of this event, the settlement of Najaf had grown into a town which had prospered from the pilgrimage trade. In 443/1051 it was burnt down by an anti-Shi'i mob from Baghdad but was quickly rebuilt, for in 476/1086 the shrine was visited by Malik Shah and his *Wazir* (Le Strange, 1905:77-8). The area immediately around the shrine became an ever-expanding cemetery for pious Shi'is, who desired above all that their last resting place might be as close to the tomb of their Imam as was possible (D.W. Donaldson:54-5; Le Strange, 1905:77-8). The lavishing of state patronage on the shrine and its interior seems to have been a deliberate attempt to remove any doubts that Najaf's claim to be the last resting place of the Imam was authentic.

places down to the present (D.M. Donaldson:58; Le Strange, 1905:78).

²⁴ Al-Tabari, *Ta'rikh*, xxxiv, 110-11; cf. Le Strange (1905:78).

²⁵ Al-Tabari, *Ta'rikh*, *loc. cit.*, is silent about this event, though he does mention the campaigns of Abu al-Haija'.

²⁶ Miskawaihi, iii, 426.

Thus, by the time the events at al-Khair took place, Najaf was long-established as the final resting place of 'Ali, if not on the basis of history or archaeology, certain as far as the Shi'a were concerned and doubtless, too, the majority of ordinary Muslims. This conviction had been endorsed by numerous acts of state patronage and by pilgrimage of important officials, even rulers, to the grave. However, al-Gharnati's account makes it plain that doubts about Najaf's authenticity persisted throughout the Muslim world. Another Spanish Muslim pilgrim, Ibn Jubayr, for example, who visited the Najaf shrine a few years after al-Gharnati's expedition to Balkh, hardly provides a ringing endorsement of the authenticity of the site.

A parasang (*sic*) to the west of the city [al-Kufa] is the famous shrine named after 'Ali ibn Abi Talib - may God hold him in His favour - *said* to be the place where the camel that bore him in his winding sheet knelt, and to hold his tomb. God best knows the truth of this.²⁷

One possible reason for the continued element of uncertainty is the fact that the establishment of the *mashhad* at Najaf and its claims, was an act more of political expediency and sectarian exploitation, than a recognition of historical realities. It was an undisputed fact that 'Ali b. Abi Talib had been assassinated in or near the mosque in Kufa and that two decades later, in 61/680, his younger son, Husain, had also been killed, along with a number of followers, at Karbala', a site also near Kufa, an area well-known for its Shi'i and pro-Persian proclivities and which caused much trouble for both Umayyad and 'Abbasid Caliphs (Kennedy, 1981:198-213; Lassner:79-87). At the same time, to the Kufans, 'Ali and Husain were not just religious leaders. They were symbols of Iraqi opposition to Syrian domination since their deaths were a blow not only to the Shi'a cause, but resulted in the loss of Iraq's independence (Wellhausen:557). During almost a century of Umayyad rule, the Shi'a population of Iraq, in particular, was subject to frequent

²⁷ Ibn Jubayr, *Travels*, 220, my emphasis.

persecution and the region was the centre of a number of rebellions which were put down with draconian severity by the authorities in Damascus. When the 'Abbasid propaganda began, the Shi'a community of Iraq and Persia eagerly embraced the cause of 'Abbas, especially when the propagandists deceived them by promising that they would establish a Caliphate of the Banu Hashim.²⁸ The Umayyads were eventually overthrown by a confederation of persianised Arab colonists from the eastern provinces of the empire, disgruntled Shi'is and non-Arabs from Persia, Khurasan, Khwarazm and Transoxiana some of whose orthodoxy was, to say the least, questionable (Lassner:108-112; Shaban:155-8; Wellhausen, ch. VII;). Kufa was a major centre of the secret 'Abbasid propaganda and rebelled against Umayyad control at a relatively early stage in the campaign (Lassner:80, 144-5).²⁹ It was in Kufa, too, where Abu'l-'Abbas was installed as the first of the 'Abbasid Caliph (132/749) (Lassner:144-5).³⁰

For the Shi'a, though, ^{Abu'l} 'Abbas' accession proved to be a bitter blow to their aspirations, for it was clear that they had been deceived. In an attempt to try and make the acceptance of the line of Abu'l-'Abbas more palatable to disillusioned Shi'is, the 'Abbasid apologists played the nationalistic card, asserting that they had freed Iraq from a century of Syrian domination. During 'Abbas' inauguration ceremony, Da'ud b. ^{Abu'l} 'Ali, 'Abbas' paternal uncle (Lassner:143-4), disingenuously declared to the Kufans that their city was "the halting-place of our love, the lodging of our affection," its population "most worthy of our generosity," and that the city itself was the "centre-point" of the new dynasty.³¹ These promises, however, were made merely to secure the temporary support of the Kufans at a critical time in the

²⁸ Both 'Ali and Abu 'Abbas were members of the Banu Hashim clan and so the Shi'a were deceived into believing the 'Abbasids would give the Caliphate to one of 'Ali's descendants when, in fact, they had no intention of doing so.

²⁹ Al-Tabari, *Ta'rikh*, xxvii, 141-3.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 152-3.

³¹ *Ibid*, 155-7.

'Abbasid campaign. As soon as power was firmly in their hands, Kufa was abandoned and ignored (Lassner:145-7). The early 'Abbasids established a series of temporary capital cities in north-central Iraq until, finally, *al-Mansur* ordered the building of a custom-built city at Baghdad (Lassner:80-1, 145-62; Le Strange, 1924:6). Shi'is were thus once again relegated to the status of marginalised sectarians by a Caliphate which was increasingly dominated by Sunni traditionalists, whilst the Kufans demonstrated their disillusionment by a series of 'Alid-inspired rebellions which turned the city into one of the most "heavily policed" urban areas under 'Abbasid control (Kennedy, 1981:203ff.)

Kufa, for the Shi'a, was thus an important symbol of their religious and political aspirations, whilst, at the same time, it served as a painful reminder to them of the generations of treachery, betrayal and persecution that they had been forced to endure at the hands of successive Caliphs and the Traditionalist establishment. This explains why, long before the 'Abbasid revolution, the grave of Husain b. 'Ali at Karbala', the authenticity of which was unquestioned,³² was a major focus of Shi'i pilgrimage and why the anti-Shi'i Caliph, al-Mutawakkil, ordered its demolition. Nor is it surprising that the Kufans sought to exploit the tragic association their city had with 'Ali b. Abi Talib by promoting the claims of adjacent Najaf as the Imam's last resting place over against those of Medina which had no significant Shi'i presence (Kennedy, 1981:202-3).

Abu al-Haija' probably felt it better to patronise the shrine as a sop to Kufan-Shi'i sentiment, in an attempt to quell disturbances in the area. For during this period the Islamic empire was plagued by religious and political turmoil, precipitated by the election of the ineffectual child-Caliph, al-Muqtadir

³² In Damascus there was a mosque which claimed to contain the graves of both Hasan and Husain, Ibn Jubayr, *Travels*, 293.

(295/907-320/932). Iraq and Syria, in particular, were ravaged by Shi'i Qarāmatians, one of whose retreats³³ was located east of Kufa. By the second decade of the 4th/10th century these revolutionaries were so powerful they were able to destroy the Meccan pilgrimage caravans for two years running (311/923-312/925), as well as sack Basra (311/923). The following year Mecca itself was plundered and the black stone carried off. In 312/925 Kufa suffered the same fate as Basra.³⁴ Despite the activities of these sectarians, however, the government of al-Muqtadir was tolerant of moderate Imamīs, and some 'Twelver' Shi'is held important posts in Baghdad during al-Muqtadir's Caliphate (Hussain:124-6). Their influence was doubtless a significant factor in the decision to establish a shrine over the site at Najaf, for the erection of such a shrine under official patronage would have been welcomed by, amongst others, the Qarāmatians, who were on the extreme, *ghulat*, or *batiniyya* wing of Shi'ism. In so doing, the authorities cleverly ingratiated themselves to moderate Shi'is in the area whilst, at the same time, providing a reminder to the revolutionary Qarāmatians that Kufa was under the protection of the Imams and thus, hopefully, deterring further acts of aggression against Iraq. With the caravan routes to Mecca interrupted and the most sacred of all objects in the sanctuary having been removed, the Kufans were in a position to reinforce the emerging Shi'i tradition that the tombs of the Imams around their city were equal in status to a pilgrimage to Mecca itself (Husted:275). At the same time Najaf and Karbala' offered an alternative, and far less dangerous, focus of religious devotion whilst the additional revenue brought in by the pilgrims boosted the local economy after the Qarāmatian depredations.

³³ *dar al-hijra*.

³⁴ L. Massignon, 'Karmatians,' *SEI*, 218-9; K.V. Zetterstéen; C.E. Bosworth, 'al-Muqtadir', *EI*(2), vii, 541-2.

This period of Islamic history was also one of transition for the Shi'a, for it was uncertain who led their community and who spoke on behalf of the Imams. As a consequence of persecution, the Imams had adopted a life of secrecy and seclusion, revealing their whereabouts only to a few close confidants. According to Shi'i pietistic tradition, following the death of the eleventh Imam, al-Hasan b. 'Ali al-'Askari, in 260/873-4, his son and successor, Muhammad, retreated into total seclusion, or occultation (*al-ghaiba*), with the consequence that the leadership of the Shi'a community was left in the care of a child who was in virtual occultation for most of his life (Halm, 1996:28-30; Hussain:65-78). In the absence of visible contact with the Imams, the shrine at Najaf provided the Shi'a with a physical symbol of the Divine Light of the greatest of all the Imams (Hussain:1). For pilgrims, furthermore, the erection of a *mashhad* at Najaf had a pragmatic aspect for now the graves of 'Ali and Husain both lay within a short journey of the same city, and that within the compass of a friendly power. Pilgrimage to the graves of the two most important figures of Shi'ism was thus made easier by virtue of their proximity to one another. Not only so, but there was less chance of a Qarmatian attack on pilgrims bound for these two holy places, even when the caravans heading for Mecca and Medina were considered fair game.

The erection of the shrine to Imam 'Ali revived an ancient association this site had with pilgrimage, one which had suffered a heavy blow with the coming of Islam. From ancient times it had been held that it was at Kufa that Noah (Nuh) had his house, built the ark and from where the "water welled from the reservoir of the earth" (Le Strange, 1905:75).³⁵ Enoch (Idris), too, is said to have lived in the area,³⁶ and it was here that ancient tradition claimed Abraham had been born and

³⁵ Ibn Jubayr, *Travels*, 220.

³⁶ *ibid.*

the fire into which he had been thrown, lighted.³⁷ From an early period in the Arab empire the Muslim authorities had adapted to and absorbed indigenous tradition, even to the extent of erecting a Masjid al-Shams, or 'Mosque of the Sun' between Karbala' and Hilla on the site where it was believed the Biblical wonder of causing the sun to stand still had taken place.³⁸ Shamash (Sumerian, Utu) was the Akkadian sun god, son of Nana, the moon god and twin brother of Inana. He was the deity of truth and justice with a warrior aspect to his personality. He was the particular protector of hero-kings, such as Gilgamesh, and is recorded as aiding Dumuzi to escape from the clutches of demons who had come to drag him down to the underworld (Black & Green:183-4). The main cult centres of the god were in Iraq—at Larsa in Akkad and Sippar in southern Sumer (Black & Green:184; Oppenheim:195-6). Islamic tradition, not to be outdone, claimed that on the same spot 'Ali b. Abi Talib had repeated this sign (Goldziher, 1971, ii:301),³⁹ a miracle which doubtless provided yet one more reason for the Najaf site to be considered the authentic burial place of the Imam.

Al-Gharnati's account reveals, however, that doubts remained about the authenticity of the Najaf site down into the 6th/12th century, though by this period rival locations probably carried far less weight with Muslims now that they had a physical focus at which they could pray. The element of uncertainty left the door open for copycat sites to spring up, a number of which have survived into the present day. Apart from Mazar-i Sharif, the shrine of Shah-i Mardan,⁴⁰ at Hamzabad, in the foothills south of Ferghana, Uzbekistan, also claims to be the final resting place

Ahsan al-Taqasim

³⁷ Al-Muqaddasi, *Jerusalem*, 118: cf. Ibn Jubayr, *Travels*, 219.

³⁸ Joshua 10:12-15.

³⁹ Under the 'Abbasids many similar local customs, particularly ones of Iranian-Mazdean origin, were revived and given official sanction, primarily as a result of the overwhelming power and influence of the Barmakid family who were formerly priests of 'Nau Bahar' (*nava vihara*) of Balkh (see chap. 4).

⁴⁰ On Russian maps it is referred to as Shakhimardan.

of Hazrat 'Ali. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries this shrine is said to have been a very popular place of pilgrimage, though it is not known when, or how, this site came to be regarded as the last resting place of the Imam. What little evidence there is suggests that Shah-i Mardan was known from quite early on in Islamic history. Doubtless, like Najaf and al-Khair, this location, too, was a pre-Islamic cult centre (Bennigsen & Wimbush, 1985:42, 154).⁴¹ As far as al-Khair is concerned, al-Gharnati implies at the very end of his narrative that the shrine erected by the Saljuqs may have been erected to emulate that at Najaf. In both cases the decision to erect a monument over the grave was not motivated purely by religious devotion but was in response to diverse political, economic and social pressures. In the case of al-Khair, these profane motives have been discretely concealed by the creation of a suitably edifying and uplifting narrative, involving dreams, miracles, visions of the Prophet and the Imam, all of which served to encourage pilgrimage and 'brand loyalty' to the shrine.

Through the medium of his narrative, al-Gharnati, apparently convinced of the authenticity of the claims, seeks to justify what was, after all, the most unlikely of all of the various possible locations for the grave of 'Ali b. Abi Talib.⁴² He does this by the conventional method of subordinating and encasing a kernel of fact around a framework of divine intervention and the miraculous. The narrative thus seeks to divorce the issue of 'authentication' from the historical context, by elevat-

⁴¹ Shah-i Mardan was damaged in Feb. 1919 during the 'Basmachi' insurrection, but was repaired in 1924 by local "fanatics" and became the focus of Islamic resistance to the Red Army. In March 1928 an Uzbek Communist, Hamza Niyazi, was executed by *mujahidin* by being thrown down the mountainside on which the shrine was built; an execution which, one is tempted to suggest, was motivated by ancient memories of human sacrifice. When the Communists retook the town, the *mazar* was destroyed only to be rebuilt again in the 1930s by devotees. The authorities once more razed it to the ground and instead erected a Communist shrine to the socialist martyr, Hamza (Hamzabad = 'built by Hamza'). An anti-religious museum was built on the plateau above on the site where once had stood the shrine of 'Ali b. Abi Talib. Today, Shahr-i Mardan/Hamzabad remains "one of the most popular holy places in all of Central Asia" and is a local centre for the celebration of Nauroz (Bennigsen & Wimbush, *loc. cit.*; personal observation, July 1989).

⁴² Assuming that the one in Transoxiana had not yet advanced any similar claims. At this time of the al-Khair discovery, Hamzabad was controlled by non-Muslim tribes.

ing personalised, visionary experience above archaeological or historiographical criteria. This process of transforming the secular into the sacred is, of course, only to be expected given the milieu of the discovery and is consistent with what we know of similar discovery myths associated with relic cults in Christian Europe at the same period (see, Browne, 1981; Ward, 1982). However, the visionary and miraculous experiences recorded by al-Gharnati should not be dismissed as unworthy of consideration by the religious historian, since elements in the narrative reveal much about the discovery as well as, more generally, about the way in which such relic cults are a religious response to social, political and economic uncertainty. Although there are a number of inconsistencies in al-Gharnati's narrative, it is possible from the information contained in his account to reconstruct the course of events during those remarkable days sometime in 550 A.H.

The narrative makes it clear that the grave, though located outside of the settlement of al-Khair, was a site which had sufficiently distinguishable features to make identification of the exact place possible. Had the dreamers merely claimed they had been told that the tomb lay outside of the settlement, they would have been digging in the dunes of the desert for the rest of their lives without success. For al-Khair was surrounded on all sides by *dasht*; indeed, it seems that at this period even the great Nahr-i Shahi canal, which is nowadays the life blood of Mazar-i Sharif, had not been dug (Map 3).⁴³ The grave site, therefore, was certainly located on, or near, an archaeological mound, or *tepa*, on the outskirts of the village of al-Khair. One of the visions mentions "an open grave," which would suggest that the site in question contained an ancient graveyard and had probably been

⁴³ Though the Hazhd Nahr, or Eighteen Canals, of which the Nahr-i Shahi is but one, was extant as early as the Achaemenid period. More likely, following the discovery at al-Khair and the decision of the Saljuq authorities to suitably endow it, the Nahr-i Shahi was cleaned and possibly extended and certain tracts of land fed by its waters set aside as *waqf* to support the shrine and its shaikhs.

excavated by individuals who had been searching, illegally, for buried treasure. The deserts of Balkh are full of such ancient *tepa*, many of them dating back to the Kushan or Graeco-Bactrian period. In the 1970s, Soviet archaeologists uncovered just such a series of tombs at Tila Tepa ('gold mound') near Shibarghan and discovered a great amount of gold jewellery (Sarianidi, 1985).⁴⁴ The robbing of such sites was, and still is, a common practice in the area and is seen by local people as a legitimate source of additional revenue. Local people would tend to dig only in locations which had already yielded gold or silver items, such as coins. As such we agree with Golombek (1977:336) that the grave in question was most likely located on the site of some pre-Islamic settlement, possibly a temple complex or a burial ground, which had been razed by the Arab invaders and its inhabitants put to the sword.

Further support for this theory comes from the name of the village itself, al-Khair: ██████████ 'Propitious', 'Favoured'. A number of places in Afghanistan and Central Asia, include *khair*⁴⁵ in their names; e.g. Khairatan, Khwaja Khair, Khairabad, etc. The archaeological record reveals that a number of these locations are known to date back to pre-Islamic times (Ball, 1982, i:150-1). Khair Khana, a suburb of Kabul, was a cult centre under the Kushano-Sasanids (4th-5th century AD) and during the reign of the Turki and Hindu Shahi rulers of the region, just prior to the Arab conquest (Ball, 1982, i:151). More significantly, from the point of view of the present study, the plain⁴⁶ of Khair Khana is today the traditional loca-

⁴⁴ And also finds such as the Oxus Treasure which is believed to have been part of a temple treasure.

⁴⁵ The word *khair* appears frequently in the Qu'ran. In Sura iii:54 the plots of unbelievers (i.e. against Muhammad) are mocked since God is, *khair al-mākirin*, "the best of plotters" (see, Schimmel, 1994:222) whilst in Sura xcvii:3 the 'Night of Power', *lailat al-qadr*, is said to be 'better than a thousand months' (*khairun min alfi shahr*). The word appears in the call to prayer, where it is said that 'prayer is better than sleep'. In the contemporary Arab world, the arrival of the spring rains is still referred to as *al-khair*, God's blessing.

⁴⁶ *chaman*.

tion for the celebration of the Nauroz *mela*, a custom which involves feasting, sports competitions and general celebrations.⁴⁷ Writing in 1813, Meer (*sic*) Izzat Ullah (p. 85), who visited the shrine at Mazar-i Sharif, states that “the spot was ... always considered sacred, but did not attain its present fame until the erection by Sultan Hoossein Mirza Baykura of the tomb which still exists.” Until the early 1940s, when much of the area around ‘Ali’s shrine was redeveloped by the Afghan government,⁴⁸ the shrine was surrounded by an extensive *chahar bagh* (Vambéry, 1864:274).⁴⁹ It was in this *chahar bagh*, according to a long-standing tradition, that local people came for the Nauroz *mela*.⁵⁰ Certain intellectuals and other knowledgeable people in Mazar-i Sharif claim that the original al-Khair was the place where Zoroaster was killed or assassinated,⁵¹ whilst others assert that in pre-Islamic times it was at this spot where the Mazdean prophet’s body, immaculately preserved, was miraculously suspended between heaven and earth.⁵² Whether this was the case or not cannot be ascertained without extensive excavations within the precincts of the *rauza* but given the fact that the main festivals at the shrine all commence on Nauroz, it is reasonable to believe that al-Khair, like Khair Khana,

⁴⁷ Nur Muhammad, p. 31, lists a number of ‘Alid *qadamga*^R said to date from the period of Abu Muslim’s translation of the Imam’s remains to Balkh. He states that near the village (*qariya*) of Marghiyan (or possibly Marghniyan), of Balkh “in the direction of the mountains, that is north [but the mountains are to the south of the town], there is a *ziyarat* like the *mazar* of Hazrat Shah (i.e. ‘Ali b. Abi Talib).” According to this author, the shrine is a particular object of pilgrimage during the festival of Gul-i Surkh. Neither the shrine, nor the settlement, seems to have survived.

⁴⁸ The blame for the destruction of many of the ancient buildings around the shrine and the gardens is attributed to Gul Muhammad Mohmand (see Byron:240, where he is called “Mohammad Gul Khan, Minister of the Interior for Turkistan”) and Ghulam Rasul Parmach, governors of Afghan Turkistan in the 1930s and 1940s. Both men are accused by local people of adopting a policy of cultural vandalism in a deliberate attempt to eradicate all vestiges of monuments and reminders of the Chingizid rule of the area. The policy is generally referred to as Afghanistanisation (*Afghani-sakhtan*).

⁴⁹ *Andisha* circle, Mazar-i Sharif, spring 1996.

⁵⁰ *Andisha* circle.

⁵¹ *Andisha* circle.

⁵² Ishaq Nigargar, *personal communication*. Burial, of course, would have been taboo to orthodox Zoroastrians.

had some association with the celebration of Nauroz long before the grave of 'Ali b. Abi Talib was ever discovered or an Islamic shrine erected at the spot.

The discovery of a body of a Muslim apparently immaculately preserved would have been regarded by Muslims of that era as a miracle and a sign that the individual so buried was a prophet and martyr, for it was universally believed that "God forbade the soil to consume the prophets buried in it" (Goldziher, 1971, ii:286; cf. Ward:62). However, as Golombek (1977:336-7) notes, a number of elements of the actual burial itself cast serious doubt as to whether this was, in fact, a Muslim interment at all. If it was, then it was hardly in keeping with standard Islamic burial practices and norms.

The remarkable preservation of the corpse "completely intact" with "even his shroud ... whole," as al-Gharnati records, could not have been just the effect of being interred in the dry desert soil, but the result of deliberate *preservation*. Other tombs, from an earlier period, which have been unearthed in the desert area around Balkh have produced only skeletons (e.g. Tela Tepa, 5 km north of Shibarghan in the late 1970s). Even the clothing of the corpses, with a few exceptions, had decayed into dust (Sarianidi, 1985). Though there is no archaeological evidence for embalming as a custom in Bactria at this period, this custom was practised in the Altai region from 4th-5th centuries BC, where nomadic Turks "preserved their dead until the appropriate season for burial arrived" (Golombek, 1977:337). Embalming in Anatolia was known under the Saljuqs and it has been suggested that it was a practice brought from Central Asia by the Turks (Golombek, 1977:337).⁵³

⁵³ Even if we accept the story at face value and agree with al-Gharnati that the body was of a truth that of Hazrat 'Ali, one has still to explain how his body could have been embalmed in 7th century Iraq where presumably the technique was not known and would have doubtless been frowned upon anyway by Muslims.

There are other possible influences at work here. Mediaeval Christianity had a well developed tradition of authentication of relics, in which the highest and most 'reliable' method to verify the genuineness of the graves and bones of saints, was to discover, or unearth, his or her 'uncorrupted' remains. If miracles and various other acts of divine power took place around the body or shrine, then the 'authentication' was deemed to have been proved (Brown:75-83; Peters: 131; Ward:46-7, 62).⁵⁴ It is important to remember that the Nestorian church had a significant presence in Khwarazm and Transoxiana well into the Islamic era, and that Eastern Christianity was an active promoter of saint cults. The first Saljuqs were strongly influenced by Nestorian missions in Central Asia (Mingana, 1925; Moffett, i:385) as well as by Shamanism which too had a strong tradition of the miraculous (see below). Indeed, many of the Turco-Mongolian tribes of the region were still Christian or Manichaean at the time of the discovery at al-Khair. As such, the authentication may have been influenced by mystical experiences of monks or semi-Christianised Turco-Mongolian tribes who were devotees of relic cults. Timurid hagiographers' attempts to explain this problem away by claiming that the Imam's body had been first embalmed and then preserved by his successors (see chap. 2) have no basis in contemporary history and are certainly a fabrication.

The brick "beneath [the] side" (McChesney, 1991:28) or "cheek" (Golombek, 1977:336) of the corpse would seem to be another deviation from Islamic burial rituals, recalling, rather, the Altaic custom of placing wooden "pillows" near the head of graves (Golombek, 1977:337). Certainly burying the body under, or inside, two marble panels, is not in keeping with conventional Islamic practice, unless, of

⁵⁴ Cf. St. Jerome was turned away from his love of Cicero after having a dream in which he was beaten. The 11th C. Benedictine monk, Othloh of Emmeram (ca. 1010-70) records a similar "dream-vision in which he was visited by a man who beat him mercilessly until he seemed to be floating in his own blood" (Weintraub:57-8).

course, the two stones in question are the headstone and gravestone which had been laid above the original tomb.

One possible explanation is that the site looters, instead of finding buried treasure in an 'infidel' grave, loot which would have been considered 'fair game', stumbled instead upon a Muslim burial of, e.g. an early Arab settler who was killed fighting against the Sasanid rulers of Bactria. Another possibility, suggested by Golombek, is that in attempting to make sense of an inscription in a non-Islamic script or a fragment of decoration which they unearthed (Golombek, 1977:337), they thought they were able to read the emotive words "Ali" and "Beloved" (*muhibb*) and jumped to conclusions.⁵⁵ Or perhaps some rivals reported them to the authorities for desecrating the graves and corpses of believers, a crime which would have incurred severe civil as well as divine penalties (Goldziher, 1971, ii:286), and the excavators may have been forced to think quickly in order to escape punishment. Whichever was true, when news of their activities reached the ears of the local authorities in al-Khair the robbers, in order to justify their illegal exhumation, claimed that the grave was none other than that of 'Ali b Abi Talib. Some local religious pressure group, the "righteous ones," who may well have represented an alternative, hostile tradition to the Traditionalist '*ulama*' who surrounded Qumaj and the Saljuq administration at Balkh, hearing this report and seeing there was advantage to them if they supported the claims, began to reinforce these reports with visionary experiences. As news of the 'discovery' spread others, caught up in the outburst of devout hysteria and not wishing to be regarded as less

⁵⁵ This may sound far-fetched, but in the last few years a number of Muslims of Asian extraction in the U.K. have claimed to have found the names of Allah and Muhammad traced out in the seed patterns of aubergines and tomatoes. Claiming this 'discovery' to be a miracle or a sign, they have pickled the vegetables and their homes have attracted numerous pilgrims from all over the country.

spiritual than their neighbours, claimed to have had 'copy cat' experiences until, in a matter of days, the whole area was buzzing with millennialist fervour.

Another explanation, and one which has not been addressed by scholars, is the possibility that the 'righteous people' of al-Khair, faced with opposition from Qumaj and the scepticism of the religious (presumably Hanafi) establishment at Balkh, fabricated the grave, its contents and inscription in order to save face and to ensure there was incontrovertible evidence when the inevitable search was made for remains. After all, the supporters of the al-Khair claim appear to have been sufficiently unscrupulous to resort to violence and intimidation in order to 'persuade' a senior *faqih* in Balkh's '*ulama*' that the claim was 'authentic'. This would certainly explain the need for the discovery narrative to include a clear, reassuring statement, repeated twice, that not only the original visionaries but the four hundred and more individuals who had the same dream, were "all ... righteous people of al-Khair and other places."

This would not be the first case of pious fraud of relics, or the authentication of the remains of saints by the 'discovery' of a miraculously-preserved corpse, as it is a common feature in Islam and Christianity (e.g. Husted:272 n.28; Ward:148). Augustine's promotion of the cult of St. Stephen in North Africa, in defiance of any historical connection between the martyr and Alexandria is a good example of a process which became commonplace in early and mediaeval Christianity (Brown:61; cf. Blethel, 1972; Ward, 1982). Like 'Ali's body in al-Khair, Augustine records that the saint's body "lay hidden for so long a time. It came forth when God wished it ... [and] ... has performed such miracles" (*quoted*, Brown:91-2).⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Cf. Shi'i folklore surrounding the martyrdom of Qazi Nurullah Shustari (d. 1610) at Agra. His body is said to have lain undiscovered for three days after his death until herdsmen were drawn to the corpse by the sweet odour exuding from it. On inspection they were "surprised to discover that the body had not decomposed" (Husted:272).

The cases of the Turin Shroud and the Holy Lance (see below) are other examples of how religious elites and cliques exploited, invented and manipulated relics for political and doctrinaire purposes. One has to remember that Balkh had an ancient tradition as a major centre for relic cults which went back several centuries to the days when Nava Vihara possessed several important relics of the Buddha, and probably even earlier, given ancient tradition which says that Zoroaster lived in Bactria for most of his prophetic life and died there too (Boyce, 1975, i:274-5; Corbin:21-2; Dalton:43; Russell, 1987:49; Upasak:204-5). The lack of such a focus under Islam was probably an underlying cultural imperative which led to the revival of an ancient tradition of pilgrimage, redefined within an appropriate Islamic ethos. We know that in the same period the Banu Shazan, the Shi'a governors of Anbar (Sar-i Pul) (see below), had actively promoted relic cults by building shrines over sites connected with the 'Alids. Could it be that members of this clan were amongst the "righteous people" mentioned in al-Gharnati's narrative?

The claim of deliberate fabrication may sound far-fetched, but there is some evidence for this hypothesis. The inscription, which is said to be the original one dug from the ground at al-Khair, has survived down to the present (Plate 3),⁵⁷ but in a fragmented form, and has been dated by Golombek (1977) to the first half of the twelfth century—that is from the same era as the original discovery. Golombek (1977:340-1) proposes the following translation for the inscription:

This is the Favourite⁵⁸ of Allah, 'Ali is the Lion of Allah ... this [is the tomb of 'Ali?] brother of Muhammad, the messenger of Allah.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ This Kufic inscription is today kept in a wooden cupboard in the *mudiriya* room beside the shrine.

⁵⁸ *wali*, "favourite" is a poor translation, *wali* is a technical term used in mysticism to describe an individual who is an intermediary, or intercessor, with Allah, similar to 'saint' in the Christian tradition.

⁵⁹ The inscription includes a quotation from Sura lix:21-22.



PLATE 3: The Saljuq inscription in the shrine of Mazar-i Sharif.



PLATE 4: The Timurid tombstone in the shrine of Mazar-i Sharif.

This fragmentary inscription is most peculiar. Golombek (*loc. cit.*), arguing backwards on the basis of the inscription Khwandamir said was recovered at the site in 855/1480-81,⁶⁰ proposes the reading of *hād[ā qabr ‘alī a]kh muḥammad*, since “all of the critical words are there.” Al-Gharnati’s version of the inscription, *hādha muḥibb al-nabī, ‘Alī, karram allāh* (“This is one who loves the Prophet, ‘Ali—may God honour him”),⁶¹ though, is substantially different and far less specific in identifying the grave as that of ‘Ali b. Abi Talib. By the time al-Gharnati arrived in Balkh the original inscription, which he claims was found when the grave was first opened, was not available for inspection, for the “brick” had been encased in a silk “purse” and hung from the *mihrab* of the shrine.⁶² As such, all al-Gharnati had was the memories of eyewitnesses who may have read the original inscription. However, had the original inscription of al-Khair been as detailed in content as the Saljuq one preserved today in the shrine, with its specific reference to ‘Ali’s titles, the shaikhs and devotees who saw the original inscription would have surely exploited its unequivocal statement of identification to the full as evidence of the truth of their claims. One must therefore conclude that whilst the Saljuq inscription unearthed by the Timurids may be the same as the one preserved in the shrine today, it is unlikely that it is the same inscription which Qumaj and his fellow-Bactrians claimed to have unearthed at the original excavation of the site in 530/1135-6.

Even if Golombek is correct in this respect and Khwandamir’s account of the discovery of the inscription and its transliteration is trustworthy, one cannot but

⁶⁰ Khwandamir, *HS*, iv, 172.

⁶¹ Al-Gharnati, *TA*, 147.

⁶² Golombek (p. 337) comments that the use of a *mihrab* as a reliquary for the inscribed brick is “... most unusual. The more common method of preserving important inscriptions—stone slabs or faience panels—was to imbed them in the wall of a monument.” Fakr al-Daula ‘Ali b. Husain, minister of the Saljuq ruler of Rum, Ghiyas al-Din, Kai Khusrau III ordered that certain of the sayings (*ḥikāyat*) of ‘Ali b. Abi Talib be engraved on the wall of the Gök Medrese in Sivas, see, Huart, ‘‘Ali b. Abi Talib,’ *SEI*, 32

conclude that the author of this inscription displays a quite staggering ignorance of the relationship between 'Ali b. Abi Talib and the Prophet of Islam. For 'Ali was a cousin and the son-in-law of Muhammad, not his brother. So either Khwandamir and, by implication, Golombek, have misread the broken inscription, or the person or persons responsible for the original inscription had only a cursory knowledge of early Islamic history. This, in turn, suggests that the Muslims of Balkh, or at least those who supported the shrine's authenticity, were barely Islamicised; a factor which may well have been behind the opposition shown by the *faqih* and his faction.

Golombek (*loc. cit.*) assumes that because the inscription dates from the Saljuq era, it was commissioned *after* the discovery to replace the original inscription, which was no longer visible. This, as we have suggested, is probably the case, given the very specific content of the text when compared to the inscription al-Gharnati claims was originally unearthed at the site. Yet some doubt must remain as to the truth of this claim too. In her comparative analysis Golombek suggests that the most direct stylistic parallel is on the tower of the Ghaznavid ruler, Mas'ud^{III} at Ghazni (492/1099-508/1114), a monument which was constructed at least two decades *earlier* than the discovery at al-Khair. If the al-Khair inscription does, in fact, date from *before* 530/1135-6, then we are forced to conclude that 'person or persons unknown' deliberately fabricated the inscription and then engineered the discovery, with the intent of establishing a cult centre to 'Ali b. Abi Talib in the area of Balkh. If this was the case, then this plot must be attributed to one or other of the several heterodox Shi'i sects which, as we shall see, are known to have exerted an important influence in the region at this period.

News of the happenings at al-Khair and the spread of visionary experiences to hundreds of villagers reached the ears of Qumaj, the Saljuq governor at Balkh, some eight miles to the west of al-Khair. Perhaps, as al-Gharnati implies, one or more of the amir's representatives in the town reported the events to the governor, or maybe they were called to Balkh in order to report on the events to the east, since any outbreak of mass religious fervour had to be closely monitored lest it be a prelude to some millennial or sectarian movement which could threaten the fabric of the state. Amir Qumaj then appears to have summoned the "righteous people" from al-Khair to give an account of themselves and to enquire into the authenticity of their claims before a general council of Balkh's chief legalists.

The ensuing debate appears to have been quite heated, with opinion sharply divided between the bookish '*ulama*', representing a sceptical establishment bent on nipping this movement in the bud, and the "righteous people" and their disciples from the district of al-Khair who probably represented an alternative religious tradition, possibly inimical to the legalism of the '*ulama*' or politically opposed to the Saljuqs for their shift towards Hanafi Sunnism, or for racial reasons, they being Turks whilst the inhabitants of al-Khair, were Iranians (Daftary:184). Given the nature of the discovery and claims, it would seem feasible to suggest this group may have been a heterodox Shi'i grouping or possibly a Sufi brotherhood which espoused a particularly *Uwaysi* form of mysticism.

The al-Khairids sought to justify the authenticity of their claims on the authority of the well-known Hadith, attributed dubiously to Muhammad himself, that "whoever sees me, truly sees me, for Satan cannot take my form," rather than on the basis of the fact that certain of their number had visited the spot indicated, for none of them, it seems, had yet dug sufficiently at the site to find the inscription

which was uncovered later. This, in itself, is another peculiar feature of the whole episode for if, indeed, so many individuals had had the visions they claimed containing such specific instructions as to the location of the grave, why had no-one actually excavated the area up to this point? Or had Amir Qumaj, worried about possible political overtones of the movement, ordered the site to be sealed off until the judicial enquiry had been completed?

The use of the Hadith was probably an attempt to cut the ground from under the feet of the religious establishment, since by claiming to have had a vision of Muhammad himself, it made it extremely difficult to dismiss the claims of the “righteous people” without implying that they were guilty of blasphemy. However, one individual, a jurist of considerable eminence whom Qumaj addresses as “imam and shaikh,” was bold enough not only to challenge these visionaries, but to roundly ridicule and deride their claims. Despite the doubt that still persisted in some quarters about the authenticity of Najaf, he argued, up to this point in time no-one had been brazen enough to claim that somehow or other ‘Ali b. Abi Talib’s last resting place was in the remotest reaches of Khurasan. And how was it possible that the Caliph’s mortal remains could have found their way to such an obscure outpost of the Islamic world, a thousand or more *farsakhs* from the place where he breathed his last? Such an idea was not just unfounded but “absurd” and the visions of the “righteous people” were patently false. It is important, in the light of the claim by Timurid historians that the translation of ‘Ali’s body was linked to Abu Muslim and the Shi‘a Imams,⁶³ that al-Gharnati makes no reference at all to this legend. That it was not alluded to is further evidence for the belief that this was a myth fabricated by Timurid hagiographers, adopted as a convenient means of explaining the reason how the body of Shah-i Mardan came to be in Balkh. Had such

⁶³ Lari, *TMS*, 29-30.

a tradition existed at the time, the promoters of the authentication would have surely alluded to it.

Al-Gharnati's laconic summing up at the conclusion of the debate, "at this the people left," would suggest that the sceptics, with both history and Islamic tradition on their side, had won the day. A few hours later, however, the whole debate was stood on its head by the Damascus Road experience of the *faqih* in question. Regardless of whether one believes in spirits and apparitions or that they can, cannot, or indeed should, beat someone black and blue whilst they sleep, the bare facts of the matter were that early the following morning the legalist who had opposed authentication appeared before the amir so cowed and beaten that he was prepared to endorse anything the pro-relic lobby said. It would not be too far-fetched to suggest that the politico-religious forces who had strong motives for promoting the authentication, having failed to persuade the '*ulama*' in debate, were quite prepared to resort to more direct, physical means in order to win the day.

The dream experience related by the *faqih* is quite different to the authentication visions claimed by the "righteous people" of al-Khair. Although the jurist had been forced into conceding the authenticity of the others' dreams and claims, he takes great care not to justify his *volte-face* by asserting, like the others, that Muhammad had appeared to him. Instead, his narrative is almost a parody of the visions of the "righteous people", attributing his conversion to a visitation by a number of syncretic sectarians, the Alawites (see below). Even when he relates that he saw 'Ali b. Abi Talib in the grave, the *faqih* never claims the Imam spoke directly to him, authenticating the vision. Rather it is the Alawites who ask the rhetorical question, "Is this not the Commander of the Faithful?" The nuances of this narrative reinforce the belief that this legalist authenticated the claims of al-Khair

after being browbeaten or threatened by his opponents. Is he, by stating he was beaten by a group of Alawites, hinting that in his opinion those who were such fervent supporters of the authentication were, in fact, covert members of a heretical sect? For, whilst conceding the validity of the visions, the jurist meticulously avoids opening himself up to charges of blasphemy by attributing his change of mind to a vision of the Prophet of Islam or claiming that 'Ali b. Abi Talib had spoken to him directly and authenticated the claims of the people of al-Khair.

The sudden and unexpected conversion of the leading opposition figure silenced all opposition, or at least made them think twice about voicing their doubts publicly for fear of suffering a similar fate. Qumaj and his associates, faced with unanimity between the two opposing factions about the authenticity of the visions, decided to lend official endorsement to the discovery. His government, after all, was threatened from across the Amu Darya by the 'infidel' Qara Khitai Turks as well as by the rebellion of the Khwarazmian Shah, Atsiz (Barthold, 1977:320-27) and he could not risk sectarian war which would weaken the Saljuq hold over Balkh even more. Anyway, the relic's discovery could provide a useful focus for rallying support against the 'barbarian' threat by being interpreted as a sign from God (see, Brown:92, 99). Consequently, from this point onwards the authentication process proceeded without further ado along conventional lines. The site was opened, an apposite, though somewhat vaguely-worded, inscription unearthed and on the back of the discovery of the immaculately preserved remains, state funds were allocated to build a suitably munificent edifice over the grave.⁶⁴ At the same time, Qumaj took the opportunity to clean, or extend, the Nahr-i Shahi and assign certain of the villages which it irrigated as *waqf*, thus ingratiating himself and his government to

⁶⁴ Nothing remains of the original Saljuq building today, though the site of the original discovery is still shown to pilgrims in the north quarter of the gardens.

the shaikhs and devotees of the cult. By the time of al-Gharnati's visit some thirty years later, al-Khair had been transformed into a major pilgrimage centre, attracting devotees not just from the countryside around Balkh, but from all over Khurasan, Khwarazm and Transoxiana.

There is a final twist to this whole story of the conversion of the sceptical *faqih*. Today in the ironically named village of 'Aliabad ('built by 'Ali'),⁶⁵ some eighteen kilometres south-east of Aqcha just off the modern road to Balkh, there is a shrine to Imam 'Abdullah who, it is said, was that very legalist whose sudden change of heart forced Amir Qumaj to take the claims of the al-Khair visionaries seriously.⁶⁶

If, as we have argued, the supporters of the al-Khair site cowed all critics into silence by a campaign of intimidation, who were these individuals who were willing to defy a well established historical tradition and challenge the authority of the '*ulama*'? And why, once the 'authentication' had been made, did the Muslim population of Khurasan and Transoxiana so readily prefer the claims of al-Khair over those of Najaf?

We have already suggested that the shrine was possibly located on the site of pre-Islamic settlement and/or in a locality which may have had ancient associations with pre-Islamic festivals. Hence the events at al-Khair can be partly explained by the wish of the local population to resurrect, or maintain, an ancient and popular site of pilgrimage under an Islamic veneer.

Another aspect of the dreams and visions reveals shamanistic elements such as divination, contact with hero-ancestors and the beating of the possessed by his familiar spirit. Such elements were, and still are, an essential part of Inner Asian native religion, a belief system from which the Saljuq and other Turkman tribes were but

⁶⁵ According to Juzjani, *TN*, i, 129, the village was the site of a battle between the Saljuqs and Ghaznavids in c. 429/1038.

⁶⁶ Agha Tursun of Faizabad, *interview*, Shibarghan, July 1997; *personal observation*, spring 1995.

a generation or so removed. At the time of the events at al-Khair many Turkish tribes of the Syr Darya and Khwarazm, were still unIslamised and indeed remained so well into the 6th/12th century (Barthold, 1977:320ff.). Despite the Saljuq Sultante's official recognition of Hanafi school of Sunni Islam as the basis of state legitimacy,⁶⁷ the Turkish tribes of Inner Asia had been converted to Islam by the activities of heterodox mystics who, persecuted for their extremist views by the legalists in the west Islamic lands, sought sanctuary and merit by missionary work amongst the infidel Turco-Mongolian tribes of Transoxiana and Khwarazm.⁶⁸ The great missionary shaikh of Inner Asia, Ahmad Yasawi (d. 562/1167), known as Pir-i Turkistan, was still living at the time of the al-Khair incident. These Sufi missionaries, held in high regard by Alp Arslan and other Saljuq leaders,⁶⁹ adopted a contextual approach to the local religious traditions and the indigenous culture, adapting Islamic cosmography, theology and sacred narratives to Turco-Mongolian traditions. Deweese (1994), Baldick (1993), Mélikoff (1996) and others have recently begun to study how cults of the ancestral hero and epic poetic tradition, an essential part of ancient Khurasanian and Inner Asian identity, was grafted onto and transmuted into hagiographic accounts of Sufi missionaries, whilst the mystical experiences of these shaikhs paralleled and replaced the ecstatic and esoteric encounters of the shaman. At the same time a number of the features of the *faqih* dream can be paralleled in the much earlier account of a divine intervention recorded by the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim, Hiüen Tsiang, concerning Vaisravana

⁶⁷ Abu Hanifa, the founder of the Hanafi school of jurisprudence was said to have prayed that his doctrine might endure and received the following answer from the Unseen World, "Thy doctrine shall not wane so long as the sword continues in the hand of the Turks" (Browne, 1969, ii:168).

⁶⁸ *CHI*, v, 5-6.

⁶⁹ E.g. Ahuposh (so called since he wore, the skins of the *ā/hū*, ibex/deer, and ate only their flesh); Hasan b. Yusuf al-Bukhari al-Samani, known as Namadposh ('wearer of felts'), who was a confidant of the Saljuqid, Alp Arslan Khan who was wont to address the shaikh as 'father'; and Abu Bakr Kallabadi who was a vegetarian (Barthold, 1977:320, 328). The Saljuq rulers of Iran were followers of Shaikh Bayazid Bastami who also has a shrine said to be his last resting place at Hazrat Sultan in Samangan province (Subtelny, 1994:403).

Deva, 'Guardian of the North', whose image dominated the great assembly hall of the Nava-sangharama monastery in Bactra. In this vision Vaisravana appears to the Hephthalite leader, Khan Yeh-hu (or She-hu), demands to know why he was planning to pillage the monastery, hurls his spear at him and transfixes Yeh-hu to the wall. Having been brought to his senses by this dream, the Hephthalite leader repents and undertakes a pilgrimage of atonement to the monastery itself (Beal, 1884, i:45, see below, chap. 4).

If, by the mid 12th century, al-Khair already had a long and established association with ancient indigenous cults such as the Janda Bala, Gul-i Surkh and such-like, puritan legalists, such as the *faqih* of Balkh, may well have been flexing the new-found power accorded them by the Saljuqs further to the west, to mount a concerted campaign to eradicate pre-Islamic practices in Khurasan and Transoxiana. This, in turn, would have put pressure on the devotees of these cult(s) to legitimise traditional customs by the creation of a suitable Islamic mythological structure. This may explain why the legalists of Balkh feature so prominently in the discovery narrative and why the conversion story is provided in such detail. For the '*ulama*'s endorsement had not only to be obtained but seen to be obtained. In the end, however, it is ancient native tradition, exemplified in the ecstatic visionary experiences of the "righteous people" and repeated by the *faqih*'s vision, which wins the day over dry issues of historicity and legalism, in the same way as the experience of the shaman would have done in pre-Islamic Inner Asia. Once the ecstatic version of reality had been legitimised, all the external evidence that subsequently came to hand—the tomb, the inscription, the uncorrupted body, the Najaf debate, etc.—inexorably fitted into a view of actuality predetermined by the experience of visionaries.

The developments at al-Khair have to be seen in the context of a wider shrine cult movement which took place in the Balkh area during the Saljuq period,⁷⁰ which may well have had nationalistic overtones to it. The main impetus for this movement appears to have come from the clan of Ibn Shazan, Wazir of Chaghri Beg Da'ud,⁷¹ who governed Anbar (Sar-i Pul) in the twelfth century. This family, which hailed from Kariyan of Fars, migrated to Balkh and Sar-i Pul after falling out with the Saljuq Sultan, threw out the Ghaznavids and established themselves as semi-autonomous rulers of the area (Barthold, 1977:324).⁷² This Iranian Shi'i clan of Zaidi propensities,⁷³ finding themselves cut off from their roots and under a government dominated by Turks, set out to affirm their ethnic and religious affiliations by identifying places in the Balkh area which had associations with the 'Alids and commissioning the erection of ornate shrines at these locations.

Foremost amongst these shrines is the ornate Imam-i Khurd in Sar-i Pul (dating from not earlier than 450/1058-9) (Bivar, 1974:50), erected over the grave of Sayyid Yahya, son of the Fourth Imam, 'Ali Ashgar, Zain al-'Abidin (d. 125/742-3), who succeeded to the Imamate on his father's death.⁷⁴ Yahya was killed in a battle against the infidel in the Anbar area and it is clear that the location of his grave was known from a very early period. A second Saljuq shrine, that of Imam-i Kalan, also on the outskirts of Sar-i Pul and constructed not earlier "than the 6th Muslim century" (Bivar, 1974:48), was also endowed by the Banu

⁷⁰ According to popular belief in Balkh, Sultan Sanjar had originally built his own tomb in the area of al-Khair (*Andisha* circle, Mazar-i Sharif, spring 1996).

⁷¹ Brother of Tughril Beg, ruler of Khurasan. He ruled virtually independent of the main Saljuq Sultanate. I am grateful to Prof. A.D.H. Bivar for this information on the Banu Shazan and Saljuq Balkh.

⁷² Bivar, *personal communication*, 1/10/97.

⁷³ So named after the grandson of Husain. The Zaidis maintain that any offspring of Fatima can succeed to the Imamate, regardless of whether he is a descendant of Hasan or Husain. They also admit the possibility of two Imams existing at the same time in two distinct areas, see Shahrastani, *Kitab*, 132-35.

⁷⁴ Shahrastani, *Kitab*, 134.

Shazan, albeit somewhat later. Imam-i Kalan is locally believed to mark the grave of another Yahya, a son of Imam Muhammad al-Baqir, though it has been shown that no such son is known to have existed (Bivar, 1974:48). Both shrines include the Shi'i, not the Sunni, confession of faith in their dedicatory inscriptions and are clearly Zaidi. It may be that this family was also responsible for the construction of the Saljuq shrine at Darra-yi Shakh of Gurziwan, which dates from the first half of the 12th century (Grenet, Lee & Pinder-Wilson, 1980:73-8). This would be logical since Guzgan, as the area was then known, was part of the kingdom of Anbar. If this is the case, then one would assume that in the pre-Mongol period, this site was once associated with the family of 'Ali, though the tradition has now been long forgotten.⁷⁵ There is another 5th/11th century shrine dedicated specifically to Imam Zain al-'Abidin to the east of the shrine of Baba Hatim of Imam Sahib in Juzjan province (Ball, 1982, i:443-4).⁷⁶ That of Baba Hatim is considered stylistically to be Ghaznavid but given the Banu Shazan's Zaidi affiliations and their custom of endowing shrines over sites associated with the Imams, maybe this shrine at Imam Sahib was commissioned by the Shazan family who employed a Ghaznavid architect in its construction. Baba Hatim and Imam-i Khurd, after all, date from the

⁷⁵ The shrine of Imam Sahib, to the south-east of Maimana, is said to be the last resting place of Hazrat Muhammad Baqir, a grandson of the sixth Imam, Ja'far al-Sadiq, though some local sources say the shrine contains only a finger of the Imamzada. The recently-erected inscription gives the following genealogy: "Hazrat Muhammad Baqir b. Hazrat Imam Musa Kazim b. Hazrat Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq b. Hazrat Imam Muhammad Baqir b. Hazrat Imam Zain al-'Abidin Bimar b. Hazrat Imam Husain b. 'Ali Murtaz," *field notes*, Imam Sahib, Oct. 1996. There are no traces of mediaeval ornamentation or inscriptions, though prior to the shrine's virtual destruction in the 1980s by shell fire, the guardian of the site claimed that there was a "Kufic" inscription on the gravestone. Unfortunately, the stone was covered and enclosed in an elaborate wooden box and the truth of this claim could not be established either in 1978 or 1996, making dating impossible. In the graveyard around the shrine are buried the Uzbek amirs of Maimana (17th-19th century) and, prior to the destruction, a number of Timurid gravestones as well, *personal observation*, July 1978 & Oct. 1996.

⁷⁶ Imam Sahib lies some 55 km S.W. of Mazar-i Sharif and south of Aqcha, on the Sangcharak road. The present guardians are Pushtun *sayyids* headed by the patriarch Hashim Agha who are affiliated to the Mujaddidi sub Order of the Naqshbandi *tariqa* and the Mahaz-i Milli of Pir Jailani. Sayyid Hashim is furthermore regarded as the local pir of the Order. This family are relative newcomers to the area, having been given control of the shrines at the end of the last century and, as such, know little about the ancient indigenous tradition associated with the shrines; interview, Banu Hashim, Imam Sahib, July 1997.

same period, the former lying on one of the main caravan routes⁷⁷ between Mazar-i Sharif and Sar-i Pul (E.H. Stirling:296-300). Could it be that amongst the "righteous people" and inhabitants of al-Khair and region who supported the authentication of al-Khair as the last resting place of 'Ali b. Abi Talib, were Zaidi elements who, having actively promoted shrines to the Imams and their relatives in the region, wished to go one further and establish a Khurasanian substitute for Najaf and Karbala', given that Kufa was so far away and only the rich could afford the journey?⁷⁸ Perhaps, too, it was one way to revenge themselves on the Shi'a of Kufa who had earlier categorically rejected Zaid's views on the Imamate, particularly his belief that the Caliphate did not fall to 'Ali following the death of Muhammad and that consequently the reigns of Abu Bakr and his successor, 'Umar, were legitimate.⁷⁹

Another element which may have been in the background was the resentment felt by the native, Persian-speaking peoples of Balkh, at being dominated by Turks whose arrival had stunted the revival of Persian culture which had followed in the wake of the 'Abbasid revolution (Daftary:183-5). One way the Iranian peoples expressed their dislike, even contempt, of the newly-arrived conquerors from across the Amu Darya was by aligning themselves with Shi'i sects such as the Zaidis and Isma'ilis. Doubtless the Shazan family took full advantage of their Iranian and Shi'i roots and may well have been something of a thorn in the flesh to the Turkish rulers of Balkh. At the same time, a number of descendants of 'Ali b. Abi Talib played a prominent part in the political life of the area during the period under discussion. In 482/1089, Malik Shah's capture of Bukhara was achieved only after

⁷⁷ The road remains important as the quickest route from Mazar-i Sharif to Sangcharak.

⁷⁸ Shi'is at Agra believe that a pilgrimage to the shrine of Qazi Nurullah, at Agra is as valid as one to Karbala' if one cannot afford the expense of the latter journey (Husted:277).

⁷⁹ Shahrastani, *Kitab*, 132-3.

one of the Bukharan amirs, a descendant of 'Ali, whose son was a hostage with the attacking army, made only a token show of defending his sector of the walls and thus allowed the Saljuqs to gain access to the city (Barthold, 1977:317). In the second decade of the twelfth century, Nasr b. Arslan Khan had Ashraf b. Muhammad al-Samarkandi, *ra'is* and *faqih* of the city and a descendant of 'Ali, put to death for plotting the Khan's assassination (Barthold, 1977:320; cf. Bosworth, 1977, I:9-10).

The Ghaznavids' and Saljuqs' main opponents and rivals within the Dar al-Islam were the Fatimid Sultanate of Egypt and N. Africa, who had set up a rival, Isma'ili, Caliphate. The establishment of an Isma'ili state had increased the activities of Hasan-i Sabbah, a Persian, whose Nizari Assassins were feared by all rulers who opposed them. Apart from having a chain of impregnable mountain fortresses in Ghur, Badghis and Badakhshan, their missionaries had made great inroads in Khurasan and Transoxiana. Both the Ghaznavids and Saljuqs waged a relentless war against the Isma'ilis, though neither sultanate was particularly successful when it came to operations against the sectarian's mountain strongholds (cf. Bosworth, 1977, I:10-11, IX:132-3; Daftary, 1996; Hillenbrand, 1996).

The presence of the Shazan family in Sar-i Pul, the endowment of Shi'i shrines and the part played by descendants of the Imam in the political and religious life of the age may go some way to explain why local religious fervour centred on the figure of 'Ali b. Abi Talib in particular, rather than another figure of early Islam. However, it does not explain the extraordinary appearance of "a group of Alawites", i.e. Nusairis,⁸⁰ in the passage which describes the *faqih's* dream.

It seems certain, however, that the term Alawite is used here in a non-specific but pejorative sense for Ahl-i Haqq schismatics, or "superficially Islamicised

⁸⁰ The Nusairis adopted the more acceptable term, 'Alawiyyūn, i.e. supporters of 'Ali, in order to dispel accusations of heresy, Halm (1991:160).

[polytheists] of Indo-Aryan extraction," who believed in metempsychosis and deified 'Ali (Halm, 1991:158-9).⁸¹ That this is the case can be seen in the tenth century *Fihrist* of al-Nadim where we find a specific reference to Alawites in Balkh. Citing as his authority Abu Zaid Ahmad ibn Sahl al-Balkhi,⁸² that is someone from Balkh, al-Nadim states of a certain Ishaq from Transoxiana that he was an 'Alawite but then goes on to make it plain in his commentary on his activities that he was a leader of the ^{Abu} Muslimiyya sect which occupied, amongst other settlements, a village near Balkh called Khurramabad.⁸³

The Muslimiyya to whom al-Nadim refers were devotees of the 'Abbasid propagandist, Abu Muslim (d.138/755-6) and, as such, were but one of the many expressions of the *ghulat* movement in Khurasan (Bosworth, 1977, I:6). Abu Muslim had recruited to the 'Abbasid cause a large number of Khurasanians who had converted from Buddhism, various animistic religions, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism and possibly even Christianity. These semi-Islamised Khurasanians incorporated elements of their former faiths into their Islamic beliefs and mingled them with an excessive veneration for 'Ali and his descendants. Indeed, Abu Muslim himself was accused, probably unjustly, of having been an adherent of the Riza-miyya sect, whose most famous adherent was the Khurasanian heretic, Hakim al-Muqanna', the Veiled (Frye, 1979:ch. XIV),⁸⁴ though more than likely, it was

⁸¹ Alawi Nusairi communities were known in Kirmanshah and Luristan, but not until much later, cf. Halm, *loc. cit*; L. Massignon, 'Nusairi', *SEI*, 454.

⁸² Al-Nadim, *Fihrist*, i, 817, n.445.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 823. I have been unable to locate a village of this name in the Balkh area, though there is a Khurram in Samangan province, near the town of Habash to the west of Dahan-i Ghuri. In the late 18th and early 19th C. Khurram was the centre of the Khalifa-yi Dar al-Aman, an important Naqshbandi shaikh who succeeded the Hazrat of Karokh, near Herat. To indicate his exalted status as a pir, the Khalifa is the only Naqshbandi shaikh to have been accorded the privilege of being buried in the courtyard of the shrine of Shah-i Mardan in Mazar-i Sharif. Khurram today is still the centre for this suborder's operations. Interview with Isma'il clan, descendants of Khwaja Dar al-Aman, Khwaja Katal, July 1997.

⁸⁴ Shahrastani, *Kitab*, 131. So called because he wore a mask or a veil to conceal his face which, his enemies asserted, had been ravaged by some malignant disease. Earlier in his career he had served under Abu Muslim and 'Abd al-Jabbar. He was eventually besieged in his fortress of Kashsh (Shahr-i Sabz) in 163/779-80, but poisoned himself rather than fall into the hands of his

al-Muqanna' and other syncretists who exploited the name of Abu Muslim for their own ends (Barthold, 1977:198-9; Frye, 1979:ch. XIV). Al-Muqanna' asserted that he himself was divine and his followers claimed he performed numerous miracles to support his claims. He taught the transmigration of souls and incorporated aspects of Mazdean religious tradition within his system of beliefs (Barthold, 1977:199-200).⁸⁵ Like the Alawites of the *faqih's* dream, the followers of both al-Muqanna' and Abu Muslim wore white, a colour which had been the sacred, priestly colour of Zoroastrianism (Barthold, 1977:198-9). Though al-Muqanna' and his followers were destroyed by 'Abbasid forces, belief in transmigration and metempsychosis as related to the Imamate, persisted amongst the Khurasanians.

In the wake of the 'Abbasid revolt, numerous extremist and heterodox sects caused much trouble in the eastern Islamic lands. One of the most prominent of these groups was the Rawandiyya, followers of Abu Muslim, who believed that the spirit of Jesus had passed to 'Ali b. Abi Talib and then through the succession of 'Divine Imams' until it devolved to Ibrahim b. Muhammad, brother of Abu al-'Abbas and, following his death, to Caliph al-Mansur (Lassner:110). Following al-Mansur's accession to the Caliphate, the Rawandiyya caused considerable trouble in the 'Abbasid capital of Hashimiyya (c. 141/758). Some six hundred members of the sect came to the palace of the Caliph in order to worship their Lord (*rabbihim*) and to receive food from him, only to find that al-Mansur repudiated their veneration and ordered his army to put them all to the sword (Lassner:110-11; Le Strange, 1924:6).⁸⁶

The true ^{Abu}Muslimiyya, however, were those who regarded Abu Muslim as the divine Imam and the reincarnation of the spirit of the ancient prophets, split into a

enemies. His head was cut off and sent to al-Mahdi, al-Tabari, *EAE*, ii, 81, 92.

⁸⁵ Shahrastani, *Kitab*, 131.

⁸⁶ Al-Tabari, *Ta'rikh*, xxvii, 62-67.

number of sub-groups. The Khurramiyya branch, whom al-Nadim states occupied the village of Khurramabad near Balkh, believed that Abu Muslim had not been killed⁸⁷ but was in occultation in the mountains of Rayy.⁸⁸ Abu Muslim was to them both a prophet and the reincarnation of Zoroaster and other prophets of the Judaeo-Christian tradition who had reappeared in a different body and who eventually return again "at a time about which they [only] know."⁸⁹ According to al-Nadim, the Khurramiyya were so named because "they regarded everything that was agreeable (*khurram*) as lawful,"⁹⁰ that is they asserted the communality of all property, including women. Though whether this was, in fact, the case, has to be doubted as this is a common accusation levelled at schismatics by heresiographers.⁹¹

The founder of the Muslimiyya in Khurasan was a certain 'Abdullah⁹² but the movement quickly broke into various factions. Following 'Abdullah's death, a certain Ishaq b. Zaid b. al-Harith al-Ansari, a Turk, assumed the leadership of the Khuramiyya branch (Barthold, 1977:198-9).⁹³ It is of him that al-Nadim records he was "one of the Alawiyyah (*sic*)... but he concealed himself ... by means of this sect." Even more remarkably, al-Nadim claims that Ishaq was "one of the sons of Yahya ibn Zaid ibn 'Ali";⁹⁴ that is, an 'Alid in his own right. Though al-Nadim does not say so in as many words, Ishaq, claiming direct descent from Yahya ibn Zaid, appears to have laid claim to the Imamate. If this was indeed the case, then he would have undoubtedly sought the support of the Banu Shazan and their fol-

⁸⁷ For the death of Abu Muslim, see al-Tabari, *Ta'rikh*, xxviii, 18-44.

⁸⁸ Al-Nadim, *Fihrist*, i, 822-4; D. S. Margoliouth, 'Khurramiya', *SEI*, 257-58.

⁸⁹ Al-Nadim, *Fihrist*, i, 822-24. Another sub-branch of the sect, the Fatimiyya, asserted that the Imamate had devolved onto Abu Muslim's daughter, Fatima.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 817-24.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 817-22, though Margoliouth, *loc. cit.* shows that many of the stories about the sect, which rely on the history of a certain Waqid b. 'Amr al-Tamimi, are unreliable.

⁹² Shahrastani, *Kitab*, 129-30.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 130; al-Nadim, *Fihrist*, 823.

⁹⁴ Al-Nadim, *Fihrist*, 823.

lowers around Balkh. Could it be that the "righteous people" who initiated the search for 'Ali's remains in al-Khair were a remnant of the Muslimiyya sect from Khurramabad? If, indeed, this was the case, then this would lend further force to the argument that al-Khair was selected as the site for the shrine because of its long-standing associations with ancient Iranian or pre-Islamic religious tradition in the area.⁹⁵

The struggle with various heterodox sects was but one aspect of a theological battle which raged through Islamic Central Asia during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Sunni '*ulama*', adherents primarily of the Hanafi and Shafi'i legal schools, supported by powerful factions within the army, sought to force the secular ruler into sunnification of the state and to abandon Turco-Persian native custom⁹⁶ as the basis of state legitimacy and legislation. The Khans and their amirs, along with probably the majority of the populace, however, preferred the syncretic and adaptive approach of their shaikhs and pirs. This struggle led to frequent confrontations between 'church' and state, with the '*ulama*' on occasions acting as Fifth Columnists, throwing the full weight of their authority behind pretenders or even outside rulers, whom they felt were more in sympathy with their objectives (Barthold, 1977:315ff; Bosworth, 1977, XXIII:11-13). Some forty years prior to the events in Balkh recorded by al-Gharnati, the Saljuq amir Ahmad ibn Khizir (d. AD 1081), was accused by the '*ulama*' of having converted to the Daylamite heresy during a visit to Persia. In a trial of strength, the chief legalists of Samarkand issued a *fatwa* in which the amir was condemned for his heretical views. Despite his popularity, the '*ulama*' successfully engineered a *coup d'état* against Ahmad ibn Khizir who was arrested, tried by a religious court and judicially executed for

⁹⁵ The original branch of the Khurramiyya was known as Muhammira, a form of the Arabic word, 'red', which refers to red flags carried by the sect, see al-Nadim, *op. cit.*, 817, n. 439.

⁹⁶ '*adat*.

heresy (Barthold, 1977:317-8). In the process, this power struggle contributed significantly to the undermining of both the Samanid and Ghaznavid dynasties. Initially, the Saljuqs benefited from this conflict, in as much as it was the *'ulama'* of Transoxiana who encouraged the Saljuqs to overthrow the Samanids. However, following their conquest of Bukhara and Balkh, the Saljuq Khans became embroiled in the same confrontation, finding that their authority was constantly challenged and undermined by the legalists (Barthold, 1977:315-321).

By the time that al-Gharnati visited Balkh, the Saljuq empire was breaking up and its hold over Balkh was increasingly tenuous (Daftary:190-1). The city, which earlier in the century had been the centre from which Sultan Sanjar (485/1092-552/1157) had established his throne, was beleaguered. In 536/1141 the 'infidel' Qara-Khitai inflicted a heavy defeat on the Saljuqs with the result that they lost control of the territory north of the Oxus (Barthold, 1977:318ff). In 547/1152 the Ghurid ruler, 'Ala' al-Din Husain attacked and temporarily occupied Balkh following the defection of the Saljuq's allies, the Ghuzz. The following year, Sultan Sanjar, now an old man, suffered a humiliating defeat at their hands and remained their captive until the autumn of 551/1156.⁹⁷ In 549/1154, a force of 7,000 Kuhistan Isma'ilis attacked Saljuq forces in Khurasan whilst they were occupied with dealing with the Ghuzz uprising.⁹⁸ Then, in 550/1155, the Ghuzz attacked and reportedly destroyed Balkh (Browne, 1969, ii:304; McChesney, 1991:28).⁹⁹ To add insult to injury, a few years earlier, the Saljuqs had lost Herat to the Ghurids.

⁹⁷ *CHI*, v:147-56. The first Qara-khitai 'Gur-khan' was a Manichaean, but the dynasty was tolerant of all religions. Under their ruler, Nestorian Christian missionary activity was particularly successful.

⁹⁸ *CHI*, v:151.

⁹⁹ Juzjani, *TN*, i, 155-6.

Given the precarious situation of Balkh and the break up of Saljuq power, the discovery at al-Khair provided the beleaguered defenders of this Muslim outpost with a source of comfort and reassurance, a focal point for the faithful's devotion and a visible reminder that Allah had not forsaken them. Indeed, for the believers on both sides of the Amu Darya, it served as a sign that His favour was particularly on them at a time when they were threatened with being conquered by infidel powers from across the Oxus as well as by internal conflict. For was it not true that the body of the greatest and bravest *mujahid* of early Islam had been hidden amongst them throughout their struggles and had now been miraculously revealed? Such an event must have been the equivalent, in Muslim terms, of the unearthing, in similar circumstances, of the relic of the Holy Lance by the First Crusaders at Antioch, some fifty years earlier (Runciman, i:199-205).¹⁰⁰

This may go some way to explain why the site, once authenticated by general consensus and popular demand, was so actively promoted and encouraged by the political leadership in Balkh and why the shrine's fame spread quickly throughout

¹⁰⁰ AD 1098. There are many similarities between the events at al-Khair and those associated with the discovery of the Holy Lance. Prior to the fall of Antioch, a certain Peter Bartholomew began to have visions of St. Andrew who told him that the relic was located beneath the south chapel of the Cathedral Church of that city. Fear of being ridiculed stopped him from imparting this information to the leaders of the army until after the Crusaders captured Antioch and Karbuqa's army, in its turn, had invested the Christian army within the walls of the city. When finally he summoned up sufficient courage to inform his superiors of his visitations Bishop Adhémar, in particular, ridiculed the idea, since he was aware of the existence of a much better authenticated relic of the Holy Lance in the possession of the Byzantine ruler in Constantinople. However, the longer the siege dragged on, the more Peter Bartholomew's visions became the only hope there was of rallying the pilgrims' flagging zeal. A search was made and, after much digging, a piece of lance was discovered. It was immediately declared to be the relic in question and hailed as a great miracle and a sign of God's favour. A few days later, the army sallied out of the city with the relic carried at its head. Despite being greatly outnumbered their fervour and passion won the day, thus further reinforcing the belief that the relic was authentic. However, the Holy Lance's influence quickly waned once the Crusaders reached Jerusalem and it was eventually lost.

There is a possibility that the al-Khair affair was indirectly influenced by what happened in Antioch sixty years or so earlier. The Saljuqs were at the forefront of Islamic resistance to the Crusaders and had been involved with the massacre of the first wave of Christian pilgrim-warriors led by Peter the Hermit (*CHI*, v:196). Turkman and other tribes from all over the Empire went to fight against the infidel and it is not inconceivable that some of the people of Balkh had even fought against the Crusaders at Antioch. Balkh, after all, was on one of the main roads to Iraq as al-Gharnati's own travels show. We know Saljuq and Turkman tribes were involved at the sieges of Odessa and Antioch and it could not have escaped the attention of Karbuqa's men what a powerful effect the relic of the Holy Lance had had on the Crusaders.

the Muslim communities most under threat from the pagan incursions. The political circumstances surrounding the discovery may also explain why al-Gharnati, in particular, was such an ardent supporter of the newly-founded shrine. For he, too, came from a frontier area of the Muslim world, Spain—a region which also was under serious threat from non-Muslims, in this case, Christians. At the time that the chronicler wrote his account of the al-Khair shrine, Gharnata, or Granada, his home town was in political and spiritual turmoil. By the beginning of the 6th/12th century, the Muslim lands of the Spanish Peninsula had become so weak that many of them had been forced to pay tribute to the Christian rulers of Spain. Over the next fifty years, Christian power continued to expand southwards until, by the middle of the century, the frontier had moved south of the Tagus river on a line from Lisbon in the west to Tortosa in the east. In the process, cities such as Toledo, Saragossa and Ujclés had been lost to the Muslims for ever. To make matters worse, Muslim shipping in the Mediterranean was frequently attacked and occasionally raids launched against Muslim ports whilst the Muslim territories of Andalusia (Kennedy, 1996:200ff).

The initiation of the Second Crusade in AD 1146 by Pope Eugenius III, though primarily called in response to the loss of Edessa, resulted in King Alfonso VII of Castile declaring his own campaign against the Moors of Spain to be equally as much a Crusade. In 542/1147, he captured the important port of Almeria, thus establishing a Christian bridgehead south^{east} of Granada. In 551/1166, the Almoravid dynasty, which had governed Granada since 483/1090, collapsed as a result of internal weakness and military incompetence. In their place, the Almohads seized power, but there was little the new rulers could do to reclaim the territory lost by their predecessors. By c. 720/1329, Granada stood alone, a small, beleaguered

Muslim principality surrounded on three sides by aggressive Crusading kingdoms (Kennedy, 1996:196-216; 273-304).

Given the dire situation in his homeland, one can understand why it was that al-Gharnati empathised with the people of Balkh, even though they were at the other end of the Muslim world. Like Granada, Balkh was increasingly helpless in the face of infidel incursions and beset by internal strife and disunity. The heyday of both the Saljuq and Almoravid dynasties was over and an air of religious and political insecurity permeated both regions. Like the people of Balkh, al-Gharnati and his fellow-Muslims of Granada,¹⁰¹ sought some sort of sign that God's favour was still with them, that in the end the infidel would not prevail and that the armies of Islam would turn back the tide.¹⁰² For al-Gharnati, therefore, hearing about the miraculous events which occurred at al-Khair must have been greatly encouraging and the account of the discovery at al-Khair could perhaps be seen as one way of rallying his own dispirited countrymen to renew their struggle with their own northern invaders in the hope that a similar miracle might be granted to them.

The establishment of the 'Alid cult at al-Khair, therefore, was not merely the result of some spontaneous discovery but must be seen to have emerged out of a highly complex religious, social and political situation. The relic provided a concrete focus for Muslims of all denominations in a time of great uncertainty and turmoil—a source of succour and reassurance to a community contemplating being severed from the Dar al-Islam and being swamped by infidels. At the same time, the discovery and authentication narrative reflects the complex nature of sectarian

¹⁰¹ Al-Gharnati was not the only Andalusian pilgrim of the 6th/12th century to make an important contribution to pilgrimage literature. His more famous fellow countryman, Ibn Jubayr, also travelled extensively throughout the Middle East from 579/1183-582/1185. During his stay in Kufa (Muharram 580/April 1184) he visited the grave of 'Ali b. Abi Talib and other sites associated with the "Prince of the Faithful" and his family, Ibn Jubayr, *Travels*, 219-21.

¹⁰² Indeed, the Almohad's spiritual leader, the Beber, Ibn Tumart (c. 1078-1130), had claimed to be the Madhi, a descendant of 'Ali and Fatima and claimed to have performed miracles, see Kennedy (1996:197-200).

politics in the region and the bitter battle between the church and state for ideological supremacy. In the end, this particular conflict contributed significantly to the downfall of the Samanid, Ghaznavid and Saljuq dynasties, but, far more terrible than that from the point of view of all sides in the Muslim divide, it left open the back door of Inner Asia to the depredations of non-Muslim tribes and, eventually, the Mongols of Chingiz Khan.

CHAPTER 2

THE TIMURIDS AND KHWAJA KHAIRAN

The sudden outburst of 'Alid enthusiasm precipitated by the discovery in 530/1135-6 at al-Khair, did not last very long. For reasons as yet unclear not only the shrine but the very name, al-Khair, seems to have disappeared from the map of Khurasan within a very short time. Barthold (1962:41-2; 1977:79) suggests that the Saljuq shrine was demolished by Chingiz Khan sometime after 61/1220.¹ It seems certain, however, that the destruction of the *mazar* occurred some years *before* the Mongol destruction of Balkh (Le Strange, 1905:422), since Yaqut's account of Balkh, written shortly before Chingiz Khan's campaigns against Khurasan, makes no mention of al-Khair or the shrine. Nor do the generation of historians and geographers who visited, or wrote about, the area in the aftermath of the Mongol conquest, such as Ibn Battuta,² Rashid al-Din, Wassaf or Marco Polo,³ mention the site, nor make any reference to al-Gharnati's history (cf. Le Strange, 1905:422-3; McChesney, 1991:28-9). Only one author, the Syrian traveller 'Ali b. Abi Bakr al-Harawi al-Mawsili (d. 612/1215) makes a "casual and deprecatory" remark about the shrine in his survey of shrines in the Muslim world (McChesney, 1991:29). However, despite the name 'Harawi', that is 'from Herat', this author was certainly not basing his remarks on personal observation or information and may well have

¹ A belief which is current today; see Nur Muhammad (pp. 42, 48); Faiz Bakhsh (p. 10); Yate (p. 280-3).

² *Travels*, iii, 572-73, though he does mention a number of shrines and mosques which had survived the Mongol onslaught, including the grave of the prophet Ezekiel and the house of Ibrahim al-Adham. This would suggest that Balkh was not quite as devastated as some authorities such as Juvaini, *Tuzukh*, i, 131 claim.

³ *Book of Ser Marco Polo*, i, 151 (Yule).

been critiquing the travelogue of al-Gharnati. This would suggest that the Spaniard's claim that al-Khair was the authentic grave of 'Ali b. Abi Talib was greeted with incredulity by Muslims in the central Islamic lands.

It would seem that even before the Mongol conquest, the shrine at al-Khair had been destroyed and the events which had led to its founding been forgotten except, perhaps, by the old men of the area. More than likely the destruction of the shrine can be attributed to the 'infidel' Ghuzz Turks who, in c. 550/1155, laid waste Balkh following their capture of that city from the Saljuqs (McChesney, 1991:29).⁴ Although al-Gharnati makes no mention of the Ghuzz devastation in his discovery story, it may be that the occupation of the area by non-Muslims provided yet another *raison d'être* for him wishing to chronicle the events surrounding the discovery. Al-Gharnati visited Balkh twice, in 548/1153 and 550/1155; that is at the time when Balkh was being attacked by the Ghuzz.

Perhaps al-Gharnati naively hoped that by recording the miraculous discovery in Balkh he could rouse Muslims in the west to a *jihad* and raise awareness of the trials and tribulations that the Dar al-Islam faced on the eastern fringes of the empire. If this was the case, his effort singularly failed. The Saljuqs and Turkmans of Syria and Iraq had their hands full with another 'infidel' foe, the Crusaders, who, by the middle of the twelfth century had taken control of a number of strategic fortresses in Anatolia, Syria and the Palatinate, including one of the cities most sacred for all Muslims, Jerusalem. Nor was the Caliph likely to come to the rescue of Sultan Sanjar. Earlier in his reign, the Saljuq sultan himself had attacked Baghdad, put the Caliph al-Mustarshid to death and appropriated for his own use one of the most valued relics of the Muslim world, the mantle of the Prophet Muhammad.⁵

⁴ CHI, v, 47-48.

⁵ CHI, v, 150. The *burda* or *khirqa* is said to have been sold to Mu'awiya and fallen into 'Abbasid hands following the overthrow of the Umayyads. Several such cloaks exist in the Muslim

Al-Khair's remoteness from the heartland of Islam and the unsettled state of the country, meant that it stood little chance of becoming a pilgrimage centre for the majority of Muslims. As al-Gharnati's account makes clear, the shrine, however, did meet a short-term need amongst the semi-Islamised Turco-Mongolian population of Transoxiana and Khurasan and Persian-speaking subjects with Shi'i proclivities. Following the Ghuzz occupation Saljuq power in the region was broken. Balkh became the centre of a bloody and protracted three-cornered battle between the Khwarazmian Shahs of Merv, the Ghurids of Herat and the 'infidel', nomadic Turkic tribes of Transoxiana. As a consequence, during the last half of the twelfth century, the region went into severe economic decline (McChesney, 1991:29).⁶

The Mongol devastation which followed early in the following century cut the region off even more from the Islamic centre. Many of the ancient cities of Khurasan, including Balkh and Herat, were all but destroyed by the Mongol onslaught, the bulk of their population massacred and the network of irrigation canals gradually silted up or were blocked by the collapse of the earth banks into the channels. The remnant which remained eked out a meagre subsistence from the devastated land. It was not until the following century that the descendants of Chingiz Khan began to turn to Islam in any significant numbers. Indeed, the first Chingizid rulers were inimical to Islam and although many Islamic monuments and shrines survived the onslaught (McChesney, 1991:29),⁷ the predominant ethos of the state was

world as the objects of veneration, e.g. Istanbul and the Khirqa-yi Sharif at Qandahar. For the one at Qandahar, see, McChesney (1991:224-8); Popalzayi (1989); Katib (i, 27-29). The 'Five' (Pers: *Panj Tan*), namely Muhammad, 'Ali b. Abi Talib, Hasan, Husain and Fatima are sometimes referred to as Ahl-i 'Aba, 'People of the Cloak' (Schimmel, 1994:36-7). The Cloak thus became a symbol of the dual function of the Caliph as the Vicegerent of the Prophet and head of the Islamic community. Sultan Sanjar later sought to repair relations with the Caliphate by returning the cloak, but relations between Baghdad and the eastern Saljuqs remained strained throughout his reign. Doubtless there would have been those who would have seen Sanjar's imprisonment as divine retribution for his sacrilege.

⁶ *CHI*, v:148-49.

⁷ Ibn Battuta, *Travels*, 572-73.

Shamanistic, mingled with Buddhist and Christian traditions. Islam, during the first two generations of Mongol rulers, was very much at the bottom of the religious pile. It is therefore easy to imagine that what remained of the cult at al-Khair, if anything, was of significance only to the Muslims of the immediate locality.

It is therefore remarkable that some two hundred and fifty years after the Mongol invasion, and over three and a half centuries after the original foundation of the shrine, it saw such a spectacular revival of its fortunes and that over the ensuing centuries it grew into one of the most important pilgrimage centres of Khurasan. The credit for this revival of fortunes is due directly to the patronage of the great Timurid ruler of Herat, Sultan Husain Baiqara (r. 873/1469-911/1506).

The earliest, and probably contemporary, account of the rediscovery appears in the history of 'Abd al-Ghafar Lari (d. 912/1506),⁸ a pupil, and one of only two *murids*,⁹ of the famous Herat poet and Naqshbandi shaikh, 'Abd al-Rahman Jami (d. 898/1492) (McChesney, 1991:30). According to Lari, a certain Shams al-Din Muhammad, a descendant of the famous Khurasanian mystic, Abu Yazid Bastami, whilst on a pilgrimage to India, came across the account of al-Gharnati,¹⁰ in which was related the original discovery of 'Ali's remains in "the village of Khairan."¹¹ Shams al-Din returned to Balkh with a copy of the work and showed it to Mu'izz al-Din Baiqara, the Timurid governor of the province, who gathered the town's leading citizens together and went to the village of Khwaja Khairan. Whether there was still some building over the site, or whether there was still some folk memory of the location of the original Saljuq shrine, Lari does not explain. However, the tomb was rediscovered (McChesney, 1991:30; Nur Muhammad:42).¹² To

⁸ Lari, *TMS*, 24-30.

⁹ The other was Jami's son, Diya' al-Din.

¹⁰ Lari, *TMS*, 26.

¹¹ *qariya khairān*, Lari, *TMS*, 26, though al-Gharnati names the place as "al-Khair."

¹² Lari, *TMS*, 24-6.

reinforce the authenticity of the site Lari asserted, without any supporting evidence, that the Andalusian's source was Imam Abu Hafs 'Umar b. Muhammad, the well-known Samarkandian Traditionist (McChesney, 1991:30),¹³ and claimed that Muhammad al-Baqir, the fifth Imam, had entrusted the body to Abu Muslim for safekeeping with orders to take it to Khurasan for fear that the Umayyads would desecrate it (McChesney, 1991:31).¹⁴

Some ten years or so after the founding of the shrine, Isfizari, writing in 897/1491-2, reiterates the bare bones of Lari's history but elaborates on the account in a number of ways.¹⁵ He states that the name of the settlement where the tomb was rediscovered went by the name of Khwaja Khairan and that al-Gharnati's book was found in the library of Razi al-Din Muhammad, an individual from the "province of Afghanistan" (McChesney, 1991:31).¹⁶

However, the most complete, and still the most widely known, account of the rediscovery is that penned by Khwandamir some forty years after the events he records. By this time the shrine was flourishing and Khwandamir felt able to take advantage of its popular acceptance by interpolating a number of elements not found in the earlier accounts which were designed to enhance the shrine's authenticity and convince both the believers and doubters of its *bona fides*.

In 885 (1480-81) when Mirza Baiqara was governing at Balkh, something extremely marvellous happened. In brief it was this. A certain holy man named Shams al-Din Muhammad, a descendant of Abu Yazid Bastami, came from Kabul and Ghaznin (*sic*) to Balkh in that year. He waited upon Mirza Baiqara and showed him a chronicle that had been written during the time of Sultan Sanjar the son of Malik Shah Saljuqi. In that book it was written that the tomb of ... the Lion of God, the Commander of the Faithful, 'Ali b. Abi Talib ... was at a certain spot in the village of Khwaja Khairan. Consequently, Mirza Baiqara gathered the sayyids, *qazis*, worthies, and notables of Balkh, consulted them and then repaired to the above-mentioned village, which was three *farsakhs* from Balkh. There at the place the book indicated he saw a dome¹⁷ in which there was a tomb. He ordered the tomb excavated and when they had dug for a little while suddenly a white stone tablet¹⁸ was discovered on which was inscribed "This is the tomb of the

¹³ *Ibid*, 26.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 29-30.

¹⁵ Isfizari, *Rawzat*, i, 160-1.

¹⁶ *az wilāyat-i afghānistān*.

¹⁷ *gunbād*.

Victorious Lion of God, the Brother of the Messenger of God, 'Ali the Friend of God.'"¹⁹ A great shout was raised by those present and all pressed their faces to the ground in devotion. Alms and gifts were distributed to the deserving. When news of the discovery spread, the sick turned the face of hope towards this threshold. It is reported that many were cured of their illnesses and returned home with their dreams fulfilled. Inevitably, unimaginably large throngs of people came to the spot and brought votive offerings of gold and jewels of an amount that passes all comprehension.

When matters had reached this state, Mirza Baiqara hurried off to Herat as fast as he could and there related the events to the throne. The Great Khaqan was astonished when he heard of the discovery and decided to make a pilgrimage there with a contingent of his personal amirs. After he arrived, he paid his respects and ordered a large dome built over that holy spot with *iwans* and adjacent buildings. In the village he had a bazaar with shops and a bath constructed and he endowed the shrine with one of the canals of Balkh, which is now known as Nahr-i Shahi. He appointed Sayyid Taj al-Din Andkhui as *naqib*. He was related to Sayyid Baraka and was a person of high status. He named the descendant²⁰ of Bastami (i.e. Shams al-Din Muhammad) as shaikh and appointed reliable officials to supervise the votive and *waqf* income. Then the sovereign returned to his capital, Herat, where he lavished favours on his subjects.

In short, because of the appearance of the shrine and the sultan's visit, everyone who was able headed for the shrine so that annually a sum of about 100 Kapaki tumans worth of cash and valuables was brought there as votive gifts. The shaikh, *naqib* and the officials of the shrine spent the money on people visiting the shrine and for maintaining the buildings. The village of Khwaja Khairan became like a capital city as a result of the numbers of buildings and of the pilgrimage activity. In a short time an indescribably large number of people had come to the vicinity of that sacred place.²¹

Khwandamir transforms the laconic accounts of Lari and Isfizari into a full-blown hagiography which emphasises the *Supernatural* nature of the whole event which culminates in numerous miraculous events taking place at the newly discovered shrine. As was the case with the first authentication process, where the historical issues dividing the sceptical *faqih* and the "righteous people" became submerged by visions and similar supernatural interventions, so too Khwandamir's narrative seeks to shift the emphasis away from awkward historical realities by the same methods. At the same time, he uses the opportunity to pad out Lari's and Isfizari's brief and sober accounts for the same end whilst, indirectly, addressing any criticism from those who might still cast doubt on the historical *bona fides* of the grave.

¹⁸ *lūhī az sang-i saféd.*

¹⁹ *hadha qabr asad allāh akh rasūl allāh 'alī walī allāh.*

²⁰ *shaikhzāda.*

²¹ Khwandamir, *HS*, iv:171-3. I have followed McChesney's (1991:31-2) translation with a few alterations. Khwandamir first included an account of the discovery in the seventh volume of the *Rawzat al-Safa*, a work completed for his grandfather. It was then incorporated and expanded in his own history which was completed in 929/1523 (McChesney, 1991:31).

Herat, after all, had a sizeable Shi'i population and their confessional loyalties, as far as the last resting place of 'Ali was concerned, lay with the grave at Najaf.

In order to accomplish this end, Khwandamir appears to have interpolated into his narrative a number of elements found in al-Gharnati's original narrative. Whereas Lari merely records that the tomb was discovered, Khwandamir implies that Shams al-Din's source indicated the exact spot where the Imam was buried. Khwandamir then goes on to claim the investigators found a domed chamber (*gunbad*) already erected over the grave, even though it would seem fairly certain such a monument did not exist in 885/1480-1. It is certainly not mentioned by Lari or Isfizari. Al-Gharnati, on the other hand, states that such an edifice was erected over the grave following the original discovery. Khwandamir then adds to the earlier accounts by stating that the officials who were present at the excavation were senior religious and political figures all of whom, he implies, unquestioningly accepted the authenticity of the grave as soon as they had read the inscription. Neither Lari nor Isfizari make any reference at all to such an inscription and this is clearly borrowed from al-Gharnati's account in order to establish some sort of continuity between the first and second discovery. Conveniently, the inscription on the "white stone" unequivocally identified the grave as being that of 'Ali, Lion of God, though, as we have seen above (ch. 1) if it was the same inscription as that which is today found in the shrine (Plate 3), then, as we have seen above, it probably dates from after the first discovery.²² Given the discrepancy in the inscription which, according to al-Gharnati, was excavated when the grave was first opened, the one recorded by Khwandamir cannot be the same either. Khwandamir clearly

²² This inscription could have been unearthed during subsequent building work carried out under Sultan Husain's orders following his pilgrimage to the site following the rediscovery of the grave.

introduced the story of the inscription to convince his readers that there was no doubt that this grave site was authentic.²³

We have already remarked above on the curiously inaccurate expression “brother of the Messenger of God,” which Khwandamir says was inscribed on the headstone. Not only so, but the reference to ‘Ali as “the Friend (*wali*) of God” is probably another anachronism, for one would not expect to find ‘Ali b. Abi Talib referred to in this way on a mid-twelfth century inscription. It is an expression, though, which is closely associated with the Safawids who established the first Shi‘i state in Persia. Following Shah Isma‘il I’s conquest of Tabriz in 1501, this exact title was inserted into the Shi‘i bipartite confession of faith (Schimmel, 1994:195).

Khwandamir’s process of dehistoricification went hand-in-hand with the process of indigenisation of the shrine’s discovery by the hagiographers. Lari’s account includes a story about Abu Muslim, the great Khurasanian hero, whilst Isfizari relates how Shams al-Din found the book in the library of a shaikh who came from “the province²⁴ of Afghanistan.” Khwandamir takes it one stage further and ignores the Indian connection completely, instead he implies that Shams al-Din acquired the information during a visit to Kabul and Ghazni.

Khwandamir’s narrative is reinforced by his emphasis on how the authentication process was supported by various miracles at the grave. The validity of the site is further enhanced by his statement about the immediate popularity of the shrine with local people and he follows it up with a detailed account of the endorsement the grave received from no lesser a figure than Sultan Husain himself through his

²³ In al-Gharnati’s account the inscription was said to have been written on a brick, though Nur Muhammad (p. 26, n.1) says it was marble (*sang-i marmar*). As well as the Saljuq inscription, the administrators of the shrine also possess a magnificent Timurid stone carved in green jade (Plate 4), probably commissioned by Sultan Husain as part of the building programme he ordered following his pilgrimage. The stone has yet to be dated.

²⁴ *wilāyat*.

act of pilgrimage, the commissioning of extensive building work and endowments. It is no wonder that Khwandamir's picturesque and romanticised narrative quickly became the standard hagiographic account, eclipsing the more sober narratives of his predecessors.²⁵ Today it is the Khwandamir version which forms the basis of the stories related by the guardians of the shrine and its devotees, with, of course, suitable embellishments.

Whilst Khwandamir blended motifs drawn from al-Gharnati's original account with elements of his own invention, Lari, and his mentor 'Abd al-Rahman Jami, addressed the problem of the grave's historical incongruity in a somewhat different manner. Lari, concerned to explain how it was that the body of the Commander of the Faithful came to be translated from Iraq to Balkh, claims that his own research had revealed that the fifth Imam, Muhammad b. 'Ali al-Baqir (d. c. 117/735),²⁶ had entrusted it to Abu Muslim (d. 138/755-6) (McChesney, 1991:30-1, 204; Nur Muhammad:18ff.).²⁷

Such a claim, of course, bears little relationship to the historical record and is certainly a convenient fiction. At the time that al-Baqir lived, Abu Muslim,²⁸ was a very young man "who lacked either an Arab pedigree or an outstanding past."²⁹ His rise to prominence as an 'Abbasid propagandist does not commence until c. 128/745, nearly a decade after the death of the fifth Imam. As for claims that Abu

²⁵ Cf. comments by McChesney (1991:31). Le Strange (1905:422-3), who makes no reference to Lari's work, V.V. Barthold, 'Mazar-i Sharif,' *EI*(2),vi, 942; Yate (p. 281), who adds, presumably on the basis of information imparted during his visit, that the "coffin was reopened;" N. H. Dupree, (1967:49-50 & 1977:392-3), *et. al.*

²⁶ He succeeded to Imamate in 94/712-3, on the death of Zain al-Abidin. However, the exact date of his death is uncertain, some say he died as early as 113/731-2, others as late as 126/743-4 (Jafri:246, 255).

²⁷ Lari, *TMS*, 29-31.

²⁸ It is not known for certain where he was born, some say Isfahan others that he came from Merv (cf. Barthold, 1977:193; Frye, 1979, XIV:28). In northern Afghanistan he is traditionally said to have come from Anbar, or Sar-i Pul (*Andisha* circle, Mazar-i Sharif, spring 1996). Nur Muhammad (pp. 25-26) claims his grave is located in the village of Barak Baraki in Logar province of eastern Afghanistan, though later he states that the location of his actual tomb is unknown.

²⁹ *CHI*, iv:52.

Muslim had Imami leanings, Frye (1979:chap. XIV) has shown that such traditions originate from the legends and myths which grew up around Abu Muslim in the wake of the 'Abbasid revolution. Though he sought the support of Shi'i groups in Khurasan, his propaganda amongst them was rooted in political pragmatism and not polemical passion (Frye, 1979:chap. XIV; Jafri:272). As we have seen above (chap. 1), once the 'Abbasids had seized power, the Shi'a were quickly sidelined and eventually suppressed. In the wake of Abu Muslim's success, however, numerous syncretic and 'Ali Ilahi sects emerged in Khurasan and Transoxiana which exploited the name of Abu Muslim for personal and nationalistic ends (Barthold, 1977:196-200). These groups were known generally by the designation, "wearers of white garments,"³⁰ and their influence continued well into the twelfth century, especially in hill country of Badghis east of Herat and as far east as Badakhshan where, as we have already remarked, Isma'ili and other *ghulat* sects had a strong following (Barthold, 1977:199). In the case of the more extremist ^{Abu}Muslimiyya, this association was based on the belief that Abu Muslim had inherited the Imamate, even though he was not a descendant of 'Ali b. Abi Talib or any of the Imams.

In fact, when Abu Muslim began his covert campaign in Khurasan, the Shi'a were suspicious of him, as they were of the 'Abbasid propaganda as a whole. Had Abu Muslim been entrusted with such a sacred and holy relic by Muhammad b 'Ali al-Baqir, he would have surely exploited it, and the confidence of the Imam which the possession of such a treasure would imply, to the full in order to win Shi'i support for the 'Abbasid cause. The last thing he would have done was to have concealed the corpse in an unmarked grave in a remote Bactrian hamlet.

There is not the slightest evidence that Abu Muslim and Imam al-Baqir ever met and, even if they had, Abu Muslim would have been little more than a child at

³⁰ *Saféd-jamagān*.

the time. Lari is thus stretching credulity to the limit by his assertion and, had al-Baqir actually possessed this relic or knew of its whereabouts, he would have certainly left its safekeeping to his closest and most trusted advisers.³¹ For most of his Imamate, al-Baqir was engaged in a bitter struggle with his half-brother, Zaid, over the issue of the succession. Had the Imam known the whereabouts of the body of the First Imam, he would have surely exploited this knowledge to undermine Zaidi claims (Jafri:248-9). In fact, al-Baqir *did* possess a number of important relics which he used for exact this purpose, including a casket containing secret religious scrolls and the weapons of the prophet of Islam (Jafri:248). Yet nothing belonging to, or associated with, 'Ali b. Abi Talib is ever mentioned in his relic lists.

We conclude, therefore, that Lari invented the Abu Muslim story in an attempt to convince waverers (cf. McChesney, 1991:30-1). In doing so, he showed considerable astuteness. Al-Baqir's credentials, as far as the mainstream Shi'a were concerned, were impeccable, the real sectarian splits occurring following the death of this Imam. However, probably as a result of the activities of the various Muslimiyya sects in the region, over the succeeding centuries a whole corpus of myth and folklore evolved around the charismatic Abu Muslim which turned him into a Khurasanian *jawanmard*, in the same mould as the ancient Iranian heroes of the *Shahnama* (Frye, 1979:chap. XIV; McChesney, 1991:204).³² By including this story about Abu Muslim, without citing his source, Lari thus appeals to local sentiment in Herat and Balkh where stories of this famous hero of the 'Abbasid revolution abounded.

Over the succeeding centuries the Abu Muslim myth has been elaborated by countless storytellers and hagiographers. Nur Muhammad (pp. 26-9), possibly

³¹ For the intimate associates of al-Baqir see, Jafri (pp. 248-54).

³² Shahrastani, *Kitab*, 131-32.

aware of the historical improbability of linking Abu Muslim with the fifth Imam, claims instead that this commission was received from Ja'far al-Sadiq (d. 148/765), the sixth Imam (McChesney, 1991:204).³³ Historically, this exchange of correspondence between Abu Muslim and Ja'far al-Sadiq can be discredited. Apart from the fact that Ja'far al-Sadiq did not join the 'Abbasid cause (Kennedy, 1981:200-1), he is reported to have publicly denied that the Khurasanian propagandist was his representative (Shahristani:132).

Today, popular tradition in Afghanistan states that Abu Muslim, having unearthed the coffin of Shah-i Mardan from its secret burial place near Najaf, placed the relic on the back of a white she-camel and conveyed it in secret to Balkh, where it was interred in the grave at al-Khair/Khwaja Khairan (*Gazetteer*, 1907, ii:298; Grodekoff:44n; Nur Muhammad:29-30). This tradition is clearly an indigenised version of a late Shi'i tradition, recorded by Mustawfi in the fourteenth century, regarding 'Ali's death and which attempts to explain how the Imam's body came to be interred at Najaf. According to Mustawfi, who was also responsible for promoting the myth of authentication of this shrine to Harun al-Rashid,³⁴ 'Ali, having been stabbed by his assailant and realising death was near, commanded that after he had expired his body should be placed on a camel and that the beast be turned loose, the place where the camel finally knelt, being the place where he should be buried. His last wish was obeyed and the camel came to rest at the spot over which the shrine at Najaf was subsequently built (Le Strange, 1905:76-7).³⁵ It

³³ *Ibid.*, though he probably confuses the two Imams, since he erroneously calls Ja'far al-Sadiq the fifth Imam.

³⁴ See chap 1, above.

³⁵ There are a number of *maqams* of 'Ali and his camel in the Fertile Crescent (Schimmel, 1994:55). Sven Hedin (i:218-9), writing at the end of the last century, states that the Kirghiz believed that the last resting place of 'Ali and his she-camel was on the slopes of the Muztagh Ata mountain. This latter place has long been associated with Buddhism and local spirit cults.

seems, however, that a modified version of this legend was in vogue in Najaf and Kufa as early as 580/1184.³⁶

This unusual method of divination was inspired by the precedent found in traditional accounts of the Hijra of Muhammad who, on arriving in Medina, determined the location of where he stayed and where his mosque was to be built, by allowing the she-camel on which he was riding to roam unguided, claiming it was "under God's orders."³⁷ The place where the camel finally "lay exhausted with its chest on the ground"³⁸ was the place where he lodged. In the Bactrian version of this tradition, Abu Muslim, arriving at what is now Shah-i Mardan of Andkhui (see below), deliberately released the white she-camel to wander at will in order to determine the place which had been divinely ordained as 'Ali's last resting place (L. Dupree, 1978:115; Grodekoff:44; Nur Muhammad:26-29).

The Abu Muslim legend, and the presence of a shrine to Shah-i Mardan in Mazar-i Sharif, spawned numerous other 'Alid *qadamgah*^h, or 'footprint' shrines, throughout the region (L. Dupree, 1978:115; Nur Muhammad:29, 31, n.2; Olufsen, 1904:157-9).³⁹ We have already noted above (chap. 1) the presence of a second shrine to Shah-i Mardan at the modern town of Hamzabad in Uzbekistan. As far as Afghanistan is concerned the most important shrine linked to the Abu Muslim leg-

³⁶ Ibn Jubayr, *Travels*, 220.

³⁷ Ibn Ishaq, *Sirat*, 228 (Guillaume); cf. Margoliouth (pp. 211, 214).

³⁸ *Ibid.* Cf. the Islamic tradition relating Salih's miraculous extraction of a she-camel from a rock in Sura vii:73; see also G.D. Newby (pp. 58-6).

³⁹ Amongst the most notable shrines dedicated to 'Ali b. Abi Talib are: Panja-yi Shah-i Mardan, east of the Bala Hisar in Kabul, the focus of veneration being the impression of the hand (*panja*) of 'Ali (Masson, ii:236, iii:93; Nur Muhammad:34-35, n.3) and Sakhi Jan, in Jamal Mina, a Shi'i *qadamgah* to the Commander of the Faithful. Hazrat Shah-i Mardan, near Istalif, is associated with stories of 'Ali's dragon-slaying feats (Masson, iii:121-2), as is the famous shrine of Azhda-yi Besud, the 'Dragon of Behsud', near Shahidan, on the Band-i Amir to Bamiyan road (*Gazetteer*, 1907, ii:60; Amir Khan:171; Levy:66-8; Masson, ii:357-8, 395). Another, as yet undated (Ghurid?) shrine to Shah-i Mardan, is located in the citadel area of Qala'-yi Naraiman, high up on a plateau S.W. of the village of Laman, Badghis (*personal observation*, spring 1994). There are numerous shrines called Ziyarat-i Hazrat 'Ali. The one at Garan on the upper Amu Darya is said to be "the Holy of Holies" of all shrines in the region (Olufsen, 1904:158-61). Another shrine, of the same name, is located near the Yakhan Pass in Taiwara, Central Afghanistan (Imam Sharif:206).

end is the now-destroyed shrine of Shah-i Mardan, five kilometres south-east of Andkhui on the Shibarghan road. Originally, this complex consisted of a large burnt brick *ziyarat* and an associated *khanaqa*⁴⁰ It is claimed to be the last resting place of Abu Muslim's camel prior to its arrival at Khwaja Khairan (*Gazetteer*, 1907, ii:298; Maitland, ii:164; Peacocke:291).

Lari's translation myth was supplemented by extended poetical contributions from 'Ali Sher Nawai and 'Abd al-Rahman Jami (Nur Muhammad:46, 50), both of whom were important literary and establishment figures in the government of Sultan Husain Baiqara. As well as writing a *qasida* which relates the rediscovery of the grave at Khwaja Khairan and, in the process, lending the weight of his authority to the authentication, Jami penned a shorter poem which sought to address directly the awkward issue of Najaf's more ancient claims (Nur Muhammad:50):

Gūyand ki murtaz-i 'Alī dar Najaf ast dar Balkh bīyā, bibin chi bait al-sharaf ast
(Jāmī) na 'adan gūyī, na bain al-jabalīn khūrshīd yakī, wa nūr-i ū har taraf ast

They say at Najaf is [buried] 'Ali the Elect Come to Balkh, see, what a noble dwelling it is,
 (Jami) say neither here, nor Persian Iraq, The sun is one, yet its light is everywhere.

In these verses, Jami, a Sufi master as well as one of the most eminent Persian poets of his generation, removed the authenticity debate even further from the issue of the grave's historical validity, by the use of mystical sophistry which allows him, and others enthusiastic about the newly-discovered shrine, to accept both Najaf and Khwaja Khairan as valid pilgrimage sites. For he implies that it is not particularly important where the body of the Commander of the Faithful is actually buried, since his 'Divine Light' radiates everywhere. Thus Shi'i sentiment was satisfied, whilst mystical justification is provided for those who found pilgrimage to

⁴⁰ The shrine was badly damaged by shell fire during the Soviet occupation. Recently, a new concrete shrine, prayer area and compound has been built to the east of the original site. As far as I can ascertain no one ever dated the original buildings or surveyed them for inscriptions. Given the story still associated with the shrine, it is likely that it was erected subsequent to the Timurid re-founding of the shrine at Khwaja Khairan.

the shrine at Khwaja Khairan convenient and beneficial. Today Jami's couplet, with its imagery that harks back to an ancient concept of the regal glory (*khwarnah*) which rested on the monarchs of Mazdean Iran, greets pilgrims as they pass through the main portal of the shrine.

The authenticity of Khwaja Khairan was further enhanced by the actions of Sultan Husain Baiqara and his court. According to Khwandamir, the Khaqan was "astonished" at the news, but not in any sceptical way. On the contrary, he appears to have accepted the discovery at its face value and demonstrated his support of the site by performing a pilgrimage to the site in the company of his most senior advisers, including 'Ali Sher Nawai (McChesney, 1991:32; Nur Muhammad:46-47).⁴¹

On his arrival, Sultan Husain, having performed the necessary *ziyarat* rituals, set about ensuring a bright future for the shrine by commissioning a domed chamber with *iwans* and other buildings in the vicinity. As a further fillip to pilgrimage, he ordered the construction of a bazaar and a bath house (*hamam*), whilst the revenue from the villages dependent on the Nahr-i Shahi canal, which had been associated with the shrine during the Saljuq period, was devoted to the upkeep of the sacred place and the support of its officials (McChesney, 1991:32).

Indeed, according to Nur Muhammad (p. 48), Sultan Husain was so enthusiastic for the cult, that he wanted to move the body to Herat and place it "in the madrasa of 'Aliya (Shahrukhiyya) which was adjacent to the Masjid-i Jama'." He was prevented from doing this by his advisers who felt that he might incur divine disfavour by violating the trust placed in Abu Muslim by the Imam who, it was argued, could well have been carrying out the orders of 'Ali b. Abi Talib himself to bury his body at this particular spot (Nur Muhammad: 48-49). Consequently, the tomb

⁴¹ Nur Muhammad says the pilgrimage took place in the summer month of Saratan.

remained where it was and within two decades the small settlement of Khwaja Khairan had been transformed into one of the major pilgrimage centres of the empire.

Sultan Husain's motives for encouraging and promoting the Khwaja Khairan cult were not purely devotional and altruistic, though undoubtedly he did have a personal attachment to both saint cults and the Imams. However, there must have been strong political reasons behind the decision of the Khaqan and his advisers to endorse the grave's authenticity with such alacrity. After all, to claim Khwaja Khairan was the true resting place of 'Ali b. Abi Talib, was a high risk strategy which required rewriting an important and emotive period of Islamic history and opened the door for similar claims. Indeed this is exactly what happened.

Khwandamir records how, following the discovery at Khwaja Khairan, a certain drover⁴² from Herat claimed that whilst he had been performing the dusk prayers⁴³ at the tomb of Khwaja Ansari at Guzargah, four horsemen appeared to him in a vision, informed him that the last resting place of Hazrat Shah, viz 'Ali b. Abi Talib, was nearby, and proceeded to show him a grave near the tomb of Shams al-Din Sangtarash,⁴⁴ outside the city walls (Barthold, 1964:42; McChesney, 1991:35).⁴⁵ In stark contrast to his treatment of the events at al-Khair, Khwandamir dismisses this claim as the work of a charlatan and deceiver. However, at the time the authorities took the matter very seriously, for the site became a rallying point for "the urban lumpenproletariat" (McChesney, 1991:35), political radicals and fringe cults. Not only so, but the sick, particularly the blind and lame, were carried in large numbers to the grave site in the hope of a cure and it appears that things

⁴² *'arāba kash.*

⁴³ *nimāz-i shāmī.*

⁴⁴ *sangtarāsh*, a stone mason, someone who is particularly associated with the making of headstones for graves. Possibly the association of another Shams al-Din with the recent events at Khwaja Khairan was responsible for this particular element in the vision.

⁴⁵ Khwandamir, *HS*, 173.

were getting out of hand.⁴⁶ Of particular concern to the authorities were the activities of one Shi'i group, the *Tabarru'iyān*, or Execrators.⁴⁷ This movement, which subsequently received official approval from Shah Isma'il I (r. 1501-24),⁴⁸ took upon themselves the dual function of publicly praising 'Ali whilst execrating⁴⁹ the Caliphs who preceded him (McChesney, 1991:36). Encouraged by the discovery at Khwaja Khairan and the growing political strength of Shi'ism in Iran, extremist Shi'is in Herat may have naively misinterpreted Sultan Husain's enthusiasm for Khwaja Khairan as a harbinger of a change in the Khaqan's religious affiliation. As they were to find out to their cost, this was the last thing in the Khaqan's mind. The activities of these hard-line propagandists were dangerously provocative not just to the Sunni population of Herat in general, but to the Timurid state as a whole. Furthermore, the cursing of the Caliphs was a grave religious offence under the *shari'a* (Schimmel, 1994:188) and was a threat to the fragile peace which existed between the various religious and ethnic groups in Herat. Two weeks after the commencement of the agitation, the authorities stepped in, a number of the leading figures of the movement were arrested whilst a number of others were expelled from the city. This prompt action nipped a highly subversive, sectarian movement in the bud and the claims of the Shams al-Din Sangtarash site were quickly forgotten (McChesney, 1991:36).⁵⁰

Why then did Sultan Husain actively support the authentication of Khwaja Khairan, given the dangers of sectarian unrest which, as we have seen, it inspired?

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Shah Isma'il decreed Shi'ism was to be the only permissible expression of Islam in the Safawid Empire. When some Shi'i theologians suggested this was an unwise course, the Shah replied: "I am committed to this action; God and the Immaculate Imams are with me, and I fear no one; by God's help, if the people utter one word of protest, I will draw the sword and leave not one of them alive" (Browne, 1969, iv:52-3). During his twenty-odd years as the Persian Shah, he was to demonstrate all too often his willingness to use the sword for exactly this end.

⁴⁹ *tabarrā' kardan.*

⁵⁰ Khwandamir, *HS*, 173.

There were several factors that probably motivated the Khaqan. The Timurid period was noted for the proliferation of saint cults, and devotion to 'Ali and the *Ahl-i Bait* became popular right across the whole spectrum of Islamic popular belief. Sultan Husain Baiqara himself favoured the Shi'i rite, to such an extent that he "seriously considered reciting the names of the Twelve Imams in the *khutba*" following his capture of Herat.⁵¹ Shah Rukh's wife, Gauhar Shad, after all, had been a direct descendant of the Imams and Shah Rukh himself, despite espousing Sunnism as the official rites of his empire, lavished vast sums of money on the shrine of Imam Reza at Mashhad.⁵²

Sultan Husain, however, was prevented from pursuing this politically disastrous course of action by his chief adviser and close friend, 'Ali Sher Nawai (Barthold, 1962:20). Instead, Sultan Husain continued the policy of his predecessors, by promulgating his allegiance to the *sunna* whilst, at the same time, distancing himself from the Turco-Mongolian code of Chingiz Khan (Subtelny, 1994:380). This policy, however, did not prevent one of Sultan Husain's sons, Muhammad-i Husain, from becoming a vociferous and fervent Isma'ili.⁵³ Sultan Husain and his immediate circle would certainly have held 'Ali b. Abi Talib and his family in high esteem and the Khwaja Khairan discovery could have hardly failed to have excited him. Indeed, it may well have been regarded by the Khaqan and his court as an omen of good.

Sultan Husain may have hoped that by promoting the shrine at Balkh, the religious needs of some of his Shi'i subjects would be met to some degree, a need which increased after 914/1508 when Najaf and Karbala' fell into Safawid hands

⁵¹ *Babur Nama*, 262, transl. Beveridge.

⁵² *CHI*, vi:615-6.

⁵³ Cf. Babur's acerbic remark, "He must have been shut up (*band*) with Shah Isma'il at some place in Iraq and have become his disciple; he became a rank heretic later," *Babur Nama*, 262, transl. Beveridge.

(Browne, 1969, iv:58). Though relations between Timurid and Safawid were generally “cordial” (Browne, 1969, iv:63; Barthold, 1962:20), Sultan Husain could hardly have failed to realise the threat posed by the rise of Shi‘ism as a political force in Iran and the destabilising effect such radicalisation might have on his own government. Some years earlier a Hurufi had tried to assassinate Sultan Husain’s great-great uncle, Shah Rukh (Subtelny, 1994:381). It was better, therefore, if the Khaqan’s Shi‘i subjects had some physical focus for religious devotion within Timurid realms rather than risking ideological and political radicalisation of his subjects on pilgrimage to shrines in Persia and Iraq. By redirecting at least a percentage of the pilgrim traffic to Balkh, any antigovernment elements could be carefully policed and be dealt with swiftly and efficiently where necessary.⁵⁴ This may explain why the Khaqan intervened so swiftly following the initial revelations about the grave of Khwaja Khairan. Having lent his official approval to the authenticity of the site he was in a position to ensure that the day-to-day running of the shrine was entrusted to men of his own appointment rather than risking it falling into the hands of extremist Shi‘i shaikhs and *ishans* who might exploit the sanctity and sanctuary of the shrine for their own political and sectarian agendas.

The movement at Herat which was doubtless inspired by the Khwaja Khairan revelations, was of quite a different order. From its inception it had all the hallmarks of a ‘grass roots’ movement, led by dissident elements in the capital. Within a matter of days it was being exploited and radicalised by sectarians who used the visions to challenge the Khaqan’s authority. At the same time, the claim that the authentic grave of Shah-i Mardan was in Herat could not be tolerated, especially when the whole court had thrown its weight behind the authenticity of Khwaja

⁵⁴ This was certainly the case at Mazar-i Sharif in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the *waqf* administrators withheld benefits from pilgrims to the shrine because they were engaging in activities not approved of by the authorities in Balkh (McChesney, 1991:36).

Khairan. There was only room for one grave of 'Ali b. Abi Talib within Sultan Husain's realms, and it had to be the one to which the Khaqan himself and his hagiographers had given their seal of approval. The emergence of the Tabarru'iyān must have been a matter of grave concern to Sultan Husain, since their appearance suggested that radical, pro-Safawid propagandists had been secretly operating in the capital. Hence the swift and decisive action taken by the authorities to put an end to the agitation.

Sultan Husain's decision to promote Khwaja Khairan as a major centre of pilgrimage was a spectacular success. Within two decades of its establishment, "everyone who was able headed for the shrine" (McChesney, 1991:32). Even forty years after, Khwandamir makes it clear that its popularity was undiminished. The settlement of Khwaja Khairan grew quickly and soon overshadowed the provincial capital of Balkh. It would be reasonable, therefore, to suggest that the shrine succeeded in filling a gap in the religious lives of the populace of Balkh and Transoxiana, many of whom stood little or no chance of performing the Meccan or Kufan Hajj (Subtelny, 1988 & 1994).⁵⁵

This wish to contain popular religious devotion within officially approved channels, is shown by Sultan Husain's choice of officials to administer the shrine at Khwaja Khairan. Sayyid Taj al-Din, the first *naqib*, came from Andkhui, a place renowned for such figures as Baba Sangu (Hazrat Ishan Wali), who wielded considerable spiritual influence over Timur Lang (McChesney, 1991:42; Lee, 1996:18-19).⁵⁶ Andkhui had close affiliations with the *Ahl-i Bait* not just because of the shrine of Shah-i Mardan which, as we have seen, is associated with the translation myth associated with Abu Muslim, but also because of the shrine of

⁵⁵ E.g. 'Ali Sher Nawai who had twice been refused permission to perform Hajj (see text below).

⁵⁶ Timur had dedicated the revenues of Andkhui to the upkeep and maintenance of Mecca and Medina (McChesney, 1991:43).

Chahardah Ma'sum.⁵⁷ Located in the ruins of the old town, this shrine contains the graves of fourteen members of the same clan of sayyids, descendants of 'Ali b. Abi Talib through the line of Husain (Lee, 1996:24; Yate:348-9). Indeed, is likely that these individuals were members of Sayyid Taj al-Din Naqib's own family.⁵⁸

Shams al-Din Muhammad, the instigator of the search, and hence an ardent believer in the shrine's authenticity, was appointed as shaikh. He was a direct descendant of Abu Yazid Bastami,⁵⁹ one of the most famous of all Khurasanian mystics (McChesney, 1991:44),⁶⁰ whose last resting place, like Shah-i Mardan, was a matter of dispute.⁶¹ Indeed only a few hours' horse ride from Khwaja Khairan, at Hazrat Sultan, was a shrine which claimed to be the authentic tomb of Abu Yazid (Maitland, 1888, ii:43, 45).⁶² We know that the cult centre of Hazrat Sultan was al-

⁵⁷ *Chahardah* Ma'sum is a burnt brick *gunbad* which contains fourteen (*Chahardah*) magnificent Timurid tombstones. According to Yate (pp. 348-9), the earliest tomb dates from 889/1484, i.e. four years after the re-establishment of Khwaja Khairan, the latest from 984/1576. The Kufic inscription which Yate claims adorned the wall of the shrine when he visited it in the mid 1880s has disappeared. If such an inscription indeed existed in the mid 1880s, it may indicate that the building which now houses these graves could have been Saljuq (Zaidi?) like the famous shrines in Sari Pul, the Timurid shaikhs being subsequently buried in the shrine. Local tradition maintains that it is impossible to correctly count the number of the tombs; one time they number 15 another time 13 or 12 but never 14. This is undoubtedly due to the physical structure of the building which consists of two linked domed chambers (*gunbad*) which makes it impossible to see all 14 tombs at one and the same time (*personal observation*, Chaharda Ma'sum, May 1995, 1996). According to Schimmel (1994:81) the number 14 in Shi'ism is linked to an ancient belief in the existence of 14 protecting spirits or saints.

⁵⁸ Since the earliest tombs are contemporary with Taj al-Din's promotion to the *naqibship* of Khwaja Khairan, it may well have been he who commissioned the *gunbad* in the first place and paid for the tombstones. In 1993, local sources close to the shrine officials at Mazar-i Sharif stated there was still a clan in Andkhui called Kamali who are related to the *mutawalis* of the *rauza*.

⁵⁹ Certain of the Saljuq rulers of Khurasan had been devotees of Abu Yazid and it may have been that Shams al-Din's discovery of the al-Gharnati text had come about indirectly as a result of his research into his ancestor's career, see Subtelny (1994:403).

⁶⁰ Junaid said of him that he "holds the same rank among us as Gabriel amongst the angels" (Hujwiri:106).

⁶¹ Abu Yazid is fairly certainly buried in his home town of Bastam, in the Iranian province of Khurasan. In the Timurid period his shrine was said to be "second only in importance to Mashhad ... and was a spiritual focus for eastern Iran and Mawarannahr" (McChesney, 1991:44). There is another rival shrine to this shaikh at Chittagong in Bangladesh which is inhabited by a breed of white tortoise (Schimmel, 1994:7).

⁶² Personal observation and interviews with *ishans* and mullah of Hazrat Imam, April 1996. The tomb lies to the west of the paved road, some sixteen miles north of Aibak. Up until the modern road was constructed, Hazrat Sultan lay on the old caravan road between Tashqurghan and Pul-i Khumri. The present sun-dried brick *gunbad*, located on the top of a high sand dune, is not the original one but was constructed in c.1889 by order of Amir 'Abd al Rahman Khan. The ancient building is located inside the settlement, but I was only informed of the existence of this latter building after I had left the area and consequently did not inspect it.

ready well known in mediaeval times, for Timur Lang himself made a special point of paying his respects here following his victories in the west (Lee, 1996:20; McChesney, 1991:121-2).

Sultan Husain's choice of *naqib* and *shaikh* thus brought together a number of important religious traditions which enabled the shrine, though Sunni controlled, to have an 'interdenominational' appeal; a tradition which persists down to the present day.⁶³ For 'Ali b. Abi Talib, unlike the Imams who followed him, is a figure held in the highest esteem by Shi'i, Sunni and Sufi alike. Sayyid Taj al-Din's link with the shaikhs of Andkhui, and his possible family ties with 'Ali b. Abi Talib, probably went some way to satisfy the increasingly vocal Shi'i minority who may have questioned why, if Khwaja Khairan was the authentic burial place of 'Ali b. Abi Talib, the shrine should be controlled by Sunni administrators and *ishans*. At the same time, Sayyid Taj al-Din Andkhui and Shams al-Din's family affiliations with well-known Khurasanian mystics meant that Sufi participation in the shrine's devotional life was actively encouraged (McChesney, 1991:42-3). Again, this association has survived down to the present day with a separate room set aside adjacent to the tomb specifically as a *khanaqāh*⁶⁴

The daily running of the shrine's affairs, however, was probably entrusted to senior members of the Ansari clan from Herat. According to an ancient tradition, which is still in force to this day, the *rauza* always has one hundred and twenty Ansari clan members attached to it.⁶⁵ For a variety of reasons, it would seem that this

⁶³ Shah-i Mardan at Mazar-i Sharif has always been controlled by Sunnis and is not thus, a Shi'i shrine *per se*. All expression of Shi'i rituals associated with Ashura and Muharram, for example, being forbidden, though Shi'is attend the Janda Bala and come frequently to pray at the shrine. There is, as far as we can ascertain, only one period when this was not the case. During the reign of Nazr Muhammad Khan ((d. 1060/1650), a *mutawalli* of the shrine was appointed whose family harked from Mashhad and apparently, at that time, pilgrimage to the shrine took place during Muharram (McChesney, 1991:101-9).

⁶⁴ For a plan of the Timurid shrine, see Golombek & Wilber, ii: plan 94).

⁶⁵ The present *mudir* of the shrine, appointed by General Dostam, is an Ansari.

tradition goes back to Sultan Husain Baiqara's time (McChesney, 1991:45). Shaikh 'Abdullah Ansari (d. 481/1089), as his name implies, was a descendant of the *ansar*, or ^sHelper of the Prophet, Abu Ayyub (Browne, 1969, ii:269). He was a renowned Traditionist, famed for his zealous advocacy of the *sunna* and *shari'a* and his opposition to Mu'tazilite and Ash'arite rationalism, although he was also the author of a popular devotional manual, the *Munajat*, full of conventional mystic imagery.⁶⁶

The tomb of Khwaja Ansari at Guzargah, lay just outside the city walls of Herat and his cult played a vital role in Timurid political and religious life. When Shah Rukh took control of Herat, he faced the daunting task of justifying his claim to a territory which had been acquired at the point of the sword. Not only so, he had to somehow or other consolidate his power in the face of many rivals and create a viable and stable state out of the chaos and anarchy which had been the legacy of Timur Lang's conquests. To this end he adopted the Persian monarchical system, which centred power in the person of the divinely appointed and rightly guided ruler. The *sunna* and *shari'a* were introduced to replace traditional Turco-Mongolian law. Another essential element of this Islamic legitimisation process was the patronage of Ansari's cult, for the Khwaja was regarded as the patron saint of Herat.⁶⁷ By lavishing patronage on the shrine, Shah Rukh and his successors thus ingratiated themselves to the people of Herat whilst, at the same time, making Ansari appear to be the protector and patron of Timurid authority (Subtelny, 1994).

⁶⁶ A similar cult grew up around the tomb of thirteenth century Traditionist, Ibn Taimiya, who ardently opposed the cult of saints and was the inspiration for the later Wahhabi movement. He was buried in a Sufi cemetery in Damascus and his tomb quickly became the centre of a saint cult (Denny:76-7).

⁶⁷ Ansari is generally referred to today as 'Pir-i Herat'.

During the reign of Sultan Husain Baiqara the Ansari cult reached a pinnacle of development. The Khaqan and his court, evincing “a fine appreciation for the political and economic value of pious endowments” (Subtelny, 1994:388), surrounded the grave with numerous buildings and increased the numbers of shaikhs in attendance at the complex (Subtelny, 1994:388-91). But this was not all. Khwandamir, who was responsible for the elaboration and mythologisation of the discovery at Khwaja Khairan, composed a fictitious genealogy which made the Khaqan appear to be a direct descendant of ‘Abdullah Ansari. In this way, Sultan Husain was provided with another tool to legitimise Timurid suzerainty (Subtelny, 1994:389-90). Not unnaturally, Sultan Husain exploited this mythological lineage at every conceivable opportunity (Subtelny, 1994:391-2).

The fortunes of Guzargah, both materially and spiritually, thus became intimately intertwined with those of the Herat Timurids. The shrine became associated with all the important events of Sultan Husain’s reign and, to tie the bonds even tighter, the Khaqan appointed as guardians of the shrine individuals who were an integral part of the Establishment. ‘Ali Sher Nawai, who later lent his authority to authenticity of Khwaja Khairan, had an extremely close affiliation with Ansari’s tomb, to the extent that he petitioned, and was eventually granted, an honorific but prestigious office at the shrine. Towards the end of his life, ‘Ali Sher believed that his regular journeys to Guzargah were a legitimate substitute for the Meccan Hajj; a journey he never undertook (Subtelny, 1994:395-7). Given Sultan Husain’s closeness to the Ansaris, who as a clan had profited much from Timurid patronage over the years, it was a sensible move to appoint Ansari shaikhs as *mutawallis* of the newly established shrine at Balkh.

The similarities between Sultan Husain's sponsorship of Guzargah as an imperial cult centre and his promotion of Khwaja Khairan cannot be incidental. The Timurid patronage of Guzargah was a deliberate political decision made in order to promote the regime's Sunni credentials and to demonstrate its right to exercise sovereignty. Similarly, the unexpected and unsolicited discovery of the remains of 'Ali b. Abi Talib provided miraculous evidence of God's approval of Timurid sovereignty over Balkh which at the time was threatened by the ravages of the Shaibanids. Sultan Husain thus had the best of both worlds. Guzargah and Khwaja Khairan symbolised the two main politico-theological divisions of Islam, Sunni and Shi'i, whilst both cult centres were bound together at the devotional level by the close involvement of Naqshbandi brotherhoods which helped to bridge a widening ethnic and sectarian divide. The appointments made to the Balkh shrine were thus politically motivated, in the same way as the ones made earlier at Guzargah.

From the point of view of national security, the two shrines could not have been better located. 'Abdullah Ansari, the protector and legitimiser of Timurid rule, lay buried a few miles from the walls of Sultan Husain's capital city. That of 'Ali b. Abi Talib, with its greater potential as a focus of antigovernment movements, was sufficiently far away as not to pose an immediate threat to stability in Herat. Yet the shrine was sufficiently close to the provincial capital of Balkh for local authorities to act swiftly to suppress any disturbances or uprisings by political opponents or sectarians.

Sultan Husain's active promotion of Guzargah and Khwaja Khairan were thus twin prongs in his lifelong battle to legitimise and consolidate Timurid authority. Like the rulers of Anglo-Saxon England, the possession of such powerful relics

were an essential tool in this struggle, for the justice of their cause was deemed to have been established by the very fact that they were the guardians of these holy things. The shrines were visible symbols of royal and divine right (see Rollason:159ff.). That relics and shrines should be exploited in such a way is, perhaps, strange to the western mind in the post-enlightenment era, obsessed as we are with the 'constitutionality' of government. But to a dynasty whose empire arose from raw conquest and which was anxious to be accepted as a legitimate Islamic government, these relics and shrines played a vital role in the integration process. As such, the lavish patronage bestowed on the shrines at Guzargah and Khwaja Khairan for these ends would have been regarded by the Timurids as a legitimate use of these sacred objects (see Brown:42-50).

The indigenisation and redirection of pilgrimage to localised "little cities of God" (Subtelny, 1994:386) were arguably amongst the most significant factors in creating the stability which was a feature of Sultan Husain's long reign. As such, we can say that the policy succeeded, even though after Sultan Husain's death his empire was swept aside by the Shaibanid Uzbeks. The shrines stood like two pillars of a suspension bridge which linked the Persian and Islamic world of the west to the semi-'pagan' Turco-Mongolian world of Central Asia and the steppes. In the maelstrom of uncertainty which followed towards the end of Sultan Husain's reign, the shrines must have seemed to ordinary people like little paradises, centres of tranquillity, unity and sanctuary in a world threatened internally by sectarian tensions and externally by Uzbek incursions from the other side of the Oxus (see Brown:41-3, 75-6, 100).

At the purely pragmatic level, the success of the shrine at Khwaja Khairan brought considerable prosperity to a region which had suffered much hardship as a

result of civil war and unrest. From Khwandamir's account it is clear that Khwaja Khairan was transformed almost overnight into a bustling bazaar town. Trade boomed as vast numbers of pilgrims visited the shrine. Reading between the lines of Khwandamir's account, it would appear that the Hazhdā^rNahr canal system had been particularly neglected since the days of Timur's invasions, a decline which must have had seriously reduced agricultural output and probably led to a decline in the population. The agricultural lands dependent on the canal system would have been a major source of revenue for Sultan Husain, as well as being one of the main food producing regions of the state. As such, it was important to promote the development of the area, to attract more population and increase output. If Khwandamir is not exaggerating, both these goals were realised within a short space of time. The success of the shrine, furthermore, meant that a proportion of these revenues were spent on the repair, maintenance and expansion of the Nahr-i Shahi and in bringing more land into production.

CHAPTER 3

NAUROZ IN AFGHAN FOLKLORE AND RELIGIOUS TRADITION

Even the most ardent devotee of the shrine of Shah-i Mardan admits that the triple New Year festivals of Nauroz, Janda Bala and Gul-i Surkh are rooted in the region's pre-Islamic past. In the case of Nauroz, the Zoroastrian origin of this festival is well known and its traditions well documented, though it was probably originally derived from a much more ancient Indo-Aryan tradition (Boyce, 1982 ii:108-9; Curtis:32; A. Donaldson:120-3; Grunebaum:54-6).¹ Today, Nauroz is still celebrated throughout Central Asia, Iran, Afghanistan and parts of Turkey (particularly amongst the Kurds) despite its pre-Islamic origins. As such, the celebration of Nauroz in Mazar-i Sharif is hardly unique. Rather, it is its association with the festivals of Gul-i Surkh and Janda Bala, and the fact that all three of these festivals are assimilated to a shrine dedicated to 'Ali b. Abi Talib, which makes it an object of particular interest to the religious historian.

Whilst Afghans are generally ignorant of the origins of Janda Bala and Gul-i Surkh in particular, they do recognise that these festivals have little to do with Islam or, indeed, the person of Shah-i Mardan. In the case of the Janda Bala, there is some attempt at providing an Islamic context, inasmuch as it is said that it is not so much the pole as the Hazrat's banner which is the focus of veneration during Janda Bala. As we shall see below (chap. 7) this linkage is based on concepts of Islamic history which do not stand up to close examination. In endeavouring, therefore, to identify the origins of these festivals, how they came to be associated with

¹ al-Biruni, *CAN*, 199-204, 217 (Sachau's translation and pagination).

Nauroz and, more particularly, with a shrine dedicated to 'Ali b. Abi Talib, we shall first examine aspects of Bactrian religious tradition in the pre-Islamic era and the survival of certain ancient traditions associated with the Nauroz period which are still practised in the mountain communities of north-central Afghanistan.

We have already noted that there is evidence to suggest that at the time of the Saljuq discovery, the grave site at al-Khair was already associated in local minds with certain pre-Islamic religious practices or festivals. We know that for millennia before the arrival of Islam, Bactra was one of the great centres of ancient civilisation and a major centre of pilgrimage. Mediaeval Islamic geographers and historians acknowledged its antiquity by referring to it as *Umm al-Bilad*, the 'Mother of Towns', and claiming that Bactra had been founded by a great-grandson of Noah (Holt:28-9), or by Cain, son of Adam (Faiz Bakhsh:1).² Another early Islamic tradition attributed to 'Abdullah b. 'Omar, the second Caliph, claimed that Bactra was the second city founded on the earth and that the grave of Abel was somewhere in the plain of Gustashp³ near the city (Faiz Bakhsh:1). Such legends were doubtless Islamised versions of much more ancient indigenous foundation myths which followed a pattern which we have noted in respect to Kufa. Indeed this process of remythologisation to preserve ancient centres of religious power took place with the Ka'ba itself during the lifetime of Muhammad, and with his sanction.

As early as the sixth century BC, the satrapy, or province, of Bactria was sufficiently important in economic, political and religious terms to be dubbed "a second Babylonia" (Tarn,1980:102) and it is certain that Bactra as a city is very ancient indeed, possibly as old as the riverine civilisations of the Nile, Tigris-Euphrates and Indus. As far as Bactria was concerned, its prosperity depended on the river

² When Cain killed Abel he was asked whether he had killed his son and replied, "Bal-akhy, that is, not my son, but my brother," Faiz Bakhsh, *loc. cit.*

³ A confusion with Vishtaspa, King of Bactra, who gave Zoroaster sanctuary.

Vakhsh, which the Greek conquerors later Hellenised to 'Oxus'. Bactra, the capital, however, had another, equally important resource, the Hazhda Nahr, or Eighteen Canals, which made the area so fertile that classical geographers and historians referred to the city as "Paradise of the Earth" (Tarn, 1980:114), whilst Muslim writers claimed it was the site of the Garden of Eden (Faiz Bakhsh:1; Holt:28-9).⁴ This gravity-fed irrigation system fanned out like a huge artificial delta from the Bactra river (Balkh Ab). At the time of the Arab conquest, it would seem that this canal system supplied water for at least 1,500 square kilometres of land, and probably much more (Le Strange, 1905:421).⁵ Today, even after centuries of neglect, it is still estimated that some 5,000 sq. kms of arable land are fed by its waters (L. Dupree, 1978:36; McChesney, 1991: Map 3).

At the heart of the Hazhda Nahr was the provincial capital, Bactra. According to Quintus Curtius, this city lay under the shadow of mount Paropamisus, today known as the Koh-i Alburz, through which the Bactra, or Balkh Ab, broke into the plains. The Bactra river itself is said, by the same source, to have flowed past the city walls,⁶ whilst Strabo claims the river actually flowed through Bactra (Holt, 1988:16).⁷ This suggests that the ancient capital lay several kilometres south-east of the present town of Balkh. Such a position made strategic sense since by straddling, or lying alongside, the Bactra river a short distance from the mountains, the city was well placed to regulate and defend the arterial feeder canals which were drawn off the river shortly after the river broke into the plains.⁸ At the same time, its southern flanks were well protected from attack, since it was protected by

⁴ It was also termed, *Balkh al-Bahaiyya*, 'Balkh the Beautiful' (Le Strange, 1905:420).

⁵ Based on the amount of land said to have been controlled by the Barmakids, V.V. Barthold; *al-Barāmika*, *EI*(2), i:1033-6.

⁶ Quintus Curtius, *History*, VII.31.

⁷ *Geog.* XI.xi.2.

⁸ The main canal feeders are taken off the river near Chintal and Pul-i Imam Bakr.

the high ridges and narrow gorges which are characteristic of the northern face of the Hindu Kush.⁹

From earliest recorded history, Bactra was the gateway for trade with India and Central Asia as well as being an important centre for east-west caravan routes between China and the Middle East. Its strategic location, the fertility of the soil and perennial water supply, made Bactra one of the most important *entrepôts* of the so-called Silk Road and a strategic defensive position on the north-eastern frontier of Persia. Centuries before its conquest by Alexander the Great, Bactria had established widespread and diverse cultural and ideological contacts. Artefacts such as those in the Oxus Treasure suggest that Bactrian art, too, had attained artistic heights comparable to any other early civilisation (Caygill:24-26; Dalton, 1964; Holt:40-1).

Given its economic and military importance Bactra, from an early period, must have been highly cosmopolitan, with peoples of many different cultural and religious traditions rubbing shoulders in the city and trading not just goods but ideas and philosophies. The need to maintain good community and trade relations with these various cultures appears to have made successive Bactrian rulers tolerant of the many and divergent religious traditions encountered in its bazaars. This can be seen in the diversity of religious traditions which we know played a part in the religious life of the city from the Achaemenids onwards. They include Babylonian and Greek religion; Judaism (Le Strange, 1905.421),¹⁰ Eastern, or Nestorian, Christianity (Mingana:5; Moffett, i:79); Manichaeism (Lieu:8); Buddhism (Bulliet, 1979); Zoroastrianism (Corbin:23; Dalton:43) and indigenous Indo-Aryan cults. Bactra, too, was thus a springboard for the spread of religions into Khwarazm,

⁹ The three approaches to Bactra from the south are, from east to west: Tang-i Tashqurghan, the Tang-i Shadyan and the Tang-i Balkh Ab.

¹⁰ *Hudud al-'Alam*, 107.

Soghdia and China. Even with the coming of Islam this tradition persisted, Sufi adepts from Balkh playing a significant part in the spread of Islam amongst the peoples of the region (cf. DeWeese, 1994; Baldick, 1993).¹¹ These religious traditions did not arrive in the city in series, as a kind of theosophical relay race, but overlapped and existed in parallel to one other. This must have led to considerable debate with each philosophical tradition adapting their theological discourse in order to better communicate their beliefs to people from other religious traditions. In this process of dialogue, debate and confrontation, these religious traditions adapted themselves to local custom and cultural tradition. This appears to have been particularly the case in respect of Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Manichaeism and even Islam. As such, Bactra's role in the history of world religions is comparable to that of Jerusalem, Babylon or Athens.

The arrival of Islam in the seventh century AD, did not eradicate the religious traditions which were already established in the area. We know that Buddhist, Zoroastrian, Christian and Jewish communities survived down to the conquest of Chingiz Khan and probably well after. Indeed, the influence of all of these faiths can be detected today at the level of 'popular', or 'folk' Islam. Until at least the eleventh century AD, and probably beyond, Ghur and Gharchistan remained the largest enclave of idol-worshippers in the Muslim world (Bosworth, 1977, chap. IX).¹² As late as 1845 it was reported, albeit by a rather unreliable source (Ferrier, 1857:232; cf. Lee, 1996:206-7), that small pockets of *kafirs*, still existed in the upper Murghab. Indeed, in the mountains south-east of Kabul, the Dardic peoples of the area, today referred to as Nuristan, worshipped deities of Indo-Aryan origin

¹¹ See also, Salih b. Amir 'Abdullah Muhammad, *Haftad mashayekh-i Balkh*. Early Sufis originating from Balkh included Ibrahim b. Adham, whose conversion narrative closely parallels that of the Buddha, cf. Attar, *Tadhkirat*, 62-79; Hujwiri, *Kashf al-Mahjub*, 103-5.

¹² HA, 110.

until a century ago. The survival of Kafir religion and, indeed, the festivals of Nauroz, Gul-i Surkh and Janda Bala themselves, are a testimony to the enduring nature of ancient religious traditions in Afghanistan into the modern era. We are, therefore, well placed in our endeavour to trace the origins of the Nauroz festivals of Mazar-i Sharif, for even today we can detect in folk practices, legends and traditions related to Nauroz, elements of the ancient religious beliefs from which these three spring festivals arose.

Cave dwelling communities settled in the northern faces of the Hindu Kush as early as the Palaeolithic era and developed what appear to be sophisticated rituals of propitiation to ward off death and sickness. Excavations by L. Dupree at Darra-yi Kur (Baba Darwish), in Badakhshan,¹³ uncovered graves in which there were decapitated torsos of domesticated goats overlaying the remains of children (Ball, 1982, i:82; L. Dupree, 1978:264).¹⁴ Some years earlier, in 1938, the skeleton of another young boy was discovered surrounded by six pairs of mountain goat horns at Teshik-Tash near Baysum in Uzbekistan (Frumkin:108; Gupta, ii:49, fig. S.3.3). This suggests that from a very early period in the human history of this region mountain goats, and particularly the horns of these animals, were believed to have power to influence the struggle between life and death and the passage of the soul from one world to the other. This has led some authorities to refer to this period as the 'Goat Cult Neolithic' (Allchin & Hammond:81-3; L. Dupree, *loc. cit.*). Petroglyphs, presumed by scholars to be prehistoric, which depict ibex and other horned animals being hunted, have been found on both sides of the Amu Darya (Bivar, 1971:79-89; Gupta, ii:Plates X, XV; Olufsen, 1904: facing page 192).¹⁵ Ibex and

¹³ Located some 63 km. east of Talaqan on the Faizabad road.

¹⁴ c. late Neolithic/Bronze Age c. 2200-1900 BC on basis of C-14 ceramic dating. Several hundred stone implements and ceramic material, dating from the Middle Palaeolithic (50-30,000 BC) were also uncovered at the site.

¹⁵ Cf. Frumkin (p. 109); Huwylar & von Moos (p. 13). Though it is assumed these petroglyphs are the work of ancient man, this is far from proven. In 1994, in the village of Laman, Badghis Prov-

mountain goats are an important symbol of fertility and rebirth in the iconography and rituals of Kafir religion (N. Dupree & Motamedi, plate 56; Jettmar, i:103, 105, 126ff.). Images of ibexes and griffins dating from 6th-4th century BC were amongst the artefacts of the Oxus Treasure (Dalton, 1964), as well as being depicted on domestic pottery dating from 3rd-2nd C. BC, from Mundigak (N. Dupree & Motamedi:plate 2), in Grave IV at Tila Tapa (1st century AD at latest) (Sarianidi:plates 112, 164-5) and on Bronze Age tools as far north as Kazakhstan (Frumkin:13, fig. I). Horned animals and hunting symbols were an important feature of Iranian art under the Achaemenids and, later, the Sasanians (Godard:plate 78). Scholars such as L. Dupree and Allchin proposed that there is a direct symbolic and religious association between this Neolithic 'Goat Cult' and the placing of the horns of ibex and wild mountain goats at shrines and on the houses of important religious and secular personages in contemporary Afghanistan, a practice which is particularly popular in the hills and mountains of the Hindu Kush and Pamirs, where the horns are symbols of the power, or *baraka*, of the shaikh or *pir* as well as the prowess of the hunter.

This hypothesis is supported by traditional practices and folk beliefs associated with the hunting of ibex, mouflon and mountain goat,¹⁶ which take place during the spring. In the mountain communities of the Hindu Kush and Pamirs, there is a group known as *mirgan*,¹⁷ who are famous for their prowess in the hunting of wild,

ince, similar drawings of ibex were observed carved into the brickwork of two Ghurid(?) shrines.

¹⁶ All three species are referred to in Afghanistan by the generic word, *āhū*.

¹⁷ Previously (Lec, 1982) I transliterated this word as '*mihrgan*' and suggested that there might be a link between the practices of the *mirgan* and the Zoroastrian festival of Mihrgan. I am grateful to Prof. I. Baldauf of Berlin for pointing out that *mirgan* derives from the Mongolian *mārgān*, *mong* being a loan word for 'archer' and hence, 'hunter' in general. However, Prof. Baldauf continues: "... there is certainly no direct possibility for the assumption of a link between the words *mirgan* and *mihrgan*; however, that is not enough of a proof so as to reject [the] hypothesis—why shouldn't a popular etymology have mixed up the relatively recent loan-word, taken from Mongols or Turks, with the pre-existing popular variant of a cult of Zoroastrian offspring?" Prof. I. Baldauf, *personal communication*, 1986. *Mirgans* from the Maimana area took part in a sharp-shooting contest organised by the Afghan Boundary Commission to celebrate Nauroz in 1885 (Yate:455-6).

horned animals, and particularly the ibex. In Darra-i Shakh ('Valley of the Horns')¹⁸ of Gurziwan, in Faryab province (Lee, 1982:109-10)¹⁹ and the Munjan valley of Badakhshan (Huwyler & von Moos, 1979),²⁰ the hunting of the *ahu* is accompanied by the ancient propitiation rituals and chivalric customs. The right to the title *mirgan* is conferred only on those who have proven their prowess by the killing of many *ahu*. In the upper Panjshir, this accolade is acquired only after a hunter has killed a thousand *ahus* with the same weapon, traditionally a flint-lock rifle,²¹ rather than the modern semiautomatic rifles which now proliferate throughout the area (E. Newby:114).²² A similar custom obtains amongst the Dardic tribes of Gilgit in Northern Pakistan (Levy:66-7).

In Gilgit, the hunter sanctifies himself the night before a hunt by abstaining from intercourse with his wife. In so doing, he believes a fairy will come to him in his sleep and reveal where the ibex can be found, for they are believed to be the flocks of these supernatural beings and cannot be killed without the *pari's* permission (Levy:67). In the Panjsher and Munjan valleys, atonement is made for killing the *ahu* by burying the gun which shot the animal for a period of time (Huwyler & von Moos:137; E. Newby:114). The hunter in Gilgit, on the other hand, is required to propitiate the fairy by throwing away some of the liver of the slain animal whilst reciting the *pari's* name (Levy:67). In Gurziwan the *ahu* meat is distributed amongst members of the *mirgan's* family, though in the Munjan the

¹⁸ The 'horns' here are the two branches of the river which meets below Darra-yi Shakh. There is another Darra-yi Shakh in a valley south of Qaisar, on the border of Faryab and Badghis provinces.

¹⁹ Elders and *qariyadar sahibs* of Darra-yi Shakh, Darra-yi Zang and Khwaja Ghur of Gurziwan, Faryab Province, spring and summer 1977-78.

²⁰ According to Huwyler & von Moos this area was not Islamised until 11th century, but Robertson (p. 406) claims there was a temple to Bagisht in the upper Munjan as late as 1891 (see text below). Translation of German article provided by Ms. T. Hodgett.

²¹ *jizail*.

²² The *mirgan* I travelled with into the Tir Band-i Turkistan, south of Darra-yi Shakh decried the use of modern breech loading and semi-automatic weapons as being inconsistent with the spirit of the hunt.

hunter retains the head and breast of the kill for himself. The flesh of the *ahu* in both Gurziwan and Munjan is regarded as “clean and pure” (Huwyler & von Moos:136ff; Lee, 1982:107).²³

In the Munjan valley the breasts of kills are dried and stored until Nauroz which marks the end of the annual 40 day hunting competition. At Nauroz (1 Hamal) the hunters assemble on the forecourt of the mosque where the male members of the village cook and eat the breasts of the *ahus*. Eating the breast is said to bestow power and courage. The head, or rather the horns with the skull attached, is regarded as the most important trophy and the most impressive ones are placed on the roof of the mosque. The remainder are donated to other holy places, such as the shrine of a saint, placed on cairns beside the road (to ward off evil spirits?) or displayed on the roof of the *mirgan*'s home. These horns are regarded as symbols of prosperity, power and happiness (Huwyler & von Moos:137ff; cf. Olufsen, 1904:157-61). Horns placed in the same locations were also noted in Gurziwan in 1977-8.²⁴

This tradition of using the mosque as the place for this meal would suggest that in the pre-Islamic era this feast was held at the local temple, with the horned trophies acting as votive gifts offered to the local deities and as appeasement of the local deities who have now been substituted by the more acceptable *paris* of the Islamic tradition.²⁵

In the Munjan valley, the ‘open season’ for the *ahu* ends at the spring equinox. During the forty days prior to Nauroz, there is fierce competition between the *mir-*

²³ *pāk wa muqaddas*. This is an interesting phrase since one would have normally expected the hunters to use the Islamic terms to distinguish between the ‘prohibited’ and the ‘permitted’ (*harām wa halāl*).

²⁴ *personal observation*, Darra-yi Zang and Darra-yi Shakh of Gurziwan.

²⁵ Cf. Ferrier's the pagan temple of “Dev Hissar” and its “gigantic Jupiter” hung with the skins of wild beasts “the offerings of hunters” (Ferrier, 1857:232).

gan as to who will 'bag' the largest number of *ahu*, and culminates with the communal eating of dried ibex breasts. In the Shahrān district of the Munjan valley, shortly after Nauroz, a group hunt is organised using encirclement and hunting dogs rather than the individual stalk. Any *ahu* killed during this hunt are also eaten communally by the men in the mosque garden (Huwyler & von Moos:136).

The *ahu* feast inaugurates the Nauroz festivities which, according to local tradition, celebrates the miraculous appearance of the patron saint of the valley, Shaikh Nasr-i Khusrau (Huwyler & von Moos:139). Once, so the story goes, there was a time when the valley was on the verge of starvation and the population was considering relocating *en masse* to an adjacent valley. Three representatives,²⁶ one from each '*khel*', were sent to seek a new homeland but were met by the shaikh and ordered to return. Each representative was given a task which, if carried out, would ensure the future prosperity of the existing settlement. Sabzi²⁷ was ordered to draw ibexes on the rocks, Mokhtar, to kill a small animal and make a feast, whilst Saqa²⁸ was to be the first to plough and sow. The men returned home and carried out the shaikh's instructions and found there was sufficient water for their fields and the harvest was plentiful (Huwyler & von Moos:139). In honour of this mystical encounter, as well as because Saqa is said to have been given a handful of gravel by a mysterious stranger who told him to count the pebbles as soon as he

²⁶ Two of these individuals are the eponymous ancestors of two of the main *khel* of the valley: Mukhtar of the Mukhtar Khel and Saqa of the Saqa Khel.

²⁷ Pers. *sabz*, 'green', is said to be the son of Khushhal of the "Khushhalabeg" (*sic*) Khel. Sabzi is rarely, if ever, used as a personal name in Afghanistan. In colloquial Dari, '*sabzi*' mean vegetables (cf. English, 'greens') or 'spinach' and perhaps this legend has something to do with the stories of Khizr, the 'Green Man' and provides another link with the motif as Nauroz rituals being associated with the agricultural cycle and the rebirth of the earth. The cooking of *sabzi pilau* is a traditional part of the Nauroz celebrations in northern Afghanistan.

²⁸ Or possibly, *saqau*, water-carrier?

had seen an ibex, Saqa's immediate descendants are the ones who plant the first seeds.

The spring festival is a partial re-enacting of Sabzi's mission. The men gather at the rocks where carvings of the *ahu* are found and the eldest member of the Khushhal²⁹ Beg clan casts seven stones at one particular drawing of an ibex, presumably the one reputed to have been etched by Sabzi himself. If he hits the image, then good fortune is ensured for the coming year. Once these seven stones have been thrown, all the men cast seven of their own stones at various *ahu* petroglyphs. Later in the day three cows, one from each '*khel*', are raced against each other across the uncultivated fields, the winning post being a certain stone which is then used to sacrifice the animals, the cow which wins the race being the first to be slaughtered. The '*khel*' whose animal wins the race is considered to be greatly honoured and in receipt of particularly good fortune. After the sacrifices, the meat is cooked and distributed to everyone in the village.

The offering of these cows is said to release the waters in the mountains; that is to ensure the snows on which the river and irrigation depends, melt in time for planting. If the snow melt does not commence a few days after these rituals, three more cows are slaughtered in the uppermost part of the valley, near the glaciers which are the source of the river, and the blood run into the main feeder canal of the valley's irrigation system. If this fails to release the waters, then the local mulah of the Mukhtar Khel sacrifices a sheep, though usually this action is not required (Huwyler & von Moos:139-41).

During the Nauroz festival the children of Shahrān play a hunting game. One boy dresses as an ibex with horns of wood and races to the rock with the ibex

²⁹ The Persian term means 'blessed', 'fortunate', 'happy'. This suggests that Sabzi is the most important individual in the regeneration myth cited above.

drawings and attempts to climb it. Meanwhile, all the other children chase him and either distract him from his task or try to capture him. The enactment of this play is also regarded as a good luck ritual for the hunt. The men also have a hunt dance in which one individual dresses as an ibex, another as the hunter (Huwyler & von Moos:141).³⁰

In the folk lore of the Munjan valley the ibex and the hunt is closely associated with the fairies.³¹ These fairies, always female in Persian folklore, are the shepherds of the ibex and other horned animals since they provide the *pari* with their basic sustenance in the form of ibex milk. The *mirgan* is required to seek the fairies' permission to kill the *ahu* before setting out on the hunt.³² Failure to propitiate the *pari* can have disastrous consequences. In the Munjan valley, one hunter who is said to have shot an *ahu* whilst a fairy was milking, incurred her wrath and curse (Huwyler & von Moos:138-9).

According to Munjan legend, the *ahus* originated at the time of Moses and his confrontation with Qarun ("Karun"), one of the three opponents of the prophet mentioned in the Qur'an.³³ The myth related how originally all the animals of the mountains once belonged to Qarun, who in addition to being fabulously wealthy was a protégé ("ein Schützling") of God. His wealth, however, made him so proud that he set himself up as god and decided to subdue the world. Qarun pursued the fleeing Moses, but the Nile miraculously opened up and allowed Moses to cross over the river on dry land. When Qarun pursued, his followers and his possessions were lost when the waters closed in over them. Qarun, though, managed to keep his head above water and called to Moses to save him, but Moses refused, even when

³⁰ E. Newby (p. 160), during his time in the upper Panjshir valley, recorded the use of a goat's skin to draw "the poison out of the body and into the skin."

³¹ Pers. *pari*.

³² Field notes, Gurziwan, June-July 1978.

³³ Sura xxvii:76-82; xxxix:39.

Qarun promised a large thank offering.³⁴ Qarun eventually drowned, but a portion of his cattle, which had not entered the waters of the Nile, survived and fled to the mountains where they became the forebears of the *ahus* (Huwyler & von Moos:138). This legend is a garbled account of the Qur'anic story of Pharaoh's armies being drowned in the Red Sea and the legend of Qarun.³⁵ Qarun, according to the canonical version, was "of the people of Moses," i.e. a Hebrew, who acted insolently on account of his excessive wealth and opposed Moses despite being warned of imminent judgement for rejecting the prophetic message. Qarun is finally judged when the earth opens up and swallows him and his household.³⁶

The Munjan version of this narrative incorporates elements of earlier religious tradition. Less than a hundred years ago, the upper Munjan valley had a temple to the deity, Bagisht, son of the goddess Disani (Robertson:406). Disani, the most important female deity of the Kafirs, is a fertility goddess who, like the *Magna Mater* deities of the ancient Middle East, appears to have evolved from an ancient "vegetation cult" (Dietrich:11ff). An Eve-like figure, she is born from the side of the supreme deity, Imra. From her breasts stream milk; she is guardian of the wheat harvest and of cattle, the deity of the hunt and can assume the form of a wild goat (Jettmar, i:69-71). Like Persephone, she is raped whilst milking her goats, and later accidentally beheads her son. As goddess of water, she was visibly repre-

³⁴ *khairāt* is a public expression of thankfulness to God for answered prayer, the return of loved ones from overseas or release from illness, plague or other affliction, e.g. barrenness, the birth of a son, etc. The custom of *khairat* is most commonly associated with individuals or extended families, but can also be celebrated by whole tribes, or even nations, after victory in war, deliverance from plague, or national catastrophe (i.e. locusts or drought).

³⁵ Sura xxviii:76-82. This confusion can be explained by the fact that in Dari, 'Qarun' and 'Far'un' are very similar in pronunciation. Huwyler evidently used a Pushtu interpreter for his interviews, since the Pushtu term, *khel*, is used for 'clan'; a term which would not be indigenous in this Tajik speaking area. Pushtu does not have the phoneme /f/ which becomes /p/ or, less frequently, /k/.

³⁶ In Gurziwan in 1978, a local *mirgan* informed me that hunting of the *ahu* and distributing its flesh was in obedience to the command of Jesus Christ ('Isa Masih), though he was unable to elaborate on this tradition.

sented by a “great irrigation channel” in Presungul which is said to have been built by her (Robertson:381-2,406-411). Bagisht, Disani’s son, is said to have been born in a swift flowing river and showed his great strength by calming the turbulent flow and piling up the waters on both sides (Jettmar, i:74). Another (unnamed) son of Disani is said to have defied the gods by planting without their permission and was condemned to suffer drought and lack of water, but flaunted their will by starting up a water mill. The angry gods set out to punish him but he was accidentally beheaded by his own mother. In order to console her for her loss, the gods instigated a feast in her honour which involved races and mourning rites (Jettmar, i:70-2).

It would appear that the Qur’anic story of Moses crossing the Red Sea is an Islamised version of this myth, Bagisht having been assimilated to Moses, with his command over the waves, whilst Qarun’s defiance is paralleled by Disani’s other son who flouts the will of the gods. The context of the spring festival in which this myth is rehearsed would suggest that the whole festival and the hunting rituals associated with it, are a survival of ancient spring regeneration rituals that commemorate the end of winter, the coming of spring and the rebirth of the world as marked by the new planting season. Disani’s rape shares common features with the Munjani hunter who is said to have incurred the wrath of a fairy by killing an *ahu* whilst she was milking it (Jettmar, i:68-72; Robertson:382-3). As the mosque and shrines are decorated with the horns of hunted and sacrificed animals so, too, Kafir temples were adorned in a similar way (Robertson:390-91). Kafir festivals, such as Marnma and Duban, included races and hunting competitions as well as the sacrifice of cows at stone altars (Jettmar, i:105; Robertson:588-9). It would seem then that the *mirgan* and *ahu* traditions, which are found today in the mountain commu-

nities of the northern face of the Hindu Kush, from Maimana to the Munjan valley, are rooted in the same mythological tradition which gave rise to the Kafir religion. In the case of the Munjan valley, indeed, we have evidence that Kafir religion was practised in the area at the end of the last century and we have already noted how, south of Gurziwan, the region of Ghur and Gharchistan had been the home of a large 'pagan' community well into the Islamic era.

We find the same motif at the shrine of Khwaja Takrut in Isfara, near ^RKokand, which up to the 1920s was an important ^focus for the 'tulip', i.e. *lala*, festival. This *mazar* commemorates a mythological figure, one of four brothers, who is said to have been left alone fighting in a battle, when he was rescued by a goat, who bore him away from to the mountains (Peshchereva, 1963:217). We even find similar traditions associated with the person of 'Ali b. Abi Talib at the shrine of Shah-i Mardan in "Namatgut" near Ishkamish. According to Olufsen (1904:157-61) this shrine was "the holy of holies" for the local population at the beginning of this century. It was said to contain two black stones which 'Ali played with when his spirit was in residence. During Nauroz this shrine was the centre of an important local festival during which a bull was sacrificed, cow horns were blown and racing competitions were held. Cow and bull sacrifices are quite unusual for an Islamic society, where the traditional animal to be slaughtered is a sheep or, sometimes, a goat. They were, however, commonplace in Kafir religion. Cows, too, are a sacrifice particularly associated with the Indo-Iranian goddess, Ardivi Sura Anahita (Russell, 1987:245). Sporting competitions, traditional throughout Afghanistan at Nauroz, may well derive ultimately from the same ancient Indo-Aryan roots. In northern Afghanistan there is still an annual race, run on Nauroz, between Tash-

qurghan and Mazar-i Sharif.³⁷ In Kafir tradition Imra is said to have challenged the demon Yush to a horse race (Robertson:383-4).

The symbolic use of ibex horns associated with the spring equinox probably originally derived from ancient astrological concepts. The vernal equinox is marked by the reappearance of Pleiades, which form the cusp of Taurus, the Bull's western horn. At the same time, the "Horns of the Ibex,"³⁸ or the anterior part of Aquarius, culminate. Forty days prior to the spring equinox, that is on or around 10 February and the same day that the *ahu* hunt commences in the Munjan valley, was traditionally the beginning of agricultural activity.³⁹ This date coincides with the astrological 'conflict' between the Lion and the Deer, or the Lion and the Bull, which is depicted, for example, on an Achaemenid relief at Persepolis (Godard:Plate 47). During the whole of the forty days prior to the equinox, the Bull (Taurus) is invisible and, according to ancient mythology, was fighting the lion. Taurus' reappearance at the equinox was thus regarded as symbolic of the triumph of spring over winter. Over the ages, these dates moved due to the problem of calendric precession, the commencement of the 'Lion-Bull' conflict gradually moving nearer the vernal equinox. In c. 500 BC, for example, this 'battle' occurred one week *after* the equinox.⁴⁰

The sacrifice of bulls and cows at Nauroz, noted in the Munjan valley and at Shah-i Mardan near Ishkamish, may have originally coincided with the reappearance of the victorious Taurus which subsequently become identified with the spring equinox as a result of calendric precession. The ibex, on the other hand, is sym-

³⁷ Dr Wahidi, Shibarghan, 1997.

³⁸ The constellation of the Ibex in ancient Iran comprised of the modern Capricorn (later Babylonian 'Goat-Fish') and Aquarius.

³⁹ *CHI*, ii:737-8.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* The problem of precession was exacerbated by calendric changes instituted by the Magi and the government to the extent that Nauroz, and other festivals related to it, failed to synchronise (cf. Boyce, 1970; De Blois, 1996; Jettmar, i:117-20).

bolic of the winter solstice; the helical rise of its 'horns' occurring just prior to the winter solstice. The death of the *ahu* in the hunt, is thus a ritualised killing of winter which culminates in the renewal of the earth at the equinox, or Nauroz.

Munjani spring rites also include propitiatory acts designed to ensure the release of the life-giving waters on which the new planting season depends. Water rituals, the spring equinox and Nauroz have ancient associations. Al-Biruni remarks, for example, that on this day people were wont to pour water over each other.⁴¹ In present-day Afghanistan the custom of *āb pāshī*,⁴² that is washing of graves and their headstones, is still a common Nauroz practice.⁴³ In Maimana and the mountain regions of southern Faryab, if the spring rains fail, they perform the ritual of *āb jirān*, 'water pouring'.⁴⁴ A prepubescent orphaned boy, aged between seven and fourteen, of good, upright character,⁴⁵ is selected from amongst a number of volunteers. A rope is tied around the neck of the nominated youth and he is taken systematically to every house in the village. The boy knocks at the gate of the yard and when the head of the household⁴⁶ comes to the door he recites a *ghazal*, whereupon the senior male pours a bucket of water over him and then compensates him for his dousing by gifts (*khairat*) of meat, oil, flour or clothing. On the following day these offerings of food are cooked and a big *mela* is held to which all the dignitaries are invited. In this way it is believed they will ensure that the rain will fall in abundance and the crops be spared.⁴⁷

⁴¹ al-Biruni, *CAN*, 203 (Sachau).

⁴² From Pers., *pāshīdan*, to sprinkle.

⁴³ Ishaq Nigargar, Sayyid Haidar and family, Khwaja Katal, June 1997.

⁴⁴ From Pers., *jiriyān*, flowing, running. Amongst Afghans, the word also has connotations of 'what comes to pass', 'a happening', 'an event'. For the link between pouring water and determination of fate see chap. 6.

⁴⁵ An untrustworthy youth might be tempted to molest the women if no males are in the house. This may be one explanation for why a prepubescent child is chosen; Engineer Ya'qub, Mazar-i Sharif, July 1997.

⁴⁶ *sāhib-i khāna*.

⁴⁷ Majid Bai, Ghulbiyan, October 1996; Engineer Ya'qub of Ghulbiyan, Mazar-i Sharif, July 1997.

Similar splashing and ducking ceremonies took place during the Kafir feast of Disanedu, which was dedicated to Gish and Disani (Jettmar, i:107). In the Iranian province of Khurasan, when rain was scarce, people placed cotton, soaked in the blood of an animal sacrifice, into a bowl of water. This mixture of blood and water would then be carried to the roof and poured in such a way as it would run off through the drain pipes, preferably passing through seven such faucets, since this number was considered particularly auspicious (B.A. Donaldson:97). This tradition bears a striking resemblance to the Munjani ritual of pouring the blood of a sacrifice into the water channels. It would seem, therefore, there is some evidence for asserting that in Afghanistan, and the northern areas in particular, there is an ancient association between the spring equinox/Nauroz, rain and irrigation and regeneration of both humankind and the natural world, motifs which are clearly borrowed from a non-Islamic religious tradition which prevailed in the area.

As far as Balkh was concerned, this religious and mythological tradition revolved around the Balkh Ab, or Bactra river, which was the most important of all the irrigation networks on the south bank of the Oxus. Balkh, as we have seen above, was associated with the story of Noah and the flood from an early period after the coming of Islam, a tradition which has persisted to the present day. According to local folklore, many aeons ago the Balkh plain was covered by a great flood.⁴⁸ Hazrat 'Ali, however, passed through the area and, seeing the devastation wrought by the flood, he miraculously dammed the Balkh Ab river at the famous lakes of Band-i Amir, which are the source of the river. He thus saved the people in the plains from drowning, whilst ensuring the Balkh Ab would continue to provide the life-giving water for the Hazhda^r Nahr canals. In honour of this miracle, it is

⁴⁸ Flooding has been a problem throughout the whole of the Balkh Ab and Hazhda Nahr network throughout its history (cf. *Gazetteer*, 1895, ii:140).

said, the name of the lakes was changed from Band-i Barbar⁴⁹ to Band-i Amir. A variant of this legend, recorded in the last century, linked the inundation of the northern plains directly with Noah's Flood (Gazetteer, 1895, ii:51; Peacocke:322).⁵⁰

An interesting parallel to this tradition is found in Uwaysi hagiography concerning Diya' al-Din 'Sarrafi',⁵¹ who is said to have been the chief minister of the 'king' of Balkh. One day the Oxus overflowed and threatened to flood the whole Balkh plain and a disaster was only averted by the timely intervention of a dervish who threw his hair into the river and caused it to subside. Having seen this miracle, Diya' al-Din repented and donned the robes of a dervish. In Uwaysi tradition, Sarrafi is associated with the biblical figures of Simon Peter, Jonah and Moses, all individuals attributed with miracles associated with water and floods in the Biblical record (Baldick, 1993:113).⁵² The miraculous deliverance from a flood, attributed to 'Ali and Diya' al-Din, has a number of similar features to the Munjan legend of Moses and Qarun and the myth of Bagisht, son of Disani, who holds back the raging torrent and prevents floods. Since flooding in the Hazhda Nahr, and Afghanistan in general, is a spring phenomenon, it would seem all these miracle stories derive ultimately from a common mythological tradition related to the period now known as Nauroz.

⁴⁹ According to Steingass, *barbar* in Persian is used for the people of Barbary, the western part of N. Africa, but also means 'above, besides, upon'. In the area of Band-i Amir there is a fortress called Shahr-i Barbar dating from 7-13th century AD (Ball, 1982, i:243). South-west of Band-i Amir is a red sandstone massif known as Qala'-yi Barbar, which is said by local people to have been built by, and named after, an ancient king of the area; *personal observation*, Yakolang-Bamiyan road, April 1998.

⁵⁰ Zaman Jan, personal communication, Balkh, spring 1996. Cf. the legend, cited above, attributing the founding of Bactra to one of Noah's sons.

⁵¹ That is, moneychanger, moneylender, banker.

⁵² Peter walked on water and was a fisherman by trade; Jonah was swallowed by a great fish for three days, whilst Moses crossed the Red Sea on dry land, saw the host of Pharaoh drowned and later brought water from a rock.

Muhammad 'Ali, writing in the middle of the present century, records another aspect of the Nauroz flood myth but this time it is a female, rather than a male, suprahuman being who is central to the legend:

There are several legends connected with this day [Nauroz]. One of them is that an old woman, *Ajozak* ... comes into this world once a year. As soon as she lands somewhere in a valley, she starts swinging in a gorge, which is encircled by high mountains. If she falls down into a stream below, it is presumed that the year will be wet and rainy, otherwise they expect a dry season and shortage of food (Mohammed 'Ali, 1969: 4-55).

al-Biruni, too, records an ancient Khwarazmian tradition associated with the month Rimazhd, the eleventh of their calendar. In spring it was said that a certain Queen Mina left her castle in a state of intoxication, lost all self-control and was killed by the frost. Since it was such an unusual thing that cold should kill a human, "they used it as an epoch for something miraculous, extraordinary."⁵³ A. Krasnowolska, in an unpublished(?) paper⁵⁴ records several other Ajozak-type spring myths from Central Asia in which a woman, or her sons, is killed or is said to be waiting for her hunter husband who, when he returns, makes her pregnant.⁵⁵ In the Afghan version, Ajozak possesses miraculous powers to free the life-giving water and to ensure the year is one either of dearth or fecundity. The same motif is found in Kafir religion where Disani, mistress of the cows and hunters, is raped and is responsible, inadvertently, for the death of her son, Bagisht.

The Kafirs too, held a New Year festival, known as "Giché", which was dedicated to the goddess Disani. Robertson (pp. 410, 583), who observed this festival in February 1891,⁵⁶ however, says little about its traditions or mythology. One ritual

⁵³ al-Biruni, *CAN*, 224 (Sachau).

⁵⁴ "An old Calendric Myth in Iran and Tajikistan," draft paper presented to the Edinburgh conference on Central Asia and the Caucasus, 1991(?).

⁵⁵ In 1896, in the Panj valley in upper Badakhshan, Olufsen recorded that the local population believed in a malevolent spirit of the waters called "Amasdé", who inhabited the whirlpools created by the fast-flowing mountains and rivers where he lured unfortunate swimmers into his deadly eddies. This name is certainly a corruption of the supreme Zoroastrian deity, Ahura Mazda (Olufsen, 1904:197-204 & 1911:367; Russell, 1987:447), but the Amasdé of the Panj valley bears little resemblance to the Zoroastrian supreme deity.

⁵⁶ Robertson states that Giché was celebrated on the same day each year but this is certainly not

required all families who had male offspring born in the previous twelve months, to sacrifice a goat at Disani's shrine in Kamdesh whilst fires of purification were lit in front of her temple. A further festival, called Dizanedu and which was dedicated to Disani and the war god, Gish, occurred later in the year (July 9). Rituals included goat sacrifice and communal feasting on its flesh and other sacred food which had been offered at the shrines of Disani and Gish (Robertson:590-91).

That religious and magical rituals designed to appease the powers which controlled the rains, the snow melt and the water in the irrigation channels, emerged at an early period in Bactria, the Hindu Kush and Pamirs is hardly surprising, given the paramount importance the spring had to the agriculture of the area. The lack of rains,^{or} their late arrival, a sudden winter snap, could devastate the crops. Flash floods are another serious problem for settled agriculturalists, since they destroy newly planted fields, break down, or block, the fragile mud walls of the dykes and sweep away exposed settlements. Techniques were thus evolved to propitiate nature divinities who were deemed to control, on the one hand, the destructive aspect of nature at this season, whilst, on the other hand, celebrating the renewal of the earth and the beneficent powers of human and agricultural fertility. It would seem from a comparative study of contemporary folk practice regarding Nauroz, that there remain many ancient traditions which find parallels in what we know of Kafir religion in Afghanistan in the last century. These modern practices would seem to be Islamised versions of ancient regeneration myths which involve both gods and goddesses who were believed to control the forces of nature and who were petitioned and propitiated in a variety of ways, by sacrifice of horned animals, both wild and domesticated, as well as by re-enaction of myths and the holding of races and com-

so as he himself later admits when he records their year consisted of only 360 days, see Jettmar (i:117-20).

petitions which were designed to facilitate and simulate the victory of the gods and goddesses of fecundity and fertility over the demonic powers of winter and destruction. In the Islamised versions of these rituals, the figure of 'Ali b. Abi Talib, in particular, seems to have been assimilated to certain aspects of these traditions. As such, it is understandable why the shrine of Mazar-i Sharif has become the focus of non-Islamic festivals related to the spring equinox.

CHAPTER 4

BACTRA, ZAR-I ASPA, NAVA VIHARA AND NAUBAHAR

The advent of Zoroastrianism in Bactria formalised aspects of Indo-Aryan beliefs and practices by transforming these concepts into a systematised religious tradition with a written canon. From a very early period Zoroastrian tradition held that it was the King of Bactria, Kavi Vishtaspa, who gave sanctuary to the persecuted Zoroaster and embraced the new faith, and that it was in this city where Zoroastrianism first became a major religious force in Iran and Central Asia (Boyce, 1975, i:274-5; Dalton:43; Frye, 1984:61; Russell, 1987:49; Upasak:205ff.). Greek sources, too, associate Zoroaster with Bactria (Russell, 1987:49),¹ whilst Corbin (pp. 21-2) declares it to be a “scientific certainty” that Zoroaster’s ministry took place “somewhere on the upper Oxus.” According to another ancient tradition, Zoroaster died near Bactra whilst fighting against the enemies of King Vishtaspa (Boyce, 1975, i:187-8; Zaehner:33).² Even Boyce, who argues against this tradition (Boyce, 1975, i:274-5), agrees that Bactria had been Zoroastrian for many centuries before the religion took root in Western Iran (Boyce, 1975, i:6-7).

Authorities, too, are divided on the dates for Zoroaster’s life and death. Traditionally, it is believed that his ministry began 600 years before Plato or 258 years before Alexander the Great, that is, c. 628-551 BC and that his move to Bactra

¹ The first mention of Zoroaster in classical literature is quite late, in c. 390 BC; see Plato, *Alciades*, I:22.

² Another tradition says he was assassinated by the priests of the old religion (Boyce, 1975, i:191). Some Afghans claim that the shrine of ‘Ali b. Abi Talib is built on the site of Zoroaster’s grave, though, as I have argued above, the Bactra of Zoroaster was situated much nearer the Koh-i Alburz than Mazar-i Sharif or modern Balkh. This would not, however, preclude the site of al-Khair having previously been the location of a Zoroastrian or Buddhist religious edifice.

took place c. 528 BC, since Zoroaster is said to have been 40 years old when King Vishtaspa gave him sanctuary (Zaehner:33). Boyce (1984:11), though, favours a date in the Bronze Age (1400-1200 BC), whilst Frye states, probably correctly given our present state of knowledge, that “it is hardly possible to assign even a century for Zoroaster’s activity” (Frye, 1984:57-8; cf. Upasak:204-5). For the purpose of this study, it is sufficient to note that all authorities agree that long before the conquest of Alexander the Great, and probably before the establishment of the Achaemenid Empire, of which Bactria was an important princely satrapy, Zoroastrianism had established itself as a major religion in the area and it is very likely that Zoroaster himself was the person responsible for introducing this faith to the region.

Zoroastrianism evolved from the ancient Indo-Aryan religious tradition and many of its deities appear, too, in the Rig Veda. Zoroaster’s message was thus more akin to that of Christ’s in relation to Judaism than, for example, that of Islam to Hinduism. It was a reformation, or redefinition, of Indo-Aryan religious tradition, which made it that much easier to reincorporate elements of the ancient cults once Zoroaster had passed away and the responsibility for determining orthodoxy was left in the hands of the priesthood.

One important figure of early Zoroastrianism and Indo-Aryan mythology is Yima, the Yama of the Rig Veda. In early Iranian religion he is the first man, the fertiliser of the earth and the presider over the thousand year Golden Age (Curtis:25; Zaehner:134-5). He instigated the first bull sacrifice then shared its flesh with the ordinary people, thus making them immortal. In so doing he committed a heinous sin and incurs the wrath of the gods (Curtis:25-6; Zaehner:126-7, 131-44). Yima is associated with celestial symbols of spring such as ibex, sheep,

deer and other horned animals, the Zoroastrian 'Tree of Life' and 'Tree of all Seeds' (Pope, ii:796-7, figs. 274, 310, plates 177E, 222A,B, 232B etc.). As King of the Dead, he is considered by some authorities to be the equivalent of the supreme deity of the Kafirs, Imra (Boyce, 1982, ii:18-19; Robertson:381-94). In the Avesta and Vendidad (2nd-early 3rd C. AD), Yima appears as a Noah figure who delivers humanity from the curse of frost and cold (Curtis:26). The bull sacrifice marks the commencement of a golden age which Iranian mythology associates with the celebration of Nauroz. Indeed, Yima himself is said to have instituted the celebration of this festival (Zaehner:135-7). He brought rain from heaven on Nauroz following a period of prolonged drought (Curtis:26) and so miraculously re-filled the ruined irrigation ditches which the evil Afrasiyab had destroyed (Curtis:32).³

In the Islamic period 'Ali b. Abi Talib assimilated a number of aspects of Yima, or Jamshid, especially his feats as a dragon-slaying hero (Curtis:25-6). At least three shrines dedicated to 'Ali, namely those at Mazar-i Sharif, Shah-i Mardan in the Panj valley and Sakhi Jan in Kabul, are all important *foci* of Nauroz celebrations and suggest that in this respect 'Ali has been the means by which elements of the Yima myth have been perpetuated into the Islamic era. This is further reinforced by the parallels between 'Ali's feats in the creation of Band-i Amir and Yima's deliverance of the land from the curse of perpetual winter. If the *janda* fails to rise into position correctly, or falls over during the ceremony or the ensuing forty days, local people regard this as a premonition of drought and disaster in the coming year. 'Ali is thus seen as the new Yima who provides rain and blesses the season of planting.

³ al-Biruni, *CAN*, 203 (Sachau).

Another Zoroastrian divinity whose cult had ancient historical association with Balkh was the goddess Ardvi Sura Anahita. She was originally one of the Indo-Aryan pantheon (Chaumont:169)⁴ and there is a semantic link between her and the Hindu water goddess *sarasvati* (Boyce, 1975, i:71). Zoroaster, however, “condemned and banished” (Herzfeld, ii:516) her, Mithra, Verethragna and Homa, from his reformed religion, as belonging to the evil *daevas*. Her cult, however, soon reasserted itself. One of the most ancient of all Zoroastrian texts (Boyce, 1975, i:72 & 1984:2), Yasht 5, was composed in her honour. Boyce (1984:2) dates this Yasht to “at least” 2000 BC, that is some six hundred to a thousand years before Zoroaster lived, according to her chronology (Boyce, 1975, i:190-1). The discovery of Mother Goddess figurines, dating from the third millennium BC, in Afghanistan indicates worship of fertility deities pre-dates Zoroastrianism (Pope, ii:882, fig. 306, pl. 826; Rahimi:20; cf. Boyce, 1991, iii:264), which might have been the roots from which the cult of Anahita emerged (cf. Rahimi:22). When exactly this goddess’ association with Bactra began, however, is unclear, though we do know that the Achaemid king, Artaxerxes II (404-359 BC), whose ancestors had been priests in her temple at Istakhr (Boyce, 1984:61; Chaumont:171-2; Herzfeld, 1947, ii:516), commanded temples to Anahita to be built throughout the empire, including Bactra (Tarn, 1980:102, 115; cf. Herzfeld, ii:516).

Yasht 5, which depicts Anahita as goddess of the waters and is often referred to as the “Hymn to the Waters” (Boyce, 1975, i:73), is probably based on one of these Achaemenid cult images (Herzfeld, ii:521).⁵ Her nature, as a deity of the waters, finds expression in the attributes, Ardvi,⁶ ‘moist’, and Sura, ‘strong’,

⁴ cf. Heroditus, *Histories*, I:131.

⁵ Herzfeld (*loc. cit.*) argues persuasively, that the redaction of Yasht 5 dates from Artaxerxes II’s reign.

⁶ ‘Ardvi’ is uniquely ascribed only to this goddess. Boyce (1974, i:74) suggests an Indo-Aryan origin as *sarasvati**, ‘she who possesses the waters’.

'mighty'.⁷ Her proper name, Anahita, translates as 'immaculate', or 'undefiled'. In this aspect of her nature, she is the Virgin, a "fair maiden", of fifteen years of age,⁸ who is the guardian of the fortunes of animals and men (Boyce, 1975, i:74; Herzfeld, 1947, ii:516). As mistress of the four great natural forces, wind, rain, clouds and sleet, she is represented driving a golden chariot drawn by four horses (Boyce, 1975, i:72; cf. Dalton, 1964). She is described in Yasht 5 as:

very strong, well-built, high-girded, tall, noble, of rich house, wrapped in a precious cloak finely woven, golden, hydria and barsam⁹ in hand, making scintillate her ear-drops, square crystals mounted in gold wears the right noble Ardvi ... round her pretty neck, she tightens her middle that her breasts be well-formed, that they be lovely. On the head she has a bound diadem Ardvi ... with a hundred stars of gold, with eight curves, chariot-shaped, with scarfs, a pretty one, with a roll around, well-wrought. A garment of beaver skins Ardvi... has put on, of three hundred she-beavers that have dropped four times ... properly prepared at the right season, the skins shine upon the on-looker (like) sheer gold and silver.¹⁰

In Zoroastrian cosmography, her planet is Venus. She is also the personification of the primordial river which flows from the great mountain, Hara, into the Lake of Vourukasha, from whence comes all rain (Boyce, 1975, i:72-3 & 1991, iii:245; Pope, ii:735, fig. 252; Russell, 1978:245). The waters of this mythological lake are released following an annual battle between the god Tishtrya (Sirius or Canis Minor), who assumes the shape of a stallion, and the witches Duzyairya ('bad harvest') and Apaosha ('dearth'), which takes place on the shores of Lake Vourukasha. Only after Tishtrya is victorious are the rains free to fall (Boyce, 1975, i:74 & 1984:2).¹¹

⁷ Herzfeld, *loc. cit.* says Sura means "the Lady". I have followed Boyce's translation.

⁸ 15 was the number associated with Ishtar, being half the number of days in a month (Jastrow:221).

⁹ That is, handfuls of grass, twigs or sticks held by Zoroastrian priests during sacred acts.

¹⁰ Yasht V, 126-129 (Herzfeld).

¹¹ The worship of Tishtrya was important in Bactria in the Sasanian period, for he is the central deity of the Ghulbiyan painting in Gurziwan, Faryab province (4th/5th century AD). The devotees, including a number of women, would appear to be members of the local ruling house, whilst the presence of a flying female figure (*fravashi?*) with prominent breasts and exaggerated uterus (womb?) suggest that the women are petitioning Tishtrya and other, unidentified, deities for children. See my forthcoming article with Frantz Grenet, "New light on the Sasanid painting at Ghulbiyan, Faryab Province, Afghanistan," *South Asian Studies*, 14, 1998 (with publisher).

Anahita, too, is the guardian of the seed of Zoroaster and his divine glory, the *khwarnah*, which she preserved and protects in Lake Kayanosih, until the end of time (Boyce, 1975, i:285; Corbin:49). It is Anahita, not Ahura Mazda, who is responsible for enlightening Zoroaster. Indeed, Ahura Mazda is said to offer sacrifices to her and beseeches her to “grant me this boon ... that I may incline the son of Pourushaspa, Zarathustra, the follower of Truth, to think in accordance with the Religion.”¹² Zoroaster, too, is said to pray to Anahita for the conversion of King Vishtaspa (Corbin:23),¹³ whilst Zoroaster’s own revelation of Ahura Mazda is wisdom imparted, “in the form of water,” that is, as a gift from Anahita (Boyce, 1975 i:73). This enlightenment came whilst, as a priest of the Indo-Aryan religion, Zoroaster prepares the *haoma* ceremony for the spring festival. Having waded into the deepest parts of the “Good River,” which the Sasanians identified with the Oxus (Boyce, 1991, iii:180), he drew water for the sacrifice. As he returned to the bank, he had a vision of Ahura Mazda which fired him with reforming zeal (Boyce, 1975, i:183-5).

Unfortunately little is known about her cult in Bactra,¹⁴ since the site of this ancient city has yet to be located, let alone excavated. Her temple, Zariaspa, or Azar-i Asp,¹⁵ was clearly an important centre for pilgrimage, for by the time of Alexander the Great’s conquest of the region, Zariaspa was used as a synonym for

¹² Yasht V, 18, after Zaehner (p. 146).

¹³ Yasht V, 105 (Herzfeld).

¹⁴ One ancient tradition known to have existed in Bactra was the rearing of dogs called ‘entombers’, who ate alive those who were either too disabled by disease to survive or too old to be of any use. Such a practice was an abomination to mainstream Zoroastrians for whom dogs were sacred animals, see Strabo, *Geog*, XI.xi.3.

¹⁵ Pers. *zar*, gold(en); *asp*, horse (see, Frye, 1984:181; Tarn, 1980:114, n.6). Gold was important in the Anahita cult. Statues depict her wearing a golden crown (Boyce, 1991, iii:162) and her dress is said to have been interwoven with gold. The beavers’ skins which adorned her body were said to shine like gold (Herzfeld, 1947, ii:521). In Armenia, Anahita was the ‘Golden Mother’ (Russell, 1987:248), probably because her image at Erez was of solid gold, cf. Boyce (1984:85-6); Herzfeld (1947, ii:517); Russell (1987:242). She is also referred to as the ‘One born to Gold’ (Jobes, *DMFS*, 90). This may account for the predominance of gold in Bactrian graves etc. cf. Dalton (1964); Sarianidi (1985).

the city itself (Boyce, 1975, i:73; Chaumont:169; Dalton:44-5; Russell, 1987:246, 482).¹⁶ Indeed, by the time of the fall of the Persian empire, Anahita was the most popular of all Iranian deities.¹⁷ Tarn (1980:102, 115; cf. Herzfeld, ii:516) is of the opinion that Anahita was originally a deity indigenous to Bactra, where she was the *tyche* of the city in the Babylonian Ishtar mode. If this was the case, then Zariaspa could well have been built on the foundations of a more ancient temple to this goddess, howbeit in her Indo-Aryan form. Classical historians record that in the Achaemenid temple, the Bactra river, or possibly a symbolic feeder canal, actually ran through her temple,¹⁸ suggesting that she was regarded as being not just the guardian of Bactra but of the whole of the Hazhda Nahr and, by association, the Oxus. For, in Achaemenid times, unlike today, the Bactra (Balkh Ab) river ran into the Oxus.¹⁹ Indeed, in pre-Islamic times, “the Oxus was known as the river of Balkh” (Russell 1978:90) and, as Tarn (1980:115) rightly remarks, Bactria “almost was the Oxus in the sense that Egypt was the Nile.” Doubtless Anahita’s title, ‘Goddess of the Thousand Arms’, derives from this same association (Dalton:44; Tarn, 1980:102, 115).

Probably the association between Anahita and the Oxus predates the Achaemenid period. We have seen how, in early Zoroastrianism, there is a close association between this goddess and water as a symbol of enlightenment. This linkage is clearly very ancient, since in the Avesta ‘*vakhsh*’, the word from which ‘Oxus’ is derived, means “spoken word” (Litvinskiy & Pichikayan:153). In other languages of the region, *vakhsh* has the meaning of “spirit” with the overtone of “running

¹⁶ Strabo, *Geog.*, XI.xi.2.

¹⁷ Strabo, *Geog.*, XI. 14.16.

¹⁸ Cf. the temple complex at Ai Khanum, Boyce (1991, iii:168-9).

¹⁹ Strabo, *Geog.*, XI.xi.2. The Hazhda Nahr canal system, too, was much more extensive than it is now with the main feeder canals from the river being linked into others which were taken off from the Oxus.

water,” whilst al-Biruni states that Vakhsh was “the name of the angel placed over the waters, in particular the river Jayhun [*i.e.* the Amu Darya].” Indeed, the Khwarazmians even held a festival dedicated to the Oxus, called Wakhsangam, in the month of Ispandarmaji (Boyce, 1991, iii:179-80). Indeed, a temple dedicated to the god Vakhsh, dating in its earliest level to *c.* 6th century BC, has recently been excavated in Tajikistan (Litvinskiy & Pichikayan, 1981).²⁰

In effect, therefore, the mythological and cultic motifs noted in present-day folk lore and practices in the Hindu Kush, can be found in temple sites known to have been erected in Bactra and Oxus region as early as the fifth century BC. Anahita’s temple of Zariaspa was dedicated to a ‘Great Mother’ goddess, who was closely associated with the agricultural and human fertility of the region and regarded as guardian of its rivers, the Hazhda Nahr and Oxus in particular. Furthermore, her role in the enlightenment of Zoroaster is particularly apposite inasmuch as it provides a specific association with the spring equinox, or Nauroz. ‘Ali, too, is regarded by the Shi‘a as having semi-prophetic powers and is, in a sense, the founder of Shi‘ism. At the same time, Balkh’s present importance as a focus for Islamic pilgrimage can be seen to be based on a very ancient tradition dating back to the Achaemenid empire. However, since, as we have seen, Anahita was a pre-Zoroastrian deity who was subsequently rehabilitated into the Mazdean pantheon during the Achaemenid era, she was probably venerated in Bactra long before Artaxerxes formalised her cult by state patronage of the temple of Zariaspa. Indeed, there is every likelihood that many centuries before Zoroaster’s ministry,

²⁰ al-Biruni, *CAN*, 225 (Sachau). The temple at Takht-i Sangin, S. Tadjikistan (6th-3rd century BC) was dedicated to the Oxus, though the altar is surmounted by a statuette of the *satyr*, Silenus Marsyas, devotee of Dionysius the god of fertility and wine in the Greek pantheon. An inscription in the Calcutta museum refers to Vakhsh as “the only god,” see Litvinskiy & Pichikayan (pp. 135, 153, Plate II); cf. Zaehner, (p.167).

Bactra had some sort of cult centre dedicated to Anahita and other Indo-Aryan deities.

Not only so, but since Bactra was, from an early period in Zoroastrian history, associated with the life, ministry and death of their prophet, it would seem a reasonable hypothesis that pilgrims would have come not just to the temple of Ardivi Sura Anahita, but to pay homage to sites associated with the ministry of Zoroaster. For it is inconceivable that the religious and civil authorities in Bactra would not have exploited the commercial benefits of this connection, regardless of whether it was mythological or historical.²¹ Bactra, in religious terms, therefore, was to the eastern Empire what Istakhr was to the west. Indeed, according to one authority, by the time of the Greek conquest, Bactra was the most active centre of Persian religion, overshadowing Istakhr itself (Dalton:43).

The cult of Anahita survived in Bactria, Central Asia and Iran long after the Achaemenid empire had been swept aside. The forebears of Ardashir I, founder of the Sasanian empire, served as priests at Anahita's temple at Istakhr and, following their conquest of Iran, installed her as the tutelary deity of their dynasty (Boyce, 1975:114). Though her actual image was removed by subsequent rulers with a more puritanical view of Zoroastrianism, Istakhr remained the principal cult centre of Sasanians until its destruction by the Arab Muslim armies. Under the influence of Greek culture, in the wake of the conquest of Alexander the Great, Anahita be-

²¹ This may be one reason why the inhabitants of the region were happy to promote rival burial sites for prophets and heroes. Balkh's association with Zoroaster probably resulted in the creation of a number of shrines which marked important events in the life of the prophet. Following the fall of the Achaemenid empire, the region became isolated from the rest of the Iranian world and, in the Sasanian period, the geographical centre of Zoroastrianism shifted to western Iran. The Magi appear to have begun to reassociate the geographical places in the Avesta with sites in western Iran, even to the extent of interpolating well-known geographical features from western Iran into the sacred canon. This 'hijacking' of tradition could have hardly been well received in Bactra and one speculates whether this led to rivalry between Bactrian and the Western Iranian Zoroastrians in the same manner as Najaf and al-Khair, see Boyce (1975, i:145; 1982, ii:278-9; 1991, iii:81-2, 153ff.)

came identified as the Iranian equivalent of Greek and Middle Eastern goddesses (see, Tanabe:65-8, 72-9). An inscription on a coin of Hormizd II (AD 303-310) refers to “Anahid the Lady,”²² yet the king is depicted as worshipping a statue of Artemis.²³ In the late sixth century AD, Anahita is depicted on a bas-relief at Takht-i Rostam, presenting the crown to Khusrau II (579-590) (Russell, 1978:246). The consort of the ruler of Bukhara at the time of the Arab conquest held the Soghdian title of *Khatun* (‘Lady’), a name which some scholars argue derives from *banug*, the primary title of Anahita (Boyce 1967:40-1; Russell, 1987:252).²⁴

The Bactrian Anahita appears to have assimilated aspects of the Babylonian Ishtar cults, particularly the goddess Nana (Boyce, 1982,ii:29). The Graeco-Bactrian city of Ai Khanum, had a temple which was probably dedicated to this composite Anahita-Nana. Indeed, the modern name of this site translates as, ‘Moon Lady’. Certain bronze coins of Demetrius I (c. 200-190 BC) have representations of Artemis the Huntress with a nimbus of gold rays similar to the cult statue of Anahita or, more correctly, Nana (Boyce, 1991, iii:161-3). Both the Sasanians and Kushans worshipped Anahita under her Babylonian title, ‘Nana the Lady’ and ‘Mistress of Animals’, a cult which possibly, too, assimilated aspects of Ashi, goddess of plenty, with whom Anahita shared many attributes (Boyce, 1975, i:72 & 1991, iii: 30-1, 187-8; Russell, 1987:235-8). The Kushan king, Kanishka (2nd C. AD) declared, on a recently-discovered inscription from Samangan, that he “obtained the kingship from Nana and from all the gods” (Sims-Williams:2,79,108; cf. Frye, 1984:190). In Soghdia, too, Nana was worshipped. On coins dating from the 6th century AD, she is referred to as “la divinité protectrice” and “Nana, maîtresse

²² Frantz Grenet, *Résumé des conférences et travaux, École Pratique des Hautes Études, 1996/7*, draft report provided by author; see also Frumkin (pp. 78-9,96,121).

²³ F. Grenet, *Résumé*; Cf. Boyce (1991,ii:187-8).

²⁴ Narsharkhi, *TB*, 12-16.

du Panch.’²⁵ As late as the 7/8th century AD, a wall painting in Panjikent depicts Nana as the patron goddess of the city (Frumkin:78-9; Russell, 1987:239), whilst in Armenia, where the cult of Anahita was an important element in pre-Christian culture, Nana became so assimilated to Anahita that she was regarded as the daughter of Ormazd.²⁶

Nana was the Ishtar, or *tyche*, of Uruk whose worship was “intimately associated” with Inanna, the most important female deity of ancient Mesopotamia (Black & Green:108-9; Roux:91-2). Her cult was assimilated under different guises throughout the ancient Near East (cf. Dietrich, 1974; Drijvers:76-119; Hitti:117-20). As the Babylonian ‘Lady,’ or ‘Queen, of Heaven’, she was a goddess of sexual, erotic love and thus superficially, at least, the antithesis of Anahita, the Virgin and Great Mother. However, in other respects Nana and Anahita had many cosmological and symbolic similarities. Neither goddess ever married, though for different mythological reasons, both deities represented aspects of love, were goddesses of war and victory, as well as being *tyches* of cities. They shared the same planet sign, Venus, were associated with myths of regeneration of the natural world and the spring equinox. Both, too, were deities who played an important part in determining the fate and fortune of both individuals and the nation (Boyce, 1982, ii:29). Nana, as well as being the protectress of flocks, was guardian of streams and canals and was associated indirectly with the Gilgamesh flood epic (Black & Green:89, 108-9; Roux:89-93).

Inanna played a central role in the Babylonian *akitu*, or New Year, festival (Roux:397). The festival was held in the month Nisan, at the time of the spring equinox which marked the Babylonian New Year’s Day (Black & Green:136-7;

²⁵ F. Grenet, *Résumé*.

²⁶ *Aganhangelos*, 786 (Thompson).

Roux:397-8). During this festival the king assumed the role of the god Dumuzi, lover of Inanna, and consummated a sexual union with a priestess of her temple (Black & Green:108-9; Roux:91-2). In the Ugaritic *Epic of Keret* this relationship is dramatically portrayed when the king is said to “suck the milk of Atherat ... [and] ... the breasts of the Virgin Anat” (Dietrich:33). The festival included the ritual humiliation of the king, known as ‘taking Bel by the hand’ (Black & Green:137; Openheim:122; Roux:389).²⁷ On the ninth day the statues of all the gods, headed by Marduk, were borne out of the city through the Ishtar Gate and placed in a flower-filled temple, the *bit akitu*, located in a large park near the Euphrates (Openheim:115, 193; Roux:400).

We can speculate, therefore, that Anahita’s assimilation of aspects of this Babylonian goddess from the days of Artaxerxes II, would have included the celebration of *akitu* as part of the Bactrian annual cycle of festivals. This is made more probable by the fact that in early Zoroastrianism Anahita was already associated with the spring equinox by reason of her role in the enlightenment of Zoroaster, which was believed to have occurred on Nauroz. One tradition states that Zoroaster himself fixed Nauroz to coincide with the spring equinox, which would have provided a suitable mythological framework for the incorporation of Babylonian rites into the Mazdean festival which, anyway, in Bactra, probably centred around the role of Anahita as the enlightener of Zoroaster. After all, a similar process of assimilation took place in Balkh during the Islamic period, centred on the cult of ‘Ali b. Abi Talib.

In the third century BC, Buddhist missionary-monks pushed north-westwards from India and established important monastic centres in Taxila (Pakistan), the

²⁷ The last monarch who performed this ordeal being the Achaemenid king, Cambyses, in 538 BC, see Black & Green (p.137).

Logar valley, Begram, Bamiyan and Bactra in present-day Afghanistan. From these centres, Buddhism percolated gradually along the Central Asian trade routes to Bactria, Transoxiana, China and Mongolia. Buddhism, however, did not replace existing religions, but existed alongside them and developed its own *modus vivendi* with Graeco-Bactrian gods and goddesses, Brahminism (mainly south of the Hindu Kush in centres such as Kabul) and Zoroastrianism. Given the need for political unity in such a multi-faith region, successive dynasties tolerated and encouraged pluralism, even when the royal house itself supported one particular religious tradition over and above another.

The dominant religious tradition in Bactra, in the centuries immediately prior to the Arab conquest, has been a subject much debated by scholars. The problem stems from the claim by mediaeval Muslim geographers and travellers, that when the Arab armies under Qutaiba (d. 96 AH) conquered Bactra, they destroyed a 'fire-temple' called Naubahar (Pers. 'New Spring') (Bulliet:79; Le Strange, 1905:421-2; Wellhausen:438).²⁸ Until recently, scholars accepted this statement without question (e.g. Le Strange, 1905:421-2) and assumed that this religious complex was Zoroastrian. However, more recently it has been shown that the name Naubahar is a Persianisation of the Sanskrit, '*nava-vihāra*', 'new (Buddhist) monastery' (Ball, 1989; Barthold, 1977:77; Bulliet, 1979; Upasak:224-7),²⁹ from which the name Bukhara, too, derives (Frye, 1979:XV).

On the basis of this identification, and the location of a number of other places which have Naubahar as part of their name, scholars have speculated about how far Buddhism spread into Iran (e.g. Ball, 1989; Bulliet, 1979:140). Though such studies throw some light on the hotly debated issue of the westward spread of Bud-

²⁸ *HA*:108; Hamadani, 383-85 (Massé).

²⁹ V.V. Barthold, '*al-Baramika*', *EI*(2), i:1033-6.

dhism, they are not particularly helpful in determining the nature of religious expression in Bactra during the same period. Having shown that Naubahar is a corruption of a Sanskrit term, the question of how and why the Buddhist monastery of Bactra came to be called 'New Spring' by the Iranian population of the area, is not addressed.

Bulliet (*op. cit.*), in his seminal article on the subject, takes the adjectival part of the name and points out, rightly, that Persian, '*nau*' is a direct translation of the Sanskrit word '*nava*'. He then argues that the use of the suffix 'new' implies that the monks attached to the monastery of Nava-vihara, and a number of other presumed Buddhist locations north of the Hindu Kush with the same linguistic component, such as Bukhara, represented a new, reformed, and/or deviant, form of Buddhism, which was markedly different to that further south in the subcontinent (Bulliet:143). When it comes to discussing the exact nature of this reformed teaching, however, Bulliet confesses complete ignorance, merely stating that it was "overwhelmingly Iranian in character" (Bulliet:144). Barthold too, is puzzled by this problem and dismisses the Muslim writers' statements about Naubahar as "imaginary interpretations."³⁰ Yet the identification of Naubahar with Nava-vihara raises a number of quite interesting and curious issues which seem to have escaped the attention of scholars who have been primarily interested in the spread of Buddhism rather than the nature of religious expression in Naubahar or Nava-vihara.

King Ashoka, in Edict XIII from Qandahar, urges respect and toleration for "sects", or "schools of thought" as it is translated in the Greek version of the inscription (Allchin & Hammond:193). However, the accounts of Chinese pilgrims who visited Bactra in the fifth/sixth centuries AD, make no mention of serious doc-

³⁰ *Ibid.*

trinal divisions between Bactra's 'Nava-vihara' and other monastic communities in the region or, indeed, in India. Had this been the case, Hiüen Tsiang, in particular, would have surely commented on such deviations and used his authority and status to put matters on a more orthodox footing. Hiüen Tsiang, however, does note that the Buddhist communities on either side of the Oxus lacked knowledge of the Mahayana, or 'Greater Vehicle' school of Buddhism, to which he belonged. For the region, closer in touch with its Indian roots, had maintained the ancient rituals and teaching of the Hin[~]ryana, or 'Little Vehicle', school (Upasak:225).³¹

Bulliet's theory that Nava-vihara represented some indigenous, deviate theological tradition cannot, therefore, be sustained merely on the basis of the appearance of 'new' in Nava-vihara. In fact, Bulliet fails to note that Hiüen Tsiang does not use the term Nava-vihara when referring to the monastic settlement in Bactra. Instead he employs the far more specific, technical term, Nava-sangharama, which Bulliet assumes is synonymous with Nava-vihara, but which is not, necessarily, the case. '*Vihāra*' is a very broad descriptive word, like 'church' or 'mosque', that covers Buddhist institutes regardless of individual size or function within the local or national network. '*Sanghārāma*', on the other hand, is far more specific, since it is applied only to congregational monasteries, "built to accommodate the whole *sangha* resident at a place," rather than the single cell hermitages which were the earliest form of Buddhist monastic life (Dutt:71-2, illus. facing p. 136). The *sangharama* evolved much later than the simple *vihara* and were found in major centres of Buddhism where the presence of several hundred monks necessitated a more formal community structure and organisation (Dutt:72). At the time of Hiüen

³¹ Hiüen Tsiang, *Life*, 48, 51-2 (Beal).

Tsiang's visit, Bactra had as many as one hundred *sangharamas*, presumably of various sizes, to accommodate the needs of some three thousand monks.³²

Hüen Tsiang's *Life and Buddhist Records of the Western World*, make it clear that Nava-sangharama or Nava-vihara (assuming that these two places are identical) had a dual function within the Buddhist community in Bactra. Nava-sangharama was the monastery where Hüen Tsiang stayed during his time in Bactra³³ and seems to have been specifically built by a former ruler of Bactria to provide for the needs of the many pilgrims who flocked to the area. For Bactra was an important staging post for the pilgrimage traffic to India. Such an institution would have had the necessary kitchen and refectory facilities to cater for pilgrims, as well as a large assembly hall where the *sangha* could gather to discuss important matters related to the community's life as well as to debate theoretical theological issues (Upasak:226-7). Important visitors, such as Hüen Tsiang, were able to hold debates in the great hall in which all the monks of the locality appear to have been able to gather at one time.³⁴ Nava-sangharama, therefore, was undoubtedly a large and imposing edifice.

One of the claims to fame of Bactra's Hinyana community was its relic collection which had earned it the title of "little Rajagarha,"³⁵ a designation which Upasak (pp. 212-9) rightly points out demonstrates the vital role this Bactra community played in the establishment, spread and consolidation of Buddhism throughout Central Asia from a very early period. The most important relics appear to have

³² Hüen Tsiang, *Life*, 49 (Beal).

³³ Another argument against Bulliet's thesis that *nava-vihara/nava-sangharama* adhered to a different form of Buddhism. Had they done so, Hüen Tsiang, a stickler for orthodoxy, would not have stayed in the monastery and the debates he had with the monks would have been of quite a different order.

³⁴ Hüen Tsiang, *Life*, 51 (Beal); *Life*, 51-2 (Chinese Buddhist Assoc.).

³⁵ Hüen Tsiang, *Buddhist Records of the Western World*, i:44 (Beal); *Life*, 48 (Beal); *Life*, 50-1 (CBA). Rajagarha was the capital of Magadha, a place closely associated with the Buddha's life as well as a number of early Buddhist Councils, see also Dutt (pp. 32, 52, 143).

been housed in Nava-sangarama. These included a bejewelled water pot,³⁶ or bathing tub,³⁷ of the Buddha, which held between one and a half to two gallons,³⁸ and which was located in the monastery's Buddha-hall; a tooth of the Buddha, and a broom used by the Buddha which was three foot long and had a jewelled handle (Upasak:225-6).³⁹ These relics were brought out every feast day "and the priests and laymen drew near to worship them. The most faithful, behold a radiancy proceeding from them."⁴⁰ In addition, Nava-sang^harama housed an image of the Buddha which was "lustrous with (reflects the glory of) noted gems." It stood in a "hall" which was "also adorned with precious substances of rare value"⁴¹ and was presumably the central feature of the audience hall where the other relics were housed. There was also a famous image of Vaisravana Deva, the patron-protector of the monastery and the Buddhist community as a whole.

To the south-west of Nava-sangharama, was an ancient *vihara*, occupied by the most senior members of the community, the *arahats*, who had a reputation for performing miracles.⁴² This monastery was evidently an ancient one and was probably the original *vihara* of Bactra. This *vihara* was some way away from the central complex and provided the necessary isolation and solitude the *arahats* required, which would have been impossible in the bustling Nava-sangharama. From the context, it would seem that this ancient *vihara* consisted of a series of single meditation cells, following the pattern of the earliest monastic settlements (Dutt:71-3).

³⁶ Hiüen Tsiang, *Life*, 49 (Beal); *BRWW*, i:45 (Beal).

³⁷ Hiüen Tsiang, *Life*, 50 (CBA).

³⁸ Hiüen Tsiang, *BRWW*, i:45 (Beal); *Life*, 49 (Beal); *Life*, 50 (CBA); Yuan Chwang, *Travels*, 108-9 (Watters).

³⁹ Hiüen Tsiang, *Life*, 49 (Beal); *Life*, 50 (CBA); *BRWW*, i:45 (Beal). The nearby stupa, said to be 100 foot high, contained a sacred body relic of the Buddha.

⁴⁰ Hiüen Tsiang, *Life*, 49 (Beal), *Life*, 50 (CBA); Yuan Chwang, *Travels*, 108-9 (Watters)

⁴¹ Hiüen Tsiang, *BRWW*, i:44-5 (Beal).

⁴² Hiüen Tsiang, *BRWW*, i:46; *Life*, 50 (Beal), *Life*, 50 (CBA).

The meaning of *nava*, in *nava-sangharama* is therefore obvious; it means 'new' in the sense of 'later than' or 'replacing', and has nothing to do with sectarian splits (Upasak:224-5, 228-9). As the Buddhist community grew, and pilgrimage traffic from China increased, so the obsolete single cell *vihara* was replaced by an imposing and extremely beautiful *sangharama*, constructed some distance from the original foundation. This new centre catered for a greater number of monks, contained a much larger communal room for the meetings of the *sangha*, and provided protection and a suitably ornate environment for the community's relics, images and other treasures. At the same time, it provided accommodation for the increasing numbers of Chinese and Central Asian pilgrims en route to the holy places of the subcontinent, and for visiting teachers and missionaries from India.

Bulliet argues, on the basis of Beal's translation, that in Hiüen Tsiang's account two separate monastic communities are mentioned, the one at Nava-sangharama being "reserved for the exclusive use of monks from north of 'the great snowy mountains'," (Bulliet:143)⁴³ and suggests that this was the centre of an Irano-Bactrian sect of Buddhism. Again, Hiüen Tsiang's account does not concern sectarian divisions within the community, but is surely more a statement of the ethnic origin of the monks who ran Nava-sangharama. They were natives of Bactria as opposed to settlers and missionaries from the Indian subcontinent, who had presumably been given their own monastic edifice by the local ruler who had commissioned it. Such an action, indeed, suggests a strong element of indigenisation, but just because the monks of Nava-sangharama were from Bactria, it does not mean that they were secessionists. In fact the two separate institutions were clearly devoted to the two different aspects of Buddhism. The most recent monastery con-

⁴³ Hiüen Tsiang, *BRWW*, i:44 (Beal); *Life*, 50 (Beal); *Life*, 50 (CBA).

centrated on the theoretical *Pariyatti* which involved intensive study, and even writing, of the Sastras, whilst the original foundation was devoted to the study of *Patipatti*, the practical knowledge of meditation and use of spiritual powers and was centred around the Arahats (Upasak:224, 226-9).⁴⁴

There are other anomalies which Bulliet and other scholars do not address. If, as they assume, Naubahar and Nava-sangharama are one and the same, one would have expected the latter name to have survived into the Muslim period rather than the term 'Nava-vihara' from which Naubahar is assumed to have derived. And how is it, that a Sanskrit term which means "New Monastery" came to be mean "New Spring" in Persian? The Persian word *nau*, as we have seen, is a direct translation of *nava* and presents few problems. However, under no circumstances can Pers. '*bahār*' be considered to be a direct translation of the Sanskrit, '*vihāra*', since these words have two quite distinct and separate meanings. Though Bulliet, Barthold and others do not say so in as many words, they assume that the relationship is alliterative, '*bahār*', after all, sounds like '*vihāra*'. Muslim writers, it is assumed, writing centuries after the destruction of the Buddhist monasteries and stupas in Bactra, and being more familiar with Zoroastrianism than Buddhism, erroneously assumed that the site had been a fire temple. Such an argument, however, seems far from convincing. Why should the prefix *nava-* be directly translated into its Persian equivalent, *nau*, but the second, and most significant part of the word, not be so?

One possible explanation of the association between the Sanskrit and the Persian names is that Buddhism in the area, although very much within the mainstream of the Hinyana tradition, had reached an accommodation with the Bactrian

⁴⁴ Id.; Yuan Chwang, *Travels*, 108.

festivals of spring. It is important to remember that when Buddhist missionaries crossed the Hindu Kush they encountered a religious world which was totally different to that which prevailed in India and in and around Taxila or Qandahar. Zoroastrianism and Graeco-Bactrian cults had long been entrenched in the area and we know from sites already excavated in Afghanistan, such as Tapa Sardar (Ghazni) and Tapa Shukur of Hadda, that Buddhism in the region came to an accommodation with Hindu, Greek and Mazdean deities (Allchin & Hammond:278-9; 295; Ball, 1981, i:116, 275). If in the south, then why not in Bactra too, particularly since the city had been a major centre for Graeco-Bactrian and Iranian cults long before Buddhism established itself? We have argued that the celebration of the spring equinox played an important part in the religious life of Bactria from an early period. Could this explain the semantic confusion between *vihara* and *bahar* which was so evident in Islamic geographers and travellers? It would certainly explain why other place names which include the word Naubahar, or other compounds of *bahar*, such as Gul Bahar,⁴⁵ are found more or less exclusively in Iran, Transoxiana, Sistan and northern Afghanistan, since these are the very areas where one would expect celebration of ancient spring festivals to be the strongest. The Buddhist *viharas* located in these areas were distinctive only inasmuch as they had adapted to ancient custom by assimilating the Bactrian spring festival, and/or Nauroz, into their own religious tradition.⁴⁶

Evidence for this hypothesis can be found in the very Muslim sources which have been so criticised for their 'imaginary interpretations'. According to these

⁴⁵ Literally 'rose spring'. The settlement is located in Parwan province, a few kilometres south of the gorge which leads to the Panjshir. This area is well-known for New Year *melas* and sporting activity such as *buzkashi*. The Graeco-Bactrian site of Begram is adjacent to it and a number of Buddhist statues, indicative of a monastic settlement, have been located in Gul Bahar itself, see Allchin & Hammond (pp. 205-8); Ball (1982, i:113).

⁴⁶ Cf. Upasak's (p. 221) remarks on Balkh's position on the India-China trade routes.

sources, in the period immediately prior to the Muslim conquest, the main pilgrimage period at 'Naubahar' took place during the spring and rituals at this festival included the perfuming of the walls of the 'temple' (Le Strange, 190 :421). The walls themselves are said to have been inlaid with precious stones and covered with brocade curtains.⁴⁷ This description is very similar to Hiüen Tsiang's account of the walls of the relic hall of Nava-sangharama, though he tantalisingly refers to the ornamentation only as being "unusual",⁴⁸ or "beautifully constructed,"⁴⁹ without specifying the exact nature of these peculiarities. Probably one aspect of this unusualness was that the decorative style was different to that which the Chinese pilgrim would expect and doubtless reflected a local Indo-Iranian or Indo-Greek artistic or iconographic tradition which was part of the broader traditions of the Gandharan school.

The peculiarity of the ornamentation probably had something to do with the image of Vaisravana Deva which was located in Nava-sangharama near the focal Buddha-image.⁵⁰ Vaisravana Deva was a guardian deity particularly associated with Central Asian Buddhism;⁵¹ the rulers of Khotan, for example, claimed descent from this deity whom they regarded as the protector and patron of their dynasty (Snellgrove:334; Zwalf:226 pl. 331). As the 'Guardian King'⁵² of the North' (Zwalf:220,226,250), Vaisravana Deva had a special protecting role over the Buddhist communities in the region, hence his central position in Bactra. Doubtless Buddhists from a Zoroastrian background substituted this *deva* for militant Ashuras such as Mithra or Verethragna. Vaisravana is usually depicted resplendent in full

⁴⁷ Hiüen Tsiang, *BRWW*, i:44 (Beal); *Life*, 49 (Beal).

⁴⁸ Hiüen Tsiang, *Life*, 49 (Beal).

⁴⁹ Hiüen Tsiang, *Life*, 50 (CBA).

⁵⁰ Hiüen Tsiang, *BRWW*, i:44-5; Yuan Chwang, *Travels*, 108 (Watters).

⁵¹ Depictions of the *deva* have been found on textiles, wall paintings and wood blocks from Dunhuang (Gansu Province, China) dating from 9th-10th C AD and as far east as Japan (11th C. AD), see Zwalf (plates 319, 331, 356).

⁵² *lokapāla*.

armour, ever alert, riding across the sky on a purple cloud with the sea and waves at his feet. In one hand he bears a golden halberd, usually with a long flowing battle pennant attached (Snellgrove:334 & pl. 44; Zwalf:220 & pl. 319),⁵³ in the other hand a stupa. Vaisravana is thus guardian of both the ruler and his kingdom from the incursion of barbarian hordes, whilst the stupa represents his protection as extended to the doctrine and, by association, the monks, the scriptures and the monastery's sacred relics.

It is undoubtedly in his aspect of 'Guardian of the North' and protector of the *dharma* that the Vaisravana image appeared in Nava-sangharama. This is made plain by Hiüen Tsiang's account of the way in which the *deva* is said to have driven back the son of the Turkic (Hepthalite?) Khan, Yeh-hu, who tried to plunder the monastery of its treasures. Having encamped outside the monastery, he had a dream in which Vaisravana Deva appeared to him and demanded to know "what power do you possess that you dare ... to overthrow this convent?" The Deva hurled his lance at the Khan's son and transfixed him with it, whereupon the Khan awoke in a state of terror. His dream forced him to repent of his evil designs and he hastened to the convent, requesting the monks to absolve him from his crime. However, he died before he could receive an answer to his request.⁵⁴

Living as the Bactrian community did on the edge of lands which, as far as the monks were concerned, were still largely 'barbarian', Vaisravana Deva's nature as protector of both the secular ruler and the monastic communities, was clearly an important feature of Bactrian Buddhism. It may be that the "former king of this country"⁵⁵ who endowed the monastery at Nava-sangharama was a devotee of

⁵³ 'Naubahar' itself is said by Muslim geographers to have had a great cupola, called al-Ustun, from the apex of which flew a great silk flag "which the wind blew out at times to a fabulous length" Le Strange (1905 421-2); Hamadani, 383 (Massé).

⁵⁴ Hiüen Tsiang, *BRWW*, i:45 (Beal); Yuan Chwang, *Travels*, 108.

⁵⁵ Hiüen Tsiang, *BRWW*, i:44.

Vaisravana and regarded the *deva* as the patron guardian of Bactra in the same way that in a previous generation Ardvi Sura Anahita had been. Or it could have been that the endowment of the new monastic complex was a sign of gratitude for the defeat of barbarian hordes some years earlier,⁵⁶ or commemorated the accession of the local ruler? In Khotan, for example, Vaisravana was said to have protected Khotan in this way against the Tibetans (Snellgrove:351).⁵⁷ Indeed, there are very strong similarities between accounts of Vaisravana's protective power in Khotan and his intervention on behalf of Nava-sangharama of Bactra, which suggests that both narratives derive from a common origin and were modified by the local context (Snellgrove:346n, 351).

The foundation of Bactra's Buddhist community took place at a very early date. Upasak (pp. 206-20) argues persuasively that Bactra was the site of the first *vihara* north of the Hindu Kush. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that Buddhism reached Bactra during the lifetime of the Buddha himself.⁵⁸ It is therefore possible that the legend of Vaisravana, and the *deva* himself, is Bactrian in origin,⁵⁹ the image and the surrounding pictographs being 'unusual' inasmuch as they repre-

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ A woodblock print of Vaisravana from Dunhuang (Gansu Province) dated AD 947 was made to mark the accession of the Khotanese ruler Cao Yuanzhong. Some years earlier this individual had petitioned Vaisravana for a son and heir, a boon which had been granted and which was commemorated in the same print, see Zwalf (p. 226, pl. 331).

⁵⁸ Hiüen Tsiang attributes the monastic foundation in Bactra to two Bactrian merchants who visited the Buddha in India. Impressed with his teaching, they brought back with them some nail parings and hair of the Teacher, which were subsequently placed in stupas in Ti-Wei and Po-li, settlements which lay somewhat to the north-west of Bactra city proper. Since the names and story of the merchants, Tapassu and Bhalluka, can be found in Pali literature, Upasak (pp. 206-12, 217-20) argues that there is sufficient historical evidence to believe this legend has a factual basis. The men are said to have come from Asitanjana, a city of Uttarapatha, whilst one source claims they were from Pokharavati (i.e. Pushkaravati) in Ukkala, that is Chahrsada near Balkh (see Hiüen Tsiang, *BRWW*, i:47-8; Upasak, *loc. cit.*). Recently a number of Buddhist texts from Afghanistan, dated to the first century AD, have been acquired by the British Museum and are considered to be the earliest known writings about the Buddha (*The Guardian*, 27 June 1996). Bactra, we know, was particularly noted for its copying of Buddhist texts. Could it be that these documents derive from the archives of Nava-vihara which were hidden in remote mountain caves on the advance of the Muslim armies?

⁵⁹ Most of the depictions of Vaisravana Deva found in China date from the 9th-11th century, whereas Hiüen Tsiang saw the Bactra image in the first half of the seventh century AD, though the image had evidently been *in situ* for a number of years prior to his visit.

sented an indigeous cultic and artistic tradition. In this regard, it is interesting to note the similarities between the account of Vaisravana's protection of Nava-sangharama and the Saljuq discovery of the remains of 'Ali b. Abi Talib at al-Khair. Central to both is a dream sequence in which the guardian spirit of the shrine (Vaisravana, 'Ali) appears, castigates the doubter and reinforces his message by physical assault. On awaking, both dreamers are transformed individuals, repent of their evil thoughts and intentions and become avid devotees of the cult in question. At the same time, the central 'image'—Vaisravana Deva, the Buddha image and relics on the one hand, the immaculately preserved body of Shah-i Mardan on the other—is preserved from harm.

This association with the customs of Nauroz at Mazar-i Sharif and with the ancient cult centre of Zariaspa, runs even deeper, for iconographically there is a connection between Vaisravana Deva, fortune, the agricultural cycles and flowers. In Central Asian Buddhist art, the *deva* is sometimes depicted in association with his sister, Sri Devi, who holds a golden dish full of flowers (Zwalf:220 & pl. 319), and occasionally with Sri Kichijoten, goddess of good fortune and good harvest (Zwalf:250, & pl. 356). Hiüen Tsiang makes specific reference to Bactra's innumerable varieties of flowers "both on the land and water" for which the area was famous.⁶⁰ Undoubtedly, one of the unique local varieties of flowers "on the ... water" was the now extinct Bactrian lotus,⁶¹ a flower which has particular symbolic meaning in Buddhism as well as being the familiar flower of Ardvi Sura Anahita. For the Buddhists of Bactra, Vaisravana assumes the role of *tyche* of the *Sangha* of 'Naubahar' in the same way Anahita did in the Achaemenid period. The possession of the Buddha's washing bowl may, too, have helped to perpetuate a long en-

⁶⁰ Hiüen Tsiang, *BRWW*, i:44 (Beal); cf. Yuan Chwang, *Travels*, 108 (Watters).

⁶¹ *nilüfar*, *HA*, 108; Le Strange (1905:420) translates the word merely as lily.

trenched Bactrian tradition which was in part a celebration of the life-giving nature of water.⁶² In other aspects, Vaisravana Deva, too, bears some resemblance to Tishtrya. Vaisravana Deva, for example, is represented iconographically marching across clouds and accompanied by winds and rain. Such an association may have provided the necessary justification for the community to introduce the celebration of the New Year and/or a flower festival such as Gul-i Surkh around the cult of Vaisravana Deva who was originally, anyway, borrowed from Central Asian, and possibly Iranian, religious tradition.

There are, therefore, at least some grounds for believing that the monks of Bactra and the surrounding area adapted aspects of their practice, though not their fundamental theology, to local traditions, part of which was the assimilation of ancient Bactrian spring festivals that celebrated the fertility of the Hazhda Nahr, the commencement of the new year and regeneration. This would certainly make sense, since the Buddhists would be in a position to exploit ancient traditions of pilgrimage at this season of the year for their purposes, since they were able to provide a complementary, or rival, celebration during a period of the year when the non-Buddhist population were celebrating the spring equinox and making pilgrimage to temples to Nana and other Graeco-Bactrian deities.

By placing the emphasis on the semantic link between Naubahar and Nava Vihara, scholars have ignored another important issue, namely that it is inconceivable that Bactra at the time of Hiüen Tsiang's visit, or at the time of the Arab conquest, did not have any public edifices dedicated to the Zoroastrian faith. After all, the Sasanian empire, whose state religion was Zoroastrianism, exerted a strong influence over the region, and despite the presence of large Buddhist communities in Bactra, Bamiyan, Begram and other centres, the extent to which the Buddha's doc-

⁶² Hiüen Tsiang, *BRWW*, i:46 (Beal).

trine was followed by the indigenous populations of these areas has yet to be determined. It is certain that Buddhism in Bactria and the Hindu Kush had to co-exist, and compete, with other religious traditions which had been established in the region for far longer. The Kushans, for example, had their own dynastic cult and worshipped a number of Graeco-Bactrian gods as well as Anahita-Nana. Buddhist sites such as Tapa Sardar and Tapa Shutur make it clear that Buddhism took account of this situation by incorporating both Indian and Graeco-Bactrian deities, whilst Eastern Christianity (Moffett, i:207)⁶³ and Manichaeism (Lieu:220-4) had established a foothold in Bactria and Soghdia from the third century AD. Initially, of course, Buddhism would have been regarded as a 'foreign' religion and the majority of their monks would have come from northern India, though by the time of Hiüen Tsiang it is evident that there were several hundred Bactrian monks running the Nava-sangharama.

Hiüen Tsiang, not unexpectedly, makes no mention of other faiths during his time in Bactria. He was, after all, occupied with his own religious quest and not particularly interested in recording details of other, rival, religions that he encountered. Too many references to rival faiths, ^y anyway, would undermine the polemical aspect of his record, for one of the objects of writing down the travels of the Master was to demonstrate to fellow believers that Buddhism had become the major religious force from Northern India to China. Indeed, reading his account of Bactra, it would be easy to fall into the erroneous belief that Buddhism reigned supreme in the area. For Hiüen Tsiang and his biographer were as sublimely indifferent to the faith of others as, subsequently, the Arab Muslims were to Buddhism. In any case, Hiüen Tsiang stayed in Buddhist monasteries which, in the case of Bac-

⁶³ A celibate Christian sisterhood was established in Bactra as early as AD 195. During the 5th-6th C. Nestorian missionary activity resulted in the conversion of many thousands of Turco-Mongolian tribes on either side of the Amu Darya (Mingana:10-11; Moffett, i:231).

tra, lay well away from the main commercial centre, and spent his time discussing abstruse theological issues with fellow monks or performing pilgrimage at the various stupas. His contact with other religious traditions in Bactra, therefore, would have been minimal. In this regard, we perhaps should bear in mind how very little we would know about Buddhist doctrine and practice if the only sources we had were those of Muslim geographers and historians.⁶⁴ One thing, however, is certain; Bactra's position as one of the pre-eminent places of pilgrimage in the region did not begin with the presence of Buddhist relics, monasteries and stupas, but belongs to a much more ancient tradition to which Buddhism and subsequently, Islam, added their own unique contribution.

The Naubahar/Nava-vihara debate has been overshadowed, too, by the fact that it has been shown that the priests of 'Naubahar', the Barmakids, who subsequently rose to a prominent position in the 'Abbasid empire, derive their name from the Sanskrit *Varā-Ārāmika*, 'Chief Attendant of an *Arama*', i.e., a Buddhist monastery (Upasak:231: cf. Barthold, 1977; Bosworth, 1994; Bulliet, 1979).⁶⁵ That the Barmakid clan originally held important administrative positions in the Buddhist community at Bactra is now generally accepted,⁶⁶ yet this does not mean that at the time of the Arab conquest there were no Zoroastrian temples in Balkh. It is curious that the Barmakids generally gave out that they were Zoroastrian, not Buddhist, officials prior to their conversion to Islam. Even their many opponents dubbed them Magians and accused them of working for the restoration of the Sasanian monarchy and, by implication, the revival of the Mazdean faith (Barthold, 1977:197).⁶⁷ The Barmakids probably exploited the ignorance of the Arabs about

⁶⁴ Excluding, of course, the remarkable writings of al-Biruni.

⁶⁵ Hamadani, 376, 383-85 (Massé).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, see also al-Nadim, *Fihrist*, i:469; Zaydan, *Umayyads and 'Abbasids*, 195, where Yahya is said to have been a covert Shi'i.

the religious situation in Bactra, and found it convenient to claim a Zoroastrian, rather than Buddhist, ancestry, since the former religion was more acceptable to Islam than the latter.⁶⁸ What is more surprising is that their enemies never pointed out their dissimulation which would have certainly been a useful tool in the many attempts made by their enemies to discredit their Islamic credentials.

Even after the Barmakids became Muslims, they remained strongly nationalistic, concerned about the preservation of Iranian culture, monuments and historical records as well as introducing Persian dress, manners and etiquette to the 'Abbasid court (Browne, 1969, i:257-60; Goldzier, ii:300; Wellhausen:468-9).⁶⁹ It was the Barmakids who popularised the widespread celebration of Nauroz, Mihrgan and Ram, which lends further credence to the contention that Buddhists of Bactria celebrated Nauroz and other indigenous festivals of Zoroastrian origin (Browne, 1969, i:257-60). The Barmakids, it would seem, were more interested in reviving and preserving Iranian culture, than actively seeking a hidden agenda which involved the restoration of Buddhism (or Zoroastrianism) to the Eastern Caliphate. In the process, though, their sponsorship of traditions and festivals considered to be Iranian by Arab writers and geographers, led them to conclude, erroneously, that the Barmakids' ancestors had been priests of the Zoroastrian temple in Bactra.

At the time of the Arab invasion, political power in Bactria was in the hands of Turkic rulers who may, or may not, have been Buddhist. Other elements who fought the invaders included surviving pockets of Ephthalites, and Persian-speaking mountain communities in Ghur and Gharchistan (Barthold, 1977:180ff; Frye, 1979, XIII:309-13 & XVIII:116-7). Yazdagird III used Balkh as a base for oper-

⁶⁸ A treaty between the Muslims and Zoroastrians legitimised the continuation of fire altars in return for tribute money, the Zoroastrians being accepted as *Ahl-i Kitab*, People of the Book, and entitled to Dhimmi, or protected-people, status (Boyce, 1984:146-7). Buddhists, like Hindus, were regarded as idolaters, the images of the Buddha and other Bodhisattvas were destroyed or defaced as an affront to Islam and the monasteries razed to the ground.

⁶⁹ al-Tabari, *EAE*, i:178-9; cf., Hamadani, 383-85 (Massé).

ations against Ahnaf b. Qays,⁷⁰ which would suggest he did so in the knowledge that he could call on support from the Persian population of the region who were, presumably, Zoroastrian (see Boyce, 1984:147-50; Lieu:223). Al-Biruni and Narsharkhi are quite clear that Zoroastrian worship continued in the Oxus basin well into the tenth century. If this is the case, then fire temples and other Mazdean religious edifices must have co-existed with Buddhist monasteries and stupas at the time of the Arab conquest. At the same period, as we have already noted, the cult of Nana-Anahita was still widespread in the area in the seventh and eighth centuries.

Following the destruction of pre-Islamic Bactra and 'Naubahar' by Qutayba, the Arab colonists refounded the city several kilometres further north, away from the mountains and in the open plain (Barthold, 1977:77; Faiz Bakhsh:30; Le Strange, 1905:422).⁷¹ Monumental remains of the old Bactra, however, could still be observed for many generations after its abandonment. The *Hudud al-'Alam* relates that "Naubahar of Balkh" was the residence of the Sasanian kings and that "paintings⁷² and wonderful works"⁷³ were still visible. Nor did worship at 'Naubahar' cease with the conquest of Islam. Al-Tabari records that the local ruler, Naḳak Tarkhan, prayed at 'Naubahar' as late as the year 90/708-9.⁷⁴ This individual, presumably a Buddhist, is said to have beheaded the chief priest of Nava-vihara for embracing Islam (Upasak:231). Indeed, the temple is said to have "enjoyed a great reputation among the Muslims" (Barthold, 1977:77), which would suggest that even after their conversion, the population of the region continued to venerate

⁷⁰ Raverty, *The History of Hiri*, i:173-6.

⁷¹ *HA*, 337n. The present-day city of Balkh is mostly mediaeval and may not even be the site of the first Islamic city of that name. The most ancient Islamic remains, the 'Abbasid mosque of Noh Gunbad, lie some two kilometres south of the present settlement.

⁷² *naqsha*.

⁷³ *kākird*, *HA*, 108

⁷⁴ al-Tabari, *EAE*, ii:1181, 1205, 1490.

pre-Islamic religious sites. This would reinforce our contention that pre-Islamic Bactrian festivals, the original Janda Bala and Gul-i Surkh in particular, were perpetuated too, justified on the basis that they were an indigenous Bactrian tradition and, as such, posed no theological threat to the teaching. Such observances, anyway, would have taken place well away from the Islamic city of Balkh and, as such, would perhaps have been regarded by the Arab colonists of that place in a patronising and condescending manner.

By the second or third Hijra century memories of the actual religious traditions associated with the ruins had doubtless faded to such an extent that 'Naubahar' had come to be more symbolic of Bactria's ancient and proud past which had been swamped by Arabism, than of any particular pre-Islamic religious tradition. In other words, as far as Bactrians were concerned it was not particularly important whether the site was Buddhist or Zoroastrian. 'Naubahar' rather was a kind of shorthand for indigenous and nationalistic aspirations.

In the light of this, it makes it that much easier to understand the cultural, nationalistic and emotional needs and motivation which finally refocused the same indigenous festivals to the Islamic shrine of 'Ali b. Abi Talib.

CHAPTER 5

NAUROZ AND GUL-I SURKH: CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS

The debate concerning the authenticity of Mazar-i Sharif's claims to be the last resting place of 'Ali b. Abi Talib and the present popularity of Janda Bala, overshadows the third festival or fair,¹ that of Gul-i Surkh, which also commences on *1 Hamal*. Doubtless the reason for this is that Gul-i Surkh nowadays has no particular ritual which distinguishes it from the Nauroz events at the shrine and as a consequence the uniqueness of Gul-i Surkh as a festival in its own right has been eroded by the elevation of the *janda* and the miracles which are claimed to take place during this event.

Today the only features unique to Gul-i Surkh which appear to have survived are the custom of hospitality during the forty days of the festival, and a visual identification of the name with a species of wild red flower (Pers. '*lāla*'), which blossoms in the *dasht* around Mazar-i Sharif during the festive season. Until the present civil war broke out two decades ago, which disrupted the pilgrimage to the shrine and led to a rapid decline in the observation of Nauroz as a whole, it was customary during Gul-i Surkh for the people of Mazar-i Sharif to leave their yard doors off the latch so that complete strangers were free to enter and demand free board and lodging for as long as required. As the town was full of pilgrims from all over Afghanistan at this time of year, however, this custom was widely appreciated

¹ Pers. *méla* a word which can also mean any picnic, or outing to the country. Occasionally one hears the term *jashan-i gul-i surkh*, *jashan* being the generic word for national holidays, e.g. Jashan-i Jamhuri (Republic Day), Jashan-i Pushtunistan (Pushtunistan Day). I have used 'fair' and 'festival' interchangeably to describe Gul-i Surkh.

by all who made the journey to the shrine and earned the citizens of the town great honour and fame throughout the region.

Local people, when asked to specify other customs unique to the festival of Gul-i Surkh, invariably mention the preparation of *haft mewa* (seven fruits),² *samanak*³ or *kulcha-yi naurozi*,⁴ foods which are associated throughout the Persian and Central Asian world with Nauroz and are certainly not unique to the Hazhda Nahr. Indeed, some individuals even claim that forty days of hospitality is merely an extension of the Nauroz festival itself inasmuch as pilgrims come to Mazar on this day to observe Janda Bala, and custom dictates that local people provide accommodation for visitors.

If this is the case, it is peculiar that this custom should have such a curious name for it would be more likely to be designated *mehmani-i nauroz(i)* ('New Year Hospitality') or some similar phrase. Unlike Gul-i Surkh, the observation of Nauroz is not confined to the Balkh area but is popular throughout Afghanistan, Central Asia, Iran, Turkey and parts of the Middle East. As such, we would expect to find Gul-i Surkh, or a similar forty day hospitality tradition, associated with Nauroz in these localities too, but this is not the case. Nauroz in these places is celebrated in accordance with the Iranian tradition, for a period of two weeks⁵ only. We know that at the beginning of this century, Gul-i Surkh was also celebrated under the same name at the shrine of Baha al-Din Naqshband (718/1318-791/1389), in Bukhara. In the year in question, the fair occurred in May and not March or on Nauroz (Olufsen, 1911:420), whilst in c. 1925, the 'Tulip' ('*lala*') festival of Isfara, in the ^RKokand subdistrict of the Ferghana oasis, fell in

² The Afghan equivalent of the Iranian *haft sin*.

³ Another special food made from wheat grain.

⁴ New Year biscuits.

⁵ *pānzdafrōz*, that is, 15 days.

April and lasted ten days only (Peshchereva, 1927:374).⁶ This would indicate that Gul-i Surkh was originally a festival in its own right, distinct from Nauroz and Janda Bala, but which, like Nauroz, fell during the early weeks of the Central Asian Spring, and was timed to coincide with the blossoming of the *lala* and rose. Since Afghans clearly regard the hospitality offered by the people of Balkh during Gul-i Surkh as being distinct from the general obligation and custom of *mehman nawazi*, it would seem that the 'open door' tradition of Mazar-i Sharif is a particular feature of Gul-i Surkh rather than Nauroz. This belief is reinforced by the fact that whereas Janda Bala has proliferated in recent years throughout northern Afghanistan, and is even celebrated in a small number of shrines in Kabul and Herat, Gul-i Surkh and its traditions of hospitality remains unique to the Hazhda Nahr region, at least as far as Afghanistan is concerned. This conclusion is reinforced, picturesquely, by Vambéry (1864:274), who records that according to local folk belief, the roses which then grew around 'Ali's shrine were incapable of growing in any other soil.

In endeavouring to trace customs which are unique to Gul-i Surkh it is important first to clear up a common confusion in terminology. It is usual for western scholars and travellers to erroneously refer to Gul-i Surkh as the 'Tulip Festival' or the 'Festival of the Red Tulip' (e.g. Baily:91;⁷ L. Dupree, 1978:105-6 (implied); N. Dupree, 1977:390), in emulation of a long-standing scholarly convention of translating '*lāla*' as 'tulip' wherever it appears in Persian poetry. In Dari, however, *lala* is used to describe a number of different species of wild flowers.⁸ The *lala*, which

⁶ 'Aini (pp. 70-87) records that the Nauroz festival at Bukhara was held two weeks before Nauroz at Samarkand. Translation of Peshchereva's two articles kindness of Dr. Oliver Dirs, Dept. of Russian and Slavonic Studies, University of Leeds.

⁷ Though he is inconsistent. In his translation of the song, *Sail-i Gul-i Surkh*, Baily refers to the festival as "the red flower festival."

⁸ Cf. Steingass, '*lāla*'. Peshchereva (1927 & 1963) makes the same mistake in both articles on the *lala* festival in Isfara and the Varukh valley, without making an attempt to identify the genus of

in Balkh is particularly associated with Gul-i Surkh, is actually not even a member of the *Tulipa* genus, but is a species of poppy (*Papaver*), consisting of four deep red, or scarlet petals, a cross-shaped stigma and very dark purple, verging on black, ovary (Shmida, 1981).⁹ Peshchereva, writing about the 'Tulip' Festival in Isfara, makes no attempt to scientifically identify the species of red flower which gives its name to the festival and adorned the hills and fields of the area during April. It may well, however, have been a similar species of poppy or possibly the *anemone bucharia*,¹⁰ a flower unique to the Oxus basin and Tajikistan (Hepper, 1972).¹¹

Nor do scholars or travellers attempt to explain what the symbolic association is between 'tulips'—or indeed any red flower—and hospitality, let alone relate the term to the traditions of Janda Bala, Nauroz and/or 'Ali b. Abi Talib. This is probably because, today, the *lala* does not have any ritualised role in the festival at Mazar-i Sharif, though in the 1920s at Isfara, people adorned trees, poles and even themselves with *lala* during the 'Tulip' Festival (Peshchereva, 19227 & 1963). The only symbolic role for sprouting plants or flowers are those known to be associated directly with Nauroz, namely the planting of seeds of wheat in small boxes in houses so that something green will be flourishing at Nauroz. This practice is wide-

flower. In the Kabul and the Koh Daman area, numerous tuberous wild flowers, referred to locally by the generic word, *lala*, bloom during the forty days of Gul-i Surkh, particularly a species of tulip and crocus. The habitat of these southern Afghanistan *lalas* are the cultivated fields, unlike the *lala* of Balkh which is confined to the semi-desert *dasht* or non-irrigated *chul*. The Kabul tulip is similar in appearance to the mountain tulip (*Tulipa oculus solis*) of Palestine and quite different to the Balkh poppy, having long, pointed petals that are more pink than red. As in Palestine, this plant appears somewhat earlier than the Balkh poppy (Shmida, 1991:113-4).

⁹ Identified as such by F. Nigel Hepper, Dec. 1997, from a photograph of the Balkh poppy taken in the Dasht-i Shadyan, south of Mazar-i Sharif, in April 1997.

¹⁰ see E. Browne (1969, ii:329), where he translates *lala* as "scarlet anemone."

¹¹ Given that in the Middle East different species of red display flowers appear in the plains, valleys and hills at different times in the spring, it could be that several kinds of red tuberous wild plants actually make up the red *lala* in question. As we argue below, the *genus* is not particularly important, rather the symbolism of the red in the desert and its association with spring. Doubtless local tradition identified indigenous species of wild spring flower with e.g. the Adonis/Tammuz tradition cf. Shmida (pp. 108-13 in particular). To prevent confusion, whenever the word *lala* appears in the context of the Gul-i Surkh, the Isfara 'Tulip' Festival, or spring in Balkh in general, I have referred to it either as Balkh poppy or used the Persian term, *lala*.

spread throughout all the regions of Asia and the Middle East which celebrate Nauroz and is therefore not a custom associated with Gul-i Surkh.

Today all that is left of the connection between Gul-i Surkh and the Balkh poppy (*lala*) is a vague association in popular folk lore. It is believed that the name of the festival derives from the blossoming of these red flowers in the *dasht* during the forty days after Nauroz (cf. N. Dupree, 1977:39).¹² This, however, fails to explain what association the *lala* has with hospitality or why the festival is known as Gul-i Surkh rather than say, Gul-i Lala or even Mela-yi Lala, as the fair was known in Isfara (Peshchereva, 1927 & 1963). After all, there are a number of other copycat *melas* in Afghanistan which are held to celebrate the blossoming of certain flowers and which take their name from the plant in question, e.g. Mela-yi Arghawan¹³ and Mela-yi Naranj.¹⁴ And although red flowers do blossom in the *dasht* during the spring, many other varieties of wild flower, of various colours, flourish during this forty day period and are often far more dominant than the Balkh poppy (*lala*) in question. As such, there would be just as much justification for calling the festival Gul-i Zard ('Yellow Flower')¹⁵ or Mela-yi Shakufa ('The Blossom Festival'), since in the forty days after Nauroz many of the fruit trees burst into bloom. In other words, there must be a deeper level of association between the Balkh poppy (*lala*) and Gul-i Surkh, which has now been lost.

¹² Walwalji; *Andisha* circle; Zaman Jan; Ustad Nigargar and others.

¹³ *arghawān* = purple blossom of the Judas Tree, the festival is linked to Sufism as many of the shrines in the Kabul and Herat area are planted with this blossom (cf. Guzargah in Herat). In Kabul the festival is particularly associated with the Koh-i Khwaja Saf ('Hill of the Pure Saint') near the Bala Hisar. Walwalji, Mazar-i Sharif, spring 1996.

¹⁴ *Naranj* = bitter orange. This *mela* is held in Jalalabad during the autumn when the orange trees come into bloom. The cultivation of oranges was introduced to Afghanistan by the Soviet government in the 1950s, Walwalji and *Andisha* circle, Mazar-i Sharif, spring 1996.

¹⁵ For example, there is a famous love song known as *Gul-i Zard*, ('Yellow Flower') see Sakata (pp.109-10).

To add to the confusion, in Persian literary tradition, *gul*¹⁶ can be used as a generic word for flower in general or be a specific reference to the red rose.¹⁷ In other words, Gul-i Surkh could be translated as the ‘red flower’ or ‘red rose’. Thus Western scholars, as well as erroneously referring to the fair as the ‘Tulip Festival’, muddy the waters even further by often translating the phrase *gul-i surkh*, when it appears in ballads specifically connected with the festival, as ‘red flower’ never as ‘tulip’ or ‘red rose’ (cf. Baily:91).

The few Europeans who mentioned the festival in the last century and the early part of the present one, were at least consistent, inasmuch as they invariably refer to Gul-i Surkh as the Festival, or Fair, of the Red Rose. Faiz Bakhsh, writing in the latter half of the last century, records that during his visit to Mazar-i Sharif:

In the year 530 A.H. (A.D. 1103)¹⁸ a mausoleum was erected and an annual fair was instituted, which is held during a period of forty days at the time when the rose flower is in season. At this fair large crowds assemble from Khurasan, Persia, Khawarizm(*sic*), Bokhara, Farghana, Eastern Turkistan, Afghanistan and Hindostan.¹⁹

The *Gazetteer*, relying primarily on Vambéry (*loc. cit.*), but which incorporates first hand information gathered by British and native intelligence officers and surveyors in 1885-1886, refers to it as a “great fair, called Surkh Gul Méla (Fair/Festival of the Red Rose) [which] commences at the Nauroz (21st March) and lasts two months, or until Ramazan” (*Gazetteer* (1895) ii:257-8),²⁰ whilst Olusfen notes in respect of the festival as it was known in Bukhara:

¹⁶ See, Steingass’ dictionary entry under *gul*.

¹⁷ E.g. Sa’adi’s famous poetic work, *Gulistan*, ‘The Rose Garden’; Shabistari’s, *Gulshan-i Raz*, etc. The Persian proverb (commonly used throughout Afghanistan) *héch gul békhâr nést*, ‘there is no rose without thorns’, makes the association quite clear.

¹⁸ If he is referring to the Saljuq discovery of the shrine its date should properly be 550 A.H.. 530 A.H. corresponds to AD 1135/6 and not AD 1103, which, in Hijra dates, is 496/7.

¹⁹ Faiz Bakhsh, ‘Report on Badakhshan, Balkh and Bokhara,’ *Selections from the Records of the Government of the Punjab and its Dependencies* (Lahore 1871), India Office Library & Records, L/P&S/5/270, fols 152ff.

²⁰ See also, *Peshawar Confidential Diary*, 21 May 1896, IOLR: L/P&S/7/86, n.p., where the festival is mentioned in passing by the same name, though without explanation.

Gul-i-Surkh means red roses or red flowers, the festival being a sort of spring festival, a remnant handed down from the old Avesta faith. During this festival lamps are lit in all *chirâkkhanas*²¹ and at the *kabrs*.²² On *Panshambé*²³ women are allowed to make pilgrimages to the mosque and the grave (Olufsen 1911:420).

Sukharova (p. 38), too, refers to the festival at Khwaja Naqshband's shrine in the same manner.²⁴

In modern Afghanistan, whilst there remains a distant, visual association between Gul-i Surkh and the *lala*, by virtue of the fact that the Balkh poppy blooms still in the *dasht*, the association between the fair and the red rose has completely disappeared. On the other side of the Amu Darya, the Russian Revolution had an even more devastating effect on such traditions and Gul-i Surkh and the *lala* festivals have been completely lost to the indigenous culture.²⁵ As far as Balkh is concerned, we can trace the decline of the tradition back to the conquest of the area by Nadir Shah Afshar (d. 1747) which led to the break up of the Uzbek empire into small city states and, subsequently, the annexation of the Chingizid appanage of Balkh by the Muhammadzayi dynasty of Kabul from 1849 onwards (see, McChesney, 1991; Lee, 1996). The incorporation of what was known as Lesser Turkistan, or Afghan Turkistan, into the emergent state of Afghanistan resulted in the domination of the administration, army and civil service of the region by Kabulis and Pushtu-speakers drawn from various southern provinces, whose cultural and

²¹ That is in the niches at the shrine reserved for the burning of lamps and candles, a common practice in Central Asian shrine cults.

²² I.e. *qabr*, or grave.

²³ I.e., *panjshambé*, or Thursdays. Usually at Central Asian shrines this day is set aside for women.

²⁴ “раздника красной розы (Или гули сурк).”

²⁵ Following independence from the Soviet Union, Uzbekistan revived the celebration of Nauroz as a means of establishing national identity within a Turco-Iranian, rather than a Slavic and Christian, ethos. As part of the revival of indigenous cultural traditions, pilgrimages to shrines were permitted. In the spring of 1992 the shrine of Khwaja Naqshband was one of the major pilgrimage centres, particularly for women. Even at this early period after independence a shaikh had been installed and devotees were listening to his teaching and in various corners of the shrine performing the silent (*khāmūsh*) Naqshbandiyya *zīkr*. Whether, as in Mazar-i Sharif, Gul-i Surkh, if it is still known, will eventually be celebrated too, only time will tell. *Personal observation*, Uzbekistan, March 1992.

religious orientations were subcontinental rather than Central Asian. Thousands of Pushtuns and Kabulis were encouraged to settle in strategic areas of the former appanage, particularly in Balkh and the headwaters of the Hazhda Nahr. These settlers, whilst bringing with them their own rich traditions, were cultural very different to the indigenous Turco-Tajik peoples. They certainly had no tradition of celebrating Gul-i Surkh and even Nauroz tended to be an urban custom limited to Kabul and, to an even lesser extent, Jalalabad.

Indeed, sporadically, there were systematic attempts by certain Pushtun officials to de-Turkify the region. In the 1930s and 1940s, most of the main towns were redeveloped. The old covered bazaars²⁶ were pulled down, as were most of the ancient citadels where Uzbek amirs had once ruled. Tombstones and inscriptions commemorating the families of these amirs or important religious or national figures, were removed or broken up and dozens of towns and villages associated with the Uzbek elites, were given Pushtu names. Newspapers and other publications in Uzbek and Turkman were banned, as was the teaching of indigenous languages in state schools and *madrasas* throughout the region and the learning of Pushtu made compulsory for all pupils.²⁷

In more recent times, the purges of Taraki and his successors, the Soviet invasion in 1979 and the protracted war which followed, resulted in the exodus of millions of people from Afghanistan and the deaths, either as a direct result of the war or by assassination or execution, of most of the intelligentsia and middle classes. Following the fall of the Najibullah regime in 1992 there was a chronic decline in the security of the region which resulted in a crime wave in Mazar-i Sharif involving armed burglary and theft which created an atmosphere of mistrust and

²⁶ *chahārsū*.

²⁷ 'Abd al-Karim Bahman Toghali and Muhammad Saleh Razaq, April 1993; Dr Wahidi, July 1997; *Andisha* circle, 1995-1997, and many other local sources, cf. Byron (1981).

fear. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the origin and even the meaning of Gul-i Surkh, has been lost to the present generation.

The lack of visual relationship between Gul-i Surkh and the red rose is undoubtedly due to physical changes made to the precincts of the shrine of Shah-i Mardan in this century. Up until the 1930s, the shrine was surrounded by a large *chahar bagh*, an ornamental garden in four segments. Vambéry (1864:274), who visited Mazar in 1863, records that this *chahar bagh* was full of “wonder-working red roses (gül-i surkh). These flowers grow upon the pretended tomb of Ali, and have positively the sweetest smell and the finest colour of any I saw.” Faiz Bakhsh (*loc. cit.*), writing a few years later, makes this symbolic association even clearer by stating that the “annual fair” was “held during a period of forty days at the time when the rose flower is in season,” asserting that Gul-i Surkh’s association with the shrine of Mazar-i Sharif went back to the Timurid period. Even today the shrine is referred to as the *Rauza*, or *Rauza-yi Sharif*, that is, ‘The (Noble) Garden’.

Older people from Mazar can still remember this Chahr Bagh and say that it had eighteen irrigated *chamans*, or plots,²⁸ which one is tempted to see as being symbolic of the Hazhda Nahr system which, as we have seen, has been inextricably linked to successive cult centres in Balkh from ancient times. This garden is probably the one laid down by the Tuqay-Timurid ruler, Wali Muhammad Khan (d. 1021/1612), who was a great patron of the shrine.²⁹ It was one hundred *jarib* in area (approx. 50 acres) and was full of trees which had been planted by the “devotees of the Hazrat” (McChesney, 1991:103).³⁰

²⁸ Walwalji, spring 1996.

²⁹ Nur Muhammad, *TM*, 54-5, says it was constructed by Muhammad Khan b. Jani Beg Khan (d. 1021/1612). The design and tradition of the *chahar bagh* can be traced to pre-Islamic times. See R. Pinder-Wilson, n.d., ‘The Persian Garden: *Bagh* and *Chahar Bagh*,’ in, *The Islamic Garden*, 4th Dumbarton Oaks Colloquium in the History of Landscape Architecture.

³⁰ *bandagān-i hazrat*, McChesney (1991:103) has “employees”, but the word can be equally applied to any individual bound by devotional ties to the shrine, and does not necessarily refer to the

When the town centre was redeveloped in the 1930s much of this rose garden disappeared under paved roads, government offices and shop frontages (Byron:240-2).³¹ Much of what was left of the *chahar bagh* was paved with white marble or concrete walkways and a large cistern (*haus*) was constructed to facilitate ablutions. However, in the spring of 1992, General Dostam ordered the repairs to the shrine complex, and a large number of rose bushes of various hues were replanted in the few remaining flower beds around the shrine, though whether this was a deliberate attempt to revive an ancient association, is unclear.³² There is still a street called Kocha-yi Hazhda Chaman, ‘Street of the Eighteen Plots’, in the area of the Balkh Gate, and reference is made to the *chahar bagh* in the ballad *Sail-i Gul-i Surkh*, discussed below (Baily:91).³³ If Vambéry (*loc. cit.*) can be trusted at this point (and he can be shown to be inaccurate in other aspects of his recording of Central Asian history),³⁴ it would appear that the red roses of this formal garden were believed to possess “wonder-working” powers, that is, they imparted the *baraka* of the Hazrat by virtue of the fact that they drew their sustenance from the dust around his shrine.

At least one authoritative Afghan source asserts that the association between Balkh and the red rose is far more ancient than the Timurid connection which is claimed by Faiz Bakhsh. In his introduction to his collection of the poetry of the eleventh century Persian poetess, Rabi‘a bint Ka‘b al-Quzdari, or Rabi‘a Balkhi as she is known in Afghanistan,³⁵ Nawabi (1931:n.3) remarks that as early as the

shaikhs alone.

³¹ *Andisha* circle, Mazar-i Sharif, 1996.

³² Personal observation, spring/autumn 1996. At the same time more of the perimeter garden was dug up and put under concrete, a new mosque was built and concrete fountains and seats installed.

³³ *gar sui-yi chahār bāgh, gulī bā jānim.*

³⁴ See my comments and footnotes (Lee, 1996, chaps 6, 7) on Vambéry’s account of the political situation in northern Afghanistan in the 1860s which can be shown to be inaccurate in a number of important features.

³⁵ Exactly where she came from is shrouded in mystery. The earliest references to her suggest she was of Arab extraction and a contemporary of Rudaki. Afghan intellectuals even assert she was a

tenth century it was well-known that the rose of Balkh was the most famous of all roses amongst the Iranian-speaking peoples, for from its leaves was extracted the most superior perfume ('*araq*). This was the main reason why the Balkh rose was much praised in the poetry of the region. This connection is shown quite graphically in one of the most famous of Rabi'a's odes, which is known in Afghanistan as 'Balkh Spring' (*Bahar-i Balkh*), though Safa, an Iranian, merely entitles it, *Bagh* ('Garden').³⁶

*zi bas gul ki dar bāgh mā'wī girift
sabā nāfa-yi mushk-i Tibbat nadāsh
Magar chashm-i Majnūn ba abr andar ast
Ba mīmānad andar 'aqiqīn qada
Qadah gīr yak chand wa dunyā magīr
Sar-i nargīs-i tāza az zar wa sīm
chū ruhbān shud andar libās-i kabūd
(Ishaque, 7; Safi, i:65).³⁹*

*Chaman rang-i artang-i Māni girift
jihān būi mushk az chi ma'nī girift³⁷
ki gul rang-i rukhsār-i Laili girift
sirishikī ki dar lāla mā'wī girift
ki badbakht shud ānki dunyā girift³⁸
nishān-i sar-i tāj-i Kisra girift
banafsha, magar dīn-i tarsī girift*

From the abundance of roses (*gul*) in the garden (*chaman*)⁴⁰
The meadows have assumed the colour of Mani's picture-book
The wind has no Tibetan muskbag
How is it then the world is filled with the scent of musk?
Is it that Majnun's eyes weep from the clouds?
For the rose (*gul*) has taken the colour of Laila's cheeks.
Like drops of wine in an agate cup
Are the tears of dew⁴¹ in the poppy (*lāla*)⁴²
Grasp the wine cup awhile, and renounce the world
Since misfortunate is he who grasps the world

disciple and pupil of this famous early Persian poet. According to early sources, Rabi'a's family migrated to Iran or Sistan at the time of Abu Muslim. Her name, Rabi'a Quzdar, derives from the settlement of the same name in Afghan Sistan where the first notices about her say she was born. Farid al-Din 'Attar, however, gives a different and much more detailed account of her life and love which are discussed in detail below (Chap. 6). 'Attar claims Rabi'a was born into an unspecified royal family from Balkh but migrated to Persia in the days of Abu Muslim. 'Abd al-Rahman Jami, the Timurid poet of Herat, reiterates 'Attar's stories concerning her, though citing a different authority which may, or may not, be authentic, given the way in which the Timurids of Herat used the names of early authorities to justify the authenticity of the shrine at Khwaja Khairan. As for 'Attar's account, it may have drawn on earlier sources now lost, or have been a repetition of local tradition and folklore which had grown up around her in the intervening years (Ishaque, 1950). The citizens of Afghanistan, and Balkh in particular, are in no doubt that 'Attar is correct in asserting that Rabi'a came from their city and numerous schools and institutions are named after her throughout the country. A modern, subterranean shrine, said to hold her mortal remains and which is held in high regard by the women of Balkh, is located outside the east wall of the Timurid shrine of Khwaja Parsa.

³⁶ Ishaque (p. 7) gives no title for the poem and probably, originally, it did not have one.

³⁷ After Ishaque; Safa omits this couplet in his version.

³⁸ After Ishaque.

³⁹ I am grateful to Bruce Wannell for a number of suggestions and corrections to the Persian transliteration and my original translation of this poem.

⁴⁰ A *chaman* is a lawn within an ornamental garden.

⁴¹ *Sirishikī*, means both tears and dewdrops.

⁴² Ishaque translates *lāla* as 'tulip'.

The narcissus' head, fresh with gold and silver,
 Has assumed the sign of Khusrau's crown,
 Like monks, the violet has robed itself in deep blue,
 Is it that it has taken the Christianity faith?

If, as 'Attar states, Rabi'a came from the area of Balkh⁴³ and that local tradition is correct in claiming this poem celebrates the beauty of the spring in that area, then it is clear that decades before the shrine of 'Ali was established, spring in the region had a particular association with both the rose and the *lala*.⁴⁴ In line one, *gul* even appears in the context of a formal garden (*bagh, chaman*). We know from the *lala* festival at Isfara, which continued to be observed until the middle of the 1920s, there was a close association between the festival and sacred gardens and groves (Peshchereva, 1927:375), and it would seem that this is an ancient tradition.

In Afghanistan, this tradition survives in the custom of *melas* which are more generally associated with Nauroz in the south of the country but, since they tend to continue well after the spring equinox, may well be a survival of the ancient Gul-i Surkh tradition which, as we have seen, still today involves hospitality and feasting. In Kabul, the main *mela* site is Khair Khana, known to have been a major religious centre in the pre-Islamic era. As far as Herat is concerned, though Gul-i Surkh is not celebrated specifically and the population observe only the standard two weeks of Nauroz as in Iran, the *mela* season does not finish until the last Friday in April, or some 40 days after Nauroz. Indeed, Baily (p. 136) remarks that the Heratis reckon that the model for their *mela* tradition is Mazar-i Sharif's Gul-i Surkh. In Herat the *mela* season revolves around five major sites, four of which are important shrines,⁴⁵ both Sunni, as in the case of Takht-i Safar near the shrine of

⁴³ See chap. 6 for a more detailed discussion of the imagery of this poem.

⁴⁴ Accounts by mediaeval Muslim travellers confirm this picture of Balkh's fame and its renown for its blossom, vineyards and other produce (Le Strange, 1905: 420-21).

⁴⁵ Takht-i Safar (Guzargah); Abu Walid; Shahzada Ya'qub; Imam Sishnur. Only Pul-i Malan, an ancient bridge across the Hari Rud, does not seem to be a religious site. However, local legend links the building of this ancient bridge (its footings are Sasanid) to a local woman, Bibi Nur ('Lady of Light') (N. Dupree, 1977:257) and the road which crosses the river is said to be the one

Khwaja Ansari, and Shi'i, such as the shrine of Abu Walid (Baily:136-7).⁴⁶ In the northern provinces the number of *mela* shrines are far more numerous, which would be expected, if, as we believe, Gul-i Surkh is the original inspiration for the spring *mela* tradition. Olufsen notes that a similar tradition prevailed at the shrine of Shaikh Naqshband in Bukhara, and Gul-i Surkh was said to be held in his honour (Olufsen, 1911:420).

Mela sites identified as being of particular importance in the northern provinces include all the shrines where today the *janda* is raised at Nauroz, namely: Shah-i Mardan, Andkhui; Imam-i Kalan and Imam-i Khurd, Sar-i Pul; Imam Sahib, Maimana and Imam Sahib (Baba Hatim), Juzjan province. Other shrines of particular importance in this respect but which do not, as yet, raise a *janda*, are: Hazrat Imam, reputed to be the grave of Sultan Yazid Bastami, between Tashqurghan and Samangan; the shrine of Hazrat Sultan Muhammad Deobandi of Qara Shaikh, near Sayyad, S.W. of Sar-i Pul; the *ziyarat* of Zamish Khan, S.E. of Kauliyan, southern Faryab; Khwaja Qatal, near Mazar-i Sharif; the shrine and hot springs of Chashma-yi Shafa on the Bakh Ab river S.E. of Dehdadi and a number of the Balkh shrines which have gardens or groves attached to them such as Khwaja Agha Shah Wali and Pir Kamal al-Din.

In Isfara, in the 1920s, the association between the *lala*, poles and *mela* was much closer, inasmuch as poplar poles, or branches, were decorated with *lala* and were paraded amongst the crowd, whilst the trees of central park where the main *mela* was held, were adorned with these blossoms (Peshchereva, 1927:375-6; 1963:216). In Isfara, the shrine of Khwaja Ghor was of particular importance to the festival since 'tulips' were said to blossom around this sacred spot. A commu-

along which Zoroaster himself travelled, field notes, Herat, April 1994.

⁴⁶ Personal observation, Herat, March-April 1994.

nal feast was held at *mazar* of Khwaja Takrut (Peshchereva, 1963:215-6),⁴⁷ who was said to have been one of four brothers, one of whom is called 'Abdullah Surkhi (i.e. 'Red') (Peshchereva, 1963:217). Women, in particular, visit these shrines during the *lala* festival in the hope of curing infertility. Indeed, Peshchereva records that the shrine of Khwaja Takrut contained a stone which was decidedly phallic (Peshchereva, 1929:378 & 1963:216). Nowadays, in Balkh province, any shrine which has a grove of trees or offers suitable shade will attract 'picnickers', though Mazar-i Sharif is still regarded as the archetypal *mela* shrine.

One essential part of the 'Tulip' Festival of Isfara was the sacrifice⁴⁸ of a sheep, goat or chicken at the shrine which was followed by the eating of a communal meal around the grave site (Peshchereva, 1927:378 & 1963:216).⁴⁹ We have seen how similar traditions prevailed in the Munjan and at the shrine of Shah-i Mardan in the Panj valley, as well as being part of the festive custom of the Kafirs. Amongst the Shi'a population of Mazar-i Sharif it is still customary to sacrifice a white cock on the eve of Nauroz,⁵⁰ and eat it as a *nazr* (votive offering).⁵¹

As with Kabul's Khair Khana, a few traditional *mela* sites in northern Afghanistan are not centred around a shrine. Undoubtedly the most famous is the Dasht-i Laili, situated between Shibarghan and Daulatabad, an area linked by folklore to the tragic lovers Laila and Majnun. In the eastern quarter of the territory, the *dasht* of Khwaja Alwan between Tashqurghan and Samangan is another popular *mela* site, whilst the Dasht-i Shadyan, or Dasht-i Arzana, just south of the town

⁴⁷ Situated on the southernmost ridge of the Turkistan mountains, some 30 kms south-west of Kanibadam, see Peshchereva (1963:215).

⁴⁸ *qurbān kardan*.

⁴⁹ Interviews with *ishans* and mullah of Hazrat Imam, and *malang* of shrine of Khwaja Katal, spring 1996.

⁵⁰ *shab-i naurōz*.

⁵¹ Isma'il clan, Khwaja Qatal, July 1997. In Isfara the women cooked *chalpak* a kind of pancake, during the shrine *mela* (Peshchereva, 1963:216).

of Mazar-i Sharif is the venue for the various sporting events which are traditionally held at Nauroz. In all cases, these *dashts* are renowned during the spring for their wild flowers and the emerald green carpet of grass which covers these dry, barren wastes. As far as Khwaja Alwan, or the 'Red Saint',⁵² is concerned, local tradition has it that the *lala* blossom in the desert as a result of his prayers.⁵³ A similar tradition existed in Isfara, where the *lala* are said to have sprouted around the dismembered body of Khwaja Takrut and are regarded as symbolic of his soul which still resides in the place (Peshchereva, 1963:217). In the pre-Islamic period a number of important religious centres were located in the region of the Dasht-i Alwan. Surkh Kotal and Rabatak were Kushan cult sites in the first centuries AD, where deities of Zoroastrian and Babylonian origin, particularly the goddess Nana, were worshipped (Sims-Williams:79). Takht-i Rustam of Samangan was a major Buddhist centre on the road between India, Bactra and China (Allchin & Hammond:235-6; Ball 1982, i:261-3). No excavations have ever been conducted in the Dasht-i Shadyan, but there is a shrine to Hazrat 'Ali in the gorge to the south of the plain, marking the spot where Shah-i Mardan is believed to have defeated unspecified enemies of the faith.⁵⁴

It would seem from the evidence above, that Gul-i Surkh, at least as far as the festival in Balkh is concerned, was originally linked to *both* the red rose and the Balkh poppy, or similar red *lala*. It is evident that less than a century ago Gul-i Surkh in both Bukhara and Mazar was regarded as the Festival of the Red Rose, yet there is still a strong link between the *lala* and Gul-i Surkh, both in respect of folklore and, as we shall see, through songs such as *Sail-i Gul-i Surkh* and *Mullah*

⁵² Walwalji, October 1996. *Ahwān* actually means 'colours' of all different kinds. Cf. 'Abdullah Surkhi in Isfara.

⁵³ Walwalji, spring 1996.

⁵⁴ Rahim Ibrahim; Isma'il Akbar, July 1997.

Muhammad Jan which celebrate this festival. Indeed, Rabi'a Balkhi's poem hints that this association goes back to the pre-Mongol era. Peshchereva, however, argues that the 'Tulip' (*lala*) Festival observed in Isfara in the 1920s was distinct from the Gul-i Surkh of Bukhara, inasmuch as they were held a few weeks apart, but this discrepancy in dates may have been due to climatic differences or possibly long-standing problems of precession in the ancient Iranian calendar. Nor can we agree with this conclusion merely on the basis that these festivals were centred around two different flowers, the red rose and the 'tulip'. For Gul-i Surkh in present-day Mazar-i Sharif is far more closely associated with the *lala* than the red rose. Yet, a century and a half ago, it was the red rose which was regarded as the dominant flower of the festival. This strongly suggests that originally the festival included the symbol of both the rose and *lala*.

This dual symbolism of red rose and *lala* can be seen clearly in the references to both flowers in the ballads which are sung during the 'Tulip' Festival of Isfara. In the *Nakhsh-i Kalan* (no.1) the singers declare they have "made this *lala*" whilst in *Nakhsh-i Khurd* (no.3) the minstrel states he has "brought a rose (*gul*) with him" (l.10-11) and wishes that his lover was a "rose in the garden" (l.27) (Peshchereva, 1927). The reference to both flowers thus contradicts Peshchereva's thesis regarding Gul-i Surkh and the 'Tulip' Festival.

As far as Afghanistan is concerned, today two⁵⁵ folk songs, in particular, are associated with the festival, both of which contain references to *lala* and the red rose (*gullgul-i surkh*). It is from these songs, primarily, that the association between Gul-i Surkh and *lala* is derived, and which, in turn, explains the confusion

⁵⁵ There is another song, *Buniyat-i Pahlawan*, recorded in Qunduz, which refers to the "land of Sakhi Jan," and the "five fingers of 'Ali.'" The song may have originated in Anjidan, see Slobin (pp. 62).

between Gul-i Surkh and its associations in western scholars' works, with tulips. Originally sung in the *bairami*, or three line verse form, the Gul-i Surkh ballads of Mazar-i Sharif derive from Balkh 'tea house'⁵⁶ musical tradition, though today they are essential to the repertoire of both Herati Shi'i and Kabuli musicians (Baily:91-2). In *Sail-i Gul-i Surkh* the fame of the shrine of 'Ali, or Sakhi Jan as it is popularly called, is celebrated, and the miraculous events which take place at the *rauza* at Nauroz:⁵⁷

- 1 *Sail-i gul-i surkh ba Sakhī Jān i
ai shahr-i Herāt borda mehmān i
sail-i gul-i surkh ba Sakhī Jān i
ai shāhr-i Mazār karda mehmān i*
- 2 *tūfān karda gul sabz i dar jōsh i
dasht o biyābān namad[-i] gul pōsh i
gar sūi-yi chahār bāgh, guli bā jānim
ziyārat bekunim, chi jam'-o jōsh i*
- 3 *sail-i gul-i surkh ba Sakhī Jān i
ai shahr-i Mazār borda mehmān i
méla-yi Gul-i Surkh ba Sakhī Jān i
ai shāhr-i Herāt borda⁵⁸ mehmān i*
- 4 *méla-yi Gul-i Surkh rōz-i naurōz i
gulhā-yi lāla chi dilafrōz i
biyā ba Mazār o nafs-i jānam⁵⁹
ziyārat mikunim dunyā-yi seh rōz i*
- 5 *méla-yi Gul-i Surkh ba Sakhī Jān i
ai shahr-i Mazār karda mehmān i (repeat)*
- 6 *rauza-yi Sakhī Jān, fakhr-i bémār i
dawr-i gunbadī jam'-i nafar i
kheil-i kaftarhā ba sar-i gunbad
bāshad bā safā ham chu wār i⁶⁰*
- 7 *sail-i gul-i surkh ba Sakhī Jān i
ai shahr-i Mazār borda mehmān i (repeat)*

⁵⁶ *chāikhānā*.

⁵⁷ I have modified Baily's published text to conform to the standard system used throughout the thesis. This means certain Iranian elements have been Dari-ised and corrections to Baily's text and translation have been made where it is deemed inaccurate or ungrammatical. I have worked from Baily's published version rather than from any live performance on tape. I am grateful for a number of grammatical comments and corrections to both the text and translation suggested by Bruce Wannell.

⁵⁸ Though it would be more grammatical if it was *āwurda*.

⁵⁹ It reads better as *ai nafs-i jānim*. Baily has *o nafas jānim*. The verbal suffix should be singular to conform to Baily's translation "O dearest/We'll pay our devotions at the shrine."

⁶⁰ After Baily, though *chu wārī* does not make much sense, unless it is a very colloquial Herati usage.

- 1 The spectacle of the red roses at Sakhi Jan,
Oh, city of Herat, has brought guests.
The sight of the red roses at Sakhi Jan,
Oh, city of Mazar, has made guests [come].
- 2 Roses bud and burst like a storm,
Wilderness and desert, like a felt mat, are rose-covered,
Towards the garden (*chahār bāgh*), a rose about our person,
Let us visit [the] shrine,⁶¹ bursting with people.
- 3 The spectacle of the red roses at Sakhi Jan,
Oh, city of Mazar, has brought guests,
The festival of Gul-i Surkh at Sakhi Jan,
Oh, city of Herat, has brought guests.
- 4 The festival of Gul-i Surkh is New Year's Day,
The poppy (*lāla*), how it fires the heart,⁶²
Come to Mazar, my dearest one,
We'll visit [the] shrine, [for] life is transitory,
- 5 The festival of Gul-i Surkh at Sakhi Jan,
Oh, city of Mazar, has brought in guests (repeat)
- 6 Sakhi Jan's tomb, the boast of the sick,⁶³
Around the domed shrine the people gather,
A flock of pigeons are on the dome,
May it ever be as pure⁶⁴ as this.
- 7 The spectacle of the red roses at Sakhi Jan,
Oh, city of Mazar, has brought [in] guests. (repeat)

The meaning of *gul* in some of the contexts of this ballad is not easy to ascertain.

Are the general references to *gul-i surkh* (stanzas 1,3,7) allusions to red roses or red flowers in general? The appearance of the *chahar bagh* (stanza 2), which we know from Vambery and other nineteenth century travellers, was full of rose bushes, would imply that these references are indeed meant to designate this specific *genus* of flower. However in stanza 2 (lines 1-2), where the wilderness and desert are said to be flower-covered (*gul-posh*), it is more likely that the word is used here in its general sense of 'flower' since roses do not grow in these areas in Afghanistan. At the same time, the festival name, Gul-i Surkh, is closely associated

⁶¹ *ziyarat kardan* can be just to visit a shrine but it is also used to describe the performing of specific rituals around a particular shrine, so also stanza 4 line 4.

⁶² Or 'heart warming'.

⁶³ Baily has "Ali's tomb takes pride in healing the sick" which is wrong since *fakhr* is linked by the *ezāfi* to *bémār*. 'Pride' is also misleading, as *fakhr* is pride only in the sense of 'take pride in', or 'glory', 'nobility,' cf. one of Muhammad's titles, *Fakhri Anbiyā' wa Rusul*, 'the Glory of the Prophets and Apostles'.

⁶⁴ Baily translates *bā safā* as 'revered', but it is better translated as 'pure'.

with the presence of appearance *lala* in stanza 4. Both *gul-i surkh* and *lala* are mentioned directly in relationship to the performance of the *ziyarat* ritual at the shrine (stanza 4), which is consistent with what we already have deduced about the customs of this festival. The juxtaposition of *lala* with *gul-i surkh* makes it plain that the former is indeed a red flower.⁶⁵

From the archaic structure of the song, its mention of a *chahar bagh* (stanza 2) and the fact that it refers to the city by its older name, Mazar,⁶⁶ it is possible to state fairly authoritatively that the ballad in its present form is at least some two hundred years old, though it probably incorporates elements of a more ancient bardic tradition relating to the festival. In the song we find the relationship between

⁶⁵ Olufsen (1911:420), in his brief notice about Gul-i Surkh in Bukhara, states that the phrase, "Seil-i Gul-i Surkh" was used in a generic manner as descriptive of the "mosques, tombs, spring and gardens," which made up the whole complex of buildings and land dedicated to the shaiikh. If this is the case, *sail* would mean something like 'prospect', or 'view across' and Gul-i Surkh would be a metaphorical phrase to describe the shrine and its associated buildings and gardens, rather than the rose beds or the Balkh poppy of the *dasht*. Cf. Peshchereva (1927:375) where *sail* is used as a synonym for the festival itself.

⁶⁶ Mazar as a distinct and separate urban and political entity did not emerge until after the death of Nadir Shah Afshar in 1747, when Khwaja Ni'mat Ansari, *mutawalli* of the shrine, took over the reins of power (Lee, 1996:62-91; McChesney, 1991:207-13, 217ff). Thus references to 'Mazar' in *Sail-i Gul-i Surkh* and *Mullah Muhammad Jan* probably date, at the earliest, from the last half of the eighteenth, or early nineteenth, century. Prior to the annexation of Balkh by the Amirs of Afghanistan the settlement was known simply as Mazar, a custom which still survives to the present amongst local people, who also refer to it as either Shah-i Mardan or the Rauza[-yi Sharif]. In 1828 Edward Stirling (1991:298-301), who stayed in the town, records that it was named "Shah Mardan, ... commonly called Muzur," though Stirling prefers Shah Mardan to Mazar in his journal, since "commonly" here is used in its archaic and disparaging sense of 'vulgarly' or 'popularly', which is probably why Stirling, wishing to distance himself from *hoi polloi*, calls the place Shah-i Mardan. By the time Vambéry visited the town in 1863, the name Mazar-i Sharif seems to have become more current but, by this date, Afghan government was well entrenched and a Muhammadzayi prince, Wazir Muhammad Akbar Khan, son of Dost Muhammad Khan, was buried in the shrine's precinct. I can find only a single reference to Mazar-i Sharif prior to 1850 (Izzatullah:87). However, Izzatullah was a Muslim from India and also refers to the place as simply 'Mazar' on three other occasions in his report. The reason for the change is that whilst for the people of the Balkh appanage the shrine of Shah-i Mardan was the undisputed king of all shrines in the region and could be referred to simple as Mazar (i.e. 'The Mausoleum'), for the Pushtuns and others from southern Afghanistan as well as for Muslims from the subcontinent, it was but one shrine amongst many others, hence they sought to distinguish it from other 'mazars' by resorting to the tradition, common in the subcontinent, of suffixing the title 'Noble' to the name of the town. Cf. Elphinstone (ii:196); Izzatullah (85, 87, 91); Moorcroft (ii:488-91); Burnes (1834, i:232-3); Ferrier (1845:209-10); Harlan (1939:27, 30-35), writing in 1838/9; Lt. Eldred Pottinger, *Memoir on the Country between Herat and Kabul, the Paropamisian Mountains and the Amoo*, 1839, IOLR: Enclosures to Secret Letters from India, L/P&S/5/145, no. 7, encl. 20; Cpt. Arthur Conolly, *Account of a Journey from Bamiyan to Merve*, 1840, IOLR: Enclosures to Secret Letters from India, L/P&S/5/256, no. 34, encl. 4.

Gul-i Surkh, the shrine and Nauroz⁶⁷ to be far closer than it is at present. Indeed, it would appear that it was customary at the time this song was composed for pilgrims to actually wear a red flower or rose on their person whilst they performed *ziyarat* at the shrine. This is completely consistent with what we know of Peshchereva's study of the the 'Tulip' Festival of Isfara. Here too the population wore *lala* in their hats and belts, carried bunches of them in their hand and adorned poplar poles and trees with the red blossoms (Peshchereva, 1963:216 & 1927:375).

The second folk song associated with the Mazar-i Sharif festival, and certainly the most famous one, is *Mullah Muhammad Jan*. Originally in the *bairami* mode, like *Sail-i Gul-i Surkh* (Sakata:145), today it appears to exist in at least three versions; that sung by the musicians of Herat, the shortened 'pop' version current in and around Kabul which has been adapted to meet the demands of radio and television (Sakata:144-5), and, finally, the longer but fragmentary Balkh version. The Herati version, based on Sakata's translation (pp.144-5),⁶⁸ but with a number of annotations suggested by Doubleday, based on her recording of the ballad provided by a woman musician from that city,⁶⁹ is as follows.

refrain	<i>biyā ke burīm ba mazār sail-i gul-i lālazār giriya kunīm, zār zār</i>	<i>Mullāh Muhammad Jān wāh, wāh, dilbarjān⁷⁰ dawr-i Sakhī Jān</i>
1	<i>az dūr didam, tūrā khūsh nūr⁷¹ didam tūrā ākher mīgīram, tūrā</i>	<i>Mullāh Muhammad Jān wāh, wāh, dilbarjān wāh, wāh, dilbarjān</i>
2	<i>az dūr miyāyi⁷² khandā karda miyāyi dar baghalam dar āyi</i>	<i>Mullāh Muhammad Jān wāh, wāh, dilbarjān wāh, wāh, dilbarjān</i>

⁶⁷ *méla-yi Gul-i Surkh rōz-i naurōz i.*

⁶⁸ Sakata's transliteration of the Persian words has been modified to conform to the standardised system used throughout the thesis. I have also made a number of corrections to Sakata's English translation.

⁶⁹ *Personal communication*, April 1996.

⁷⁰ Nangialayi repeats the second line to complete the refrain.

⁷¹ After Doubleday. Sakata has *khūsh nud didam*, which she translates as, "I saw you were happy."

⁷² After Sakata. Doubleday has *mīniwayī*, a local variation of the present tense of *āmadan?*

- | | | |
|----------|---|--|
| 3 | <i>Az kurtī-yi⁷³ qermiz-i tū</i>
<i>gul karda pālīz-i tū</i>
<i>[dilakam kārēz-i tū]⁷⁴</i>
<i>Labhā-yi⁷⁵ shakar rēz-i tū⁷⁶</i> | <i>Mullāh Muhammad Jān</i>
<i>wāh, wāh, dilbarjān</i>
<i>[.....]</i>
<i>wāh, wāh, dilbarjān</i> |
| 4 | <i>biyā ke burīm andakī</i>
<i>piyāla sar-i nalbakī</i>
<i>chāī bekhōrīm, sōbhakī</i> | <i>Mullāh Muhammad Jān</i>
<i>wā, wāh, dilbarjān</i>
<i>wā, wāh, dilbarjān</i> |
| refrain: | | |
| | Come, let us go to Mazar
The sight of the poppy beds
Let us weep: groan and lament ⁷⁹ | <i>Mullah Muhammad Jan</i>
<i>Oh, Oh,⁷⁷ beloved one⁷⁸</i>
<i>Round [the shrine of] Sakhi Jan</i> |
| 1 | From afar I saw you
Light of my eyes, I saw you
In the end I'll get you ⁸⁰ | <i>Mullah Muhammad Jan</i>
<i>Oh, Oh, beloved one</i>
<i>Oh, Oh, beloved one</i> |
| 2 | From afar you come ⁸¹
You come laughing ⁸²
I embrace you in my arms ⁸³ | <i>Mullah Muhammad Jan</i>
<i>Oh, Oh, beloved one,</i>
<i>Oh, Oh, beloved one.</i> |
| 3 | From [out of] your red coat ⁸⁴
Your melon [patch] ⁸⁵ has blossomed
[My heart is your aqueduct
Your sugar-dripping lips | <i>Mullah Muhammad Jan</i>
<i>Oh, oh, beloved one,</i>
<i>....]</i>
<i>Oh, oh, beloved one.</i> |
| 4 | Come, let us go a little way,
Cup upon the saucer, ⁸⁶
Let us ⁸⁷ drink tea [like this] every ⁸⁸ morning | <i>Mullah Muhammad Jan</i>
<i>Oh, oh, beloved one</i>
<i>Oh, oh, beloved one</i> |

⁷³ After Sakata. Doubleday has *[w]askat*.

⁷⁴ This additional line does not fit in with the rest of the verse structure. Doubleday, in a personal communication, states she has "never heard" this line.

⁷⁵ After Doubleday. Sakata has *rang*, 'colour'.

⁷⁶ Sakata has "*shekarīz-i tū*" which is quite unclear but which she translates as, "your sweet face" which does not make much sense out of the Dari. Doubleday's version fits in well with conventional conceits used in such popular ballads.

⁷⁷ Pers: *Wāh, Wāh*, an expression of amazement at something beautiful, wonderful or miraculous.

⁷⁸ The last two lines of the refrain and the second part of each line of the verse are repeated. I have omitted them for the sake of brevity.

⁷⁹ Sakata has "cry" which is ambivalent. *Zār, zār* is to groan, weep, lament, to cry bitterly as if in bereavement.

⁸⁰ I.e., marry you.

⁸¹ Sakata has, "I saw you from afar," but *miyāyi* is the present tense of *āmadan*, 'to come', not the past tense of *didan*, 'to see'.

⁸² Or, "you are laughing," "starting to laugh." Sakata puts the verb into the past when it is in the present tense.

⁸³ Sakata has, "I wish you would come into my arms," but if this was the case the verb would be subjunctive. Her translation misses out on the whole directness of this verse.

⁸⁴ After Sakata. Doubleday has "your red waistcoat."

⁸⁵ In Northern Afghanistan *pālēz* is a generic word for all melons, squashes and cucumbers but always in the context of them growing in a field. In Iranian Persian, *pālēz* is a seed field or kitchen garden. The use of this phrase in the ballad is an allusion to the fact that his beloved has sexually matured for he can see the outline of her melon-shaped breasts through her bodice.

⁸⁶ After Sakata. Doubleday has "bowl." *Nalbakī* can be either a small, handless porcelain bowl for tea or, in Kabuli usage the porcelain saucer from which tea is often drunk. The metaphor of the cup being placed on the saucer/bowl euphemistically refers to the sexual consummation of their union, which is followed by a wish that they will never be parted again.

⁸⁷ Colloquially *bekhōrīm* could mean "we shall."

⁸⁸ Or "early in the morning."

The Kabul version of this ballad, as recorded by Nangialayi (pp. 8-9), retains the refrain more or less intact but has two substantially different verses, although the same broad theme and sentiments are expressed within the framework of a different form of words. At the same time, the rhyming structure of the verses, as well as the folk song's actual form is modified from the three-line *Bairami* mode to the more populist *chaharbaiti*, or quatrain. Unfortunately, we do not know what source the author used for his published version. The first line of stanza 1 is interpolated from standard *chaharbaiti* love song conventions and is not specific to *Mullah Muhammad Jan*,⁸⁹ and as the author appears to be a Pushtun from southern Afghanistan, he is probably using a populist source in Kabul rather than the Herati musical tradition.

The first two verses and refrain of Nangialayi's *Mullah Muhammad Jan* are the same as the Balkh version, but there are a number of additional verses which appear to be unique to northern Afghanistan and have survived in fragmentary *chaharbaiti* form only.⁹⁰ The Kabul and Balkh versions are consolidated below.

[refrain]

bīyā ke burīm ba mazār, Mullāh Muhammad Jān *sail-i gul-i lālazar, wāh, wāh, dilbarjān*
sail-i gul-i lālazar, wāh, wāh, dilbarjān

- | | | |
|---|--|--|
| 1 | <i>burō wa bā yār bugō, yār-i tū āmad</i>
<i>burō bā yār bugō, chashm-i tū rōshan</i> | <i>gul-i nargis, kharidār-i tū āmad</i>
<i>gul-i nargis, kharidār-i tū āmad</i>
<i>hamān yār-i wafādār-i tū āmad</i>
<i>hamān yār-i wafādār-i tū āmad</i> |
| 2 | <i>sar-i kōh-i buland, faryād kardam</i>
<i>'Alī Shér-i Khudā, yā shāh-i mardān</i> | <i>'Alī, Shér-i Khudārā yād kardam</i>
<i>'Alī, Shér-i Khudārā yād kardam</i>
<i>dil-i nāshād-i mārā shād gardān</i>
<i>dil-i nāshād-i mārā shād gardān</i> |
| 3 | <p>[Balkh version: said to be sung by 'A'isha]
 <i>'Alī Shér-i Khudā, dardam dawā kun!</i></p> | <i>munājāt-i mārā pésh-i khudā kun</i>
<i>munājāt-i mārā pésh-i khudā kun</i> |

⁸⁹ V. Doubleday, *personal communication*, April 1996.

⁹⁰ Ustad Nigargar, Birmingham, Dec. 1996; confirmed by Dr. Wahidi, Mullah Muhammad Omar 'Alim Baiyad head of 'Ali Sher Nawa'i Cultural Centre and Agha Kishlaqi, head of the Ministry of Culture, Juzjan who had these verses read to them in July 1997 and made only one or two minor changes.

cherāghhā-yi roghanī nazrat-rā métum *ba har jā[i] āshiq ast, dardish dawā kun*
ba har jā[i] āshiq ast, dardish dawā kun

4 [Balkh version: said to be sung by Muhammad Jan]

dilam daryā-yi khūn gashta, khudā jān *ghamam az hadd fizūn gashta, khudā jān*
ghamam az hadd fizūn gashta, khudā jān

[lacuna]

5 [Balkh version: said to be sung by Mullah Muhammad Jan]

sar-i kōtal rasīdam, bāna kardam *nazar bā ursī yak dāna kardam*
nazar bā ursī yak dāna kardam

[lacuna]

6 [Balkh version]

nazar kardam, nadīdum yār-i khudā *giribān tā ba dāman pāra kardam*
giribān tā ba dāman pāra kardam

[lacuna]

refrain

Come, let us go to Mazar, Mullah Muhammad Jan,
 The sight of the poppy beds, Oh, Oh, beloved one,
 The sight of the poppy beds, Oh, Oh, beloved one,

- | | | |
|---|--|--|
| 1 | Go ⁹¹ tell [my] beloved, your beloved has come,
Go tell [my] beloved, [may] your eyes be bright, ⁹² | Narcissus, your purchaser has come,
Narcissus, your purchaser has come.
That self-same faithful friend has come,
That self-same faithful friend has come. |
| 2 | On [the] high mountain, I cried aloud,
'Ali, Lion of God, or King of Men, | 'Ali, Lion of God, I called to mind, ⁹³
'Ali, Lion of God, I called to mind.
'Turn our unhappy hearts into rejoicing,
'Turn our unhappy hearts into rejoicing. |
| 3 | 'Ali, Lion of God, heal my pain,
A votive offering of oil lamps I will give you, ⁹⁵ | My petition ⁹⁴ bring before God,
My petition bring before God.
Wherever lovers are found, heal their pain,
Wherever lovers are found, heal their pain. |
| 4 | My heart is a river of blood, dear God,
[lacuna] | My afflictions are beyond measure, dear God,
My afflictions are beyond measure, dear God. |
| 5 | I've reached the pass top and made an excuse, ⁹⁶
[lacuna] | To cast a single glance at [your] window,
To cast a single glance at [your] window. |

⁹¹ The verse is addressed to a messenger or go-between.

⁹² *chashm-i tū rōshan* is a common expression to mean 'congratulations' and is often used when people receive letters from family or loved ones far away. But here it is a conventional reference to the way in which the lover's eyes brighten up at the sight of the beloved.

⁹³ *yād kardan* colloquially means 'to pray to', particularly in times of physical danger or distress.

⁹⁴ *munājāt* is a personal prayer of longing, traditionally extemporised during the night, rather than the formal *salat* and far more personal than *du'a*. Undoubtedly the most famous *munājāt*, certainly for the people of Afghanistan, are those uttered by 'Abdullah Ansari of Herat (Schimmel, 1975:155, 301).

⁹⁵ The placing of such lamps at shrines is a common practice in Afghanistan.

⁹⁶ That is to look in his lover's window. Looking through other people's windows is considered to be shameful and a violation of traditional and Islamic social rules. Muhammad Jan justifies his act by finding a convenient excuse for breaking this taboo.

6 I looked, but did not see you, beloved,⁹⁷ I have rent my raiment from top to bottom,
 [lacuna] I have rent my raiment from top to bottom.

Mullah Muhammad Jan makes it quite clear that the Balkh poppy (*lala*) is a flower specifically associated with Gul-i Surkh, whilst *Sail-i Gul-i Surkh* emphasises more the role of the red rose (*gul*, or *gul-i surkh*). This reinforces the belief that Gul-i Surkh and the Isfara ‘Tulip’ Festival were originally one and the same festival or related in some way, perhaps one marking the beginning, the other, the end, of an ancient spring festival. Gul-i Surkh, after all, lasts for forty days in Mazar-i Sharif and the start at the end of the festival is marked by the raising and lowering of the *janda*.

A number of other features present themselves in these songs which help us to pinpoint the original function of this festival in which the red rose and the *lala* feature as a dualistic symbol. In *Sail-i Gul-i Surkh* the pilgrimage to the shrine of ‘Ali, central to the ballad’s theme, is celebrated with unbridled joy. *Mullah Muhammad Jan*, on the other hand, is shot through with a dark, ambivalent *leitmotif*. In the third line of the Herati version of the refrain, the mere sight of the *lala* precipitates not rejoicing but bitter lamentation and mourning.⁹⁸

Though this phrase is absent from the refrain of the Kabul and Balkh versions, it surfaces in a far greater way in the verses. In stanza 2, ‘Ali is beseeched to “turn our unhappy hearts into rejoicing”⁹⁹ whilst the Balkh additional verses become progressively darker as the ballad unfolds. In stanza 3 ‘Ali is petitioned to “heal my

⁹⁷ The line is deliberately ambiguous inasmuch as it could be read to mean, “I have [performed] a vow but [still] did not see you, Friend of God.” *Yār-i khudā* is a title frequently used in Afghanistan for ‘Ali b. Abi Talib. However this line has a double meaning, for *yār-i khudā* is a term used by the lover to his beloved and I have treated this line as being a continuation of the story as given in the previous verse. Such *double entendres* are common in Persian mystical tradition, where references to the ‘beloved’ can be allusions to God but, at the same time, it can be interpreted as a metaphor for a lover, see Schimmel (1975:287-8).

⁹⁸ *giriya kunim, zār, zār.*

⁹⁹ ‘*Ali Shér-i Khudā, yā shāh-i mardān/dil-i nāshād-i mārā shād gardān.*

pain,” but in the following verse (4) it is evident that this prayer is unanswered and the singer cries that his “heart is a river of blood, dear God/My afflictions are beyond measure.” The song ends on a note of complete desperation, grief and despair with the declaration: “I have rent my raiment from top to bottom” or, more literally, ‘from collar to skirt’ (stanza 6), a phrase which implies deep sorrow, distress and bereavement.

We find exactly the same motif of grief, death and mourning in the ballads associated with the Isfara ‘Tulip’ Festival. One children’s song says that they have “... made this *lala* flower/We will put aside the sad heart” (Peshchereva, 1927:379).¹⁰⁰ The *Nakhsh-i Kalan* (lines 21-28) talks of death, the fear of judgement and appeals to ‘Ali, Hasan, Husain and Khizr to intercede for them (Peshchereva, 1927:380), whilst the *Nakhsh-i Miyana* speaks of walking tearfully and tears streaming from the eyes (Peshchereva, 1927:383-4).

Another unexpected theme of the ballads from Mazar and Isfara is that of erotic love. Three of the four songs¹⁰¹ in the Isfara festival are primarily concerned with this motif, the *Nakhsh-i Khurd* and the *Nakhsh-i Miyana* being essentially built around the theme of unrequited love (Peshchereva, 1927:381-4). *Mullah Muhammad Jan* too, is about the unrequited love between Mullah Muhammad Jan and an unnamed lover and explains, at least in part, the references to grief, sorrow and mourning. Unlike *Sail-i Gul-i Surkh*, this ballad contains no specific allusion to Nauroz yet long-standing tradition links Nauroz, or rather Gul-i Surkh, at Mazar-i Sharif with the ballad *Mullah Muhammad Jan*, to the extent that it is regarded as the carol of this season *par excellence*. Evidently, when the song was originally

¹⁰⁰ *Mā kardīm īn gul-i lālabekishāyīm dil-i ghamgīn-rā*

¹⁰¹ The song sung after *Nakhsh-i Kalan* (no. 2); *Nakhsh-i Khurd* (no., 3) and *Nakhsh-i Miyana* (no. 4).

composed, there *was* an association between Gul-i Surkh, Balkh, distraught lovers who petition the *genius loci* of the area to be reunited, and tragedy, death and mourning, which appears to be exemplified and precipitated by the blossoming of the poppy and the red rose of Balkh.

Such a tradition is not only out of keeping with the quasi-Islamic nature of the festivals at Isfara, Bukhara and Mazar-i Sharif, but with the ethos of the Zoroastrian Nauroz too. Even having a mullah as the central character of the song is peculiar, for one would expect such an individual to frown on its celebration of erotic love and condemn the song's blatant appeal to 'Ali for divine intervention so they can consummate their union. A similar appeal is made to 'Ali, Hasan, Husain and even Khizr, in *Nakhsh-i Kalan* (Peshchereva, 1927:380-1). Mullahs, though, would generally be opposed to the whole genre of secular music as being inconsistent with the *shari'a*. *Mullah Muhammad Jan*, and the Isfara ballads are thus more likely to be Islamised versions of ancient ballads which celebrate the archetypal Gul-i Surkh, rather than Nauroz, or the modern expression of the festival as found today at Mazar-i Sharif.

Much more comparative work has to be done by ethno-musicologists and folklorists before it is possible to be completely authoritative about the origins of such ballads. However, it is possible to suggest lines of enquiry based on our existing knowledge. According to a number of Afghan intellectuals, in the early 1960s there was an acrimonious debate between Afghan and Iranian scholars about whether *Mullah Muhammad Jan* was of 'Afghan' or Persian origin, for by this time the ballad's popularity had spread westwards. As a consequence of the debate, at least one article was published in a Kabul journal, either *Pushtunzagh* or *Djandun*, in or around 1961 (1340 S) in which the Iranian claims were refuted and the origins of

the song discussed in some detail.¹⁰² Unfortunately, due to the present state of affairs in Afghanistan it has not been possible to obtain a copy of this publication, but the gist of the contents have been communicated and verified by three independent scholarly sources who read the article in question.¹⁰³

The article claimed that *Mullah Muhammad Jan* was composed during the reign of Sultan Husain Baiqara of Herat, the same individual who so actively promoted the shrine of Shah-i Mardan at Khwaja Khair. If this is the case, then the song must have been written after AD 1480, for it is in this year when the shrine of Shah-i Mardan was rediscovered, and before 1506, the date of the Sultan's death. Mullah Muhammad Jan is said to have been a mullah in the *madrassa* of 'Ali Sher Nawa'i, where he was brought up and studied under a certain Akhund 'Abd al-Samad, side-by-side with the Akhund's daughter, 'A'isha. When the two children reached puberty they were separated according to the conventions of purdah. However, they met later as mature adults, fell passionately in love with each other and appear to have carried on an illicit liaison behind the Akhund's back. When 'A'isha's father discovered the state of affairs, he opposed the match¹⁰⁴ and Muhammad Jan was banned from his house. Separated from 'A'isha, Muhammad Jan consoled himself by composing the verses of the song, in which he bemoans his separation from his beloved.

Eventually, through the good offices of a woman, a relative of 'Ali Sher Nawa'i, a secret meeting was arranged between the two lovers in a garden. Reunited with his beloved, Mullah Muhammad Jan sings to 'A'isha the song he has com-

¹⁰² Dr Shams al-Din Zarif Sidiqi and Akram-i 'Usman, are particularly mentioned in connection with the research on the history, though I have been unable to ascertain for certain who was the actual author of the article.

¹⁰³ Dr. Wahidi; Sayyid Muhai al-Din Gauhari; Ustad Nigargar.

¹⁰⁴ No explanation for why he opposed the engagement is given. Was Muhammad Jan considered to be too low down on the social scale for the Akhund? Or was it that he opposed the liaison because the relationship was of a forbidden degree?

posed and 'A'isha, in response, extemporises her own verses. Meanwhile, unbeknown to the lovers, 'Ali Sher Nawa'i overhears the lover's song and, moved by its tragic sentiments, offers to use his good offices to secure 'Abd al-Samad's consent to their marriage. Eventually the Wazir's persuasion is successful and, as the saying goes, they lived happily ever after.¹⁰⁵ The mention of 'Ali and the titles by which he is best known in Khurasan, is explained on the basis that the tomb of Hazrat 'Ali had recently been rediscovered in 'Mazar' (that is, Khwaja Khairan) and it was natural that the two lovers should appeal to this saint for help. The fact that the Akhund eventually relented, it is said, demonstrates the power of Shah-i Mardan inasmuch as he answers their cry of distress.¹⁰⁶

The romance of Muhammad Jan and 'A'isha certainly explains the theme of love and longing found in the ballad, though 'A'isha's name is never mentioned. Yet it does not explain why, in the Balkh version, the song ends on such a note of despair and lamentation, for there is clearly no happy ending in the Balkh version of the ballad of *Mullah Muhammad Jan*.¹⁰⁷ This must throw doubt on whether this is the true historical context of the original ballad, or a legend which has been invented at a later date to enhance the connection between the shrine and its exalted Timurid patrons. This contention is supported by the references to romantic love, death, mourning and sorrow which appear in the four *Nakhsh* used in the 'Tulip' Festival in Isfara. It would seem that originally love and sadness represented dual aspects of the original festival, but the meaning and significance of these themes has been mostly lost as a result of the Islamisation of the tradition and by virtue of sheer distance in time which exists between the original festival and the present-day celebrations.

¹⁰⁵ Ustad Nigargar, Dec. 1996.

¹⁰⁶ Ustad Nigargar, Dec. 1996.

¹⁰⁷ And also in the refrain of the Herati version.

There are other problems too with *Mullah Muhammad Jan*. If 'A'isha and Muhammad Jan were brought up together in such close proximity, there is a good chance that they were 'of the same milk';¹⁰⁸ that is they shared the same wet nurse or were begotten by the same father from different mothers. As far as Islamic law is concerned, therefore, marriage between the two would be impossible since this relationship would be of a forbidden degree. Consequently, the Akhund, an expert of Islamic legal tradition, would have never consented to their union with, or without, the intervention of 'Ali Sher Nawa'i. Such foster brother/foster sister marriages, however, were commonplace, indeed even encouraged, amongst the Zoroastrian aristocracy.

Furthermore, in *Mullah Muhammad Jan* the lovers appeal to 'Ali not for physical healing, for which the shrine at Mazar is famous, but for help and blessing on an illicit love affair and for relief of the *dard* this creates. In the three love *Nakhsh* (nos 2-4) of Isfara, though we find the same theme of love and its pains, there is no appeal at all to any Islamic figure (Peshchereva, 1927:381-4). Another anomaly in *Mullah Muhammad Jan* is that, had the two lovers indeed lived in Herat during the reign of Sultan Husain Baiqara, one would expect their appeal to be addressed to one of the myriad of well-established saints in a city which has been known for centuries as 'Dust of the Saints'¹⁰⁹ and 'Place of the Friends of God'.¹¹⁰ Very few of the verses, in fact, contain specific Islamic allusions other than to the name of 'Ali and his title of Shah-i Mardan. The vow to offer an oil lamp at the shrine is a custom common to shrines throughout Afghanistan but is one inherited from a pre-Islamic religious tradition. Indeed the offering of such lamps is mentioned spe-

¹⁰⁸ *hamshir*.

¹⁰⁹ Khāk-i Pirān.

¹¹⁰ Jāi-yi Auliya'. Ghazni is called Khāk-i Auliya' ('Dust of the Friends of God'): Mazar-i Sharif, Shāh-i Auliya' ('King of the Friends of God'); Isma'il clan, *interview*, Khwaja Katal, July 1997.

cifically in Olufsen (*loc. cit.*) in connection with Gul-i Surkh in Bukhara and which he attributes to Zoroastrian customs, but could just as well be derived from Buddhist or even Christian tradition.¹¹¹ The name of Muhammad Jan's lover never appears and Muhammad Jan's own name, as well as that of Shah-i Mardan and the town of Mazar, could easily have been interpolated at some point in the Islamic period.

Another strange feature of the Balkh version of *Mullah Muhammad Jan* is that the song records how he cries out "on the top of a high mountain"¹¹² (stanza 2) and arrives "on top of a/the pass"¹¹³ (stanza 5) in the vain hope of catching a glimpse of his beloved through a window. Since Herat is situated in the middle of a plain, this throws further doubt on the claim that the song was composed in that city. Balkh too, is located on the plain though the mountains are much nearer and have a close association with Nauroz. The account of the origin of the ballad as suggested in the article on the subject written in the 1960s, makes no mention of the two lovers leaving the city for the hills. Indeed, one would hardly expect to find a solitary and unchaperoned woman, whether virgin or married, living alone on the top of a mountain in an Islamic society. We can detect a similar theme, too, in the Isfara ballads. In *Nakhsh-i Khurd* (no. 3, l. 21), the minstrel declares that his 'ruby had fallen into a ravine' and as a consequence is turned into a bird (Peshchereva, 1927:382).

The Herat version of *Mullah Muhammad Jan*, despite the sorrowful last line of the refrain, ends with the reunion of the lovers and subliminal references to the sexual consummation of their marriage. The Balkh version, on the other hand, offers

¹¹¹ Cf. Hitti's (1951:117) account of the Christian shrine at Afka, which perpetuates ancient Middle Eastern traditions related to burning oil lamps.

¹¹² *sar-i kōh-i buland, faryād kardam.*

¹¹³ *sar-i kōtal rasīdam.*

no such light at the end of the tunnel. Rather the last line of the fragmentary verse suggests that their prayer has been ignored or rejected, which precipitates acts of extravagant and ritualised mourning, implying that one or other of the lovers has died an untimely death or been killed. The whole ethos of the Balkh version of this ballad is thus quite out of keeping with the modern expression of Nauroz which is a celebration not just of the joys of spring but of the miraculous ability of Shah-i Mardan to cure the incurable. The same could be said, too, of the three love *Nakhsh* of the Isfara 'Tulip' Festival which share very similar motifs.

Given these ballads' association with red *lala* in Isfara and the festivals of Gul-i Surkh and Nauroz in Mazar-i Sharif, it would be logical to assume that, originally, *Mullah Muhammad Jan* and the Isfara love *Nakhsh* contain themes which give us clues as to the original meaning and significance of Gul-i Surkh. If this is the case, then *Mullah Muhammad Jan* must derive from either Balkh or other Tajik-speaking areas in the Oxus basin where the festival is known to have been celebrated. Over the centuries the words of these ballads would have naturally been adapted and assimilated to accommodate Islamic prejudices and, in the case of *Mullah Muhammad Jan*, during the last century and a half, the song has been further modified by the musical traditions of Herat and Kabul.¹¹⁴

The use of the word 'Mazar' suggests at least one revision to *Mullah Muhammad Jan* can be dated to the first half of the nineteenth century. Since, at the time of the Timurids the site was known as Khwaja Khairan, the word 'Mazar' in the text would be an anachronism were the ballad actually composed during that period. Jami's famous poem on the subject makes it clear that in the sixteenth cen-

¹¹⁴ Ustad Nigargar states that *Mullah Muhammad Jan* was popularised by the Herati musician, Khalu-yi Shauqi, in the latter part of the last century. The present Herati version may well be his own reworking of the song, though the ballad has probably undergone numerous revisions over the centuries.

ture the shrine, anyway, was regarded as being a part of Balkh.¹¹⁵ The theme of erotic love and hints of sexual impropriety and even incest, as well as darker references to the death of one or other of the lovers and their mourning, weeping and despair, is quite out of place in the context of the contemporary celebrations at Mazar-i Sharif and of what we know of the Isfara Lala festival. Since the *lala* and the red rose appear in the festival songs from both Mazar-i Sharif and Isfara, it is evident that the festival, as originally celebrated, was built around the ancient duality of love and death/mourning, a paradox which is physically symbolised by the two red flowers, the rose and *lala*.

The reason for such changes over the last two centuries, in particular, are self-evident. If *Mullah Muhammad Jan*, at the time of being revived by Herati musicians, contained references which were explicitly sexual, the performance of the song would have been considered unIslamic by the '*ulama*'. As far as the northern provinces of Afghan Turkistan were concerned, after the Afghan conquest of Balkh in 1849, Pushtun mullahs were appointed to senior positions in strategic madrasas and mosques (Lee 1996:219ff.).¹¹⁶ This process was accelerated after the failure of the rebellion of Sardar Ishaq Khan in 1888 when the Amir, 'Abd al-Rahman Khan (d. 1901) nationalised the shrine of Hazrat 'Ali, deposed the Ansari family from their hereditary posts as *ishans* and unilaterally appointed himself as its *mutawalli* (Lee, 1996:533ff; McChesney, 1991¹¹⁷).

Many of these mullahs, particularly those from Qandahar where the ruling elite, the Durranis, originated, were *murids* of Naqshbandi suborders whose membership depended on tribal affiliation. The Uzbeks, on the other hand, were

¹¹⁵ *Ba Balkh biyā, bibin...*

¹¹⁶ There had been a small number of Pushtuns living in the Balkh area for several decades prior to the annexation (Lee, 1996:96-7, n.).

¹¹⁷ See chapters 11-13 particularly.

associated with *tariqas* that were less tribally based and more accommodating of ancient Middle and East Asia traditions from where the Chingizid peoples originally migrated (De Weese, 1994; Mélikoff, 1996). These Pushtun legalists had been ideologically influenced by what the British disparagingly referred to as 'Wahhabism',¹¹⁸ that is, as far as the Indian subcontinent was concerned, the teaching of Shah Waliullah (1703-1762),¹¹⁹ Sayyid Ahmad Bareilvi's (1786-1831)¹²⁰ Tariqa-yi Muhammadiyya movement and the philosophy of Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi. These reformers launched a virulent polemic against 'un-Islamic' practices associated with shrines and the excessive veneration of pirs and shaikhs. They, too, adopted a markedly more anti-Shi'i stance than the Turco-Tajik Orders of Central Asia (Aziz Ahmad:209-17; Olesen, 1996:44-53; Voll, 1994).¹²¹ One of the targets of such radicalism was the attempt to suppress the celebration of Nauroz and the birthday of

¹¹⁸ The relationship of the Amirs of Afghanistan, from Dost Muhammad Khan onwards, with the conservative religious establishment, is often only touched on by 'Afghanologists', who are invariably more at home with political or military history than theological debates. Usually they treat the subject sociologically or anthropologically, seeing the opposition of the '*ulama*' as a fight between tribalism and centralism (e.g. Gregorian:40-3, 83, 130-9; Poulada, chap. VII and, more recently, Barnett R. Rubin's work). Fortunately, the most recent eruption of this long-standing ideological war between 'church' and state, which was precipitated by the Communist take over in 1978, has led to scholars taking this issue seriously from the theological point of view, cf. A. Noelle (1995); Olsen (1996); Roy (1986) and a work recently presented for publication to E.J. Brill of Leiden which deals with Amir Amanullah's relationship with the '*ulama*'. Both Amir Sher 'Ali Khan (1863-1879) and Amir 'Abd al-Rahman Khan (1880-1901) waged a bitter war against these Islamists and had many of the more vociferous mullahs exiled or put to death, see Lee (1996, chaps IX, X; Noelle, 1995).

¹¹⁹ Amongst other things, it was Shah Waliullah who urged Ahmad Shah Durrani, the first Amir of the Afghans, to invade India and free the Muslims from the Maratha yoke, see Aziz Ahmad (p. 208).

¹²⁰ During the early part of the nineteenth century these conservative, 'back-to-basics' movements were responsible for the production of numerous radical tracts which fulminated against innovation (*bida'*) and syncretism (*shirk*) amongst Muslims of the Indian subcontinent. Not unnaturally, practices associated with shrines were particularly singled out. The Amirs of Afghanistan, following the British lead, tended to lump all such movements together under the generic and pejorative label 'Wahhabi', after the radical Islamist, Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792), but it was the works of Ibn Taimiyya (1263-1328), and his *Kitāb al-Iqtida' al-Sirat al-Mustaqim Mukhālafat Ashab al-Jahim* in particular, that these eighteenth and nineteenth century Islamists of the subcontinent took as their ideological model, see Gaborieau (p. 226).

¹²¹ The Mujaddidi suborder of Naqshbandis, which took its name from Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi, had close connections with Central Asia and had originally been imported to India from there, but despite retaining contacts with the shaikhs in Bukhara and Balkh, it developed its anti-syncretic polemic in the context of Islam's encounter with Hinduism and its politics of confrontation from the crisis of identity suffered by the Muslims of north India who were forced to live under British rule.

'Ali b. Abi Talib, on the basis of a Hadith attributed to 'Ali in which he is alleged to have said, "for us [i.e. Muslims as opposed to Zoroastrians] every day is Nauroz" ('Aziz Ahmad:165; Gaboricau:226).¹²² Ahmad Barelvi and Shah Waliullah's teaching was particularly influential amongst the Pushtun tribes of the North-West Frontier and Kabul¹²³ from the early part of the nineteenth century, and which was closely linked to a revisionist, internalised, concept of *jihad* (Olesen:11-13; 68-9). This neo-fundamentalism was one of the rods which the Afghan '*ulama*' used to beat the ideological backs of the northern peoples as well as their own Amirs.¹²⁴

The process of Afghanisation of the province of Balkh went hand-in-hand with the imposition of this radicalism by southern mullahs, who attacked aspects of local culture of the northern Turco-Tajik peoples by declaring it 'unislamic'. The Nauroz festivals at Mazar-i Sharif, and ballads which celebrated unIslamic festivals, especially with erotic and incestuous overtones, would have been a prime target of these radicals, as it has been in the last year or so for the Taliban, a movement born from the same radical subcontinental *madrasa* tradition.¹²⁵ This would be especially so since the festival and the shrine played an important part in the national self-identity of the Balkh *wilayat*. It is therefore something of an irony that one of the last surviving locations at which the festival of Gul-i Surkh was celebrated was the shrine of Baha' al-Din Naqshband in Bukhara.

¹²² Shah Waliullah, for example, condemned the celebration of the marriage of 'Ali and Fatima as analogous to the Hindu celebration of the union of Krishna and Radha.

¹²³ The most famous Mujaddidi was the Hazrat of Shor Bazaar, who gave the Amirs and the British so much trouble, see Olesen (pp.48-9).

¹²⁴ Radicalised mullahs condemned, amongst other things, Afghanistan's treaties with Britain, friendship with Shi'i Persia and, when all else failed, the decadent lifestyle of their Amirs.

¹²⁵ In the spring of 1997 the Taliban authorities in Kabul banned all celebration of Nauroz and traditions associated with it, as unIslamic. Earlier, following their seizure of Kabul in September 1996, the religious police outlawed all music and singing other than the performance of Quranic chanting and *na't* (see Baily:35), that is, unaccompanied hymns in praise of Muhammad and the prophets.

Such a process, though, had probably been going on since the days when Islam began to dominate the cultural and religious life of Khurasan and Bactria. Modifications to *Mullah Muhammad Jan* would probably include the recasting of the hero of the song as a Muslim,¹²⁶ the substitution of the name of Shah-i Mardan and the interpolation of Mazar. Probably the same process of modification and interpolation occurred with *Nakhsh-i Kalan* in Isfara where the references to Muhammad, 'Patient Job', 'Ali, Hasan, Husain and Khizr could easily have been substituted for pre-Islamic deities (Peshchereva, 1927:379-80). In fact, this ballad reveals a much stronger non-Islamic element, inasmuch as the singer recalls how, when going to the bazaar at the time of prayers,¹²⁷ he saw a bird sitting on the chest of a falcon (Peshchereva, 1927:380),¹²⁸ a motif clearly drawn from Shamanistic mythology. Such modifications would have doubtless deterred the worst criticism and ensured the preservation of ancient and indigenous tradition. In the process, however, these changes and interpolations, as far as Balkh was concerned, contributed to a gradual blurring of the lines between Gul-i Surkh, Nauroz and Janda Bala.

This presumed Islamisation and assimilation of tribal ballads is not unique to the Oxus basin. Indeed, this very process has been shown to have occurred in recent times with the ancient oral poetic tradition of the Yoruba of Nigeria. In order to retain the identity of their oral art, minstrels, actors and bards have adapted to the new ideology by interpolating the names of Muslim rulers, saints and even Muhammad himself in place of African deities. References to sexual acts and male and female *genitalia* have been expurgated and poetic genres, such as the *Dada-kuada*, are retained by the expedient of using them as vehicles to exhort adherence to the *shari'a* and *sunna* or to extol the virtues of Islam over that of native and

¹²⁶ If this was the case, is there a deliberate irony in the fact that Muhammad Jan was a mullah?

¹²⁷ *nimāz*

¹²⁸ *dīdam murghī nashashta bar sīna-yi bāz.*

tribal custom (Na'Allah, 1992). The Oxus basin, of course, unlike Nigeria, has been part of the Dar al-Islam for centuries, but the principle of adaptation of ancient traditions and customs, particularly those which are considered to be a definitive part of tribal and cultural identity, is an ongoing process which can be traced through all of the world's religions. Indeed, the survival of Nauroz, Janda Bala and Gul-i Surkh at Mazar-i Sharif in itself is a classic example of how such ancient traditions adapt, assimilate and eventually redefine themselves to such a degree that they remain embedded in local culture despite being derived from a religious tradition fundamentally at odds with the Islamic concepts of *tawhid* and *shirk*. If such festivals can survive 1,500 years of Islamic domination, by virtue of their assimilation to the shrine of 'Ali b. Abi Talib, then there is every reason to believe that the ballads and hymns which commemorated the pre-Islamic Gul-i Surkh have similarly adapted and survived in the same manner as the *Dadakuada* of the Yoruba.

To sum up, we conclude that Gul-i Surkh is a festival which is unique to the Oxus basin and which originates in a pre-Islamic period of Bactrian and Soghdian history. As far as Mazar-i Sharif is concerned, this tradition survived by becoming associated with the widely-celebrated festival of Nauroz but, in the process, it has become overshadowed to such an extent that little is left of its unique customs. Fortunately, Peshchereva's timely recording of the 'Tulip' Festival in Isfara in 1925 and subsequent research in the early 1960s, has provided us with at least a glimpse into how the festival was probably celebrated in previous centuries. Soviet, rather than Islamic, opposition to this indigenous custom, however led to the eradication of this festival and Gul-i Surkh in Bukhara, such that today Mazar-i Sharif is the last living example of this ancient tradition. Gul-i Surkh itself derives

from two genus of flowers, native to the Oxus basin, and which blossomed during the spring period, namely the red rose and the *lala*, which, as far as Balkh is concerned, is a variety of poppy. Our comparative study of folk songs associated with the Isfara 'Tulip' Festival and Gul-i Surkh of Balkh, suggests that these two flowers played an equal part in the symbolism of the festival, the blossoming of each, we tentatively suggest, may have marked the beginning and end of the forty day period. Furthermore, there are indications that these two red flowers appear to be physical symbols of an ambivalent duality. On the one hand there is the positive affirmation of natural fertility and erotic love with sub themes of rebirth, whilst on the other we find these flowers symbolise the pain and agony of unrequited love, separation, death and mourning.

Having, hopefully, cleared the ground, we can now attempt to locate the Gul-i Surkh festival of Mazar-i Sharif within the broader religious context of the religious tradition of Asia and the ancient Near East.

CHAPTER 6

GUL-I SURKH IN THE CONTEXT OF THE HISTORY OF RELIGION

In our endeavour to place Gul-i Surkh in the context of the wider religious traditions of pre-Islamic Central Asia we are hampered by the fact that, as far as we can ascertain, Mazar-i Sharif is the only place in the region, indeed in the whole of the Muslim world, where the festival has survived into the present day and age. We know that up to the beginning of this century a festival of the same name was celebrated at the shrine of Baha' al-Din Naqshband in Bukhara and Peshchereva (1963:214) claims that it was known, too, in Tashkent and Panjikent. However, the custom has died out as a result of state-sponsored repression of religious faith during the Soviet period. Fortunately, though, Peshchereva (1927 & 1963) recorded the rituals and traditions of a very similar festival to Gul-i Surkh in Isfara in the earlier part of this century, before the custom died out.

A further problem arises inasmuch that Gul-i Surkh, as far as we can ascertain, is not mentioned in any European or indigenous source prior to the early nineteenth century, and even where references to the festival are made, they are predominantly found in the accounts of western travellers who merely remark on the existence of the festival before passing on to other matters. Unfortunately, archaeology in northern Afghanistan is still in its infancy, when compared to the number of excavations that have been undertaken in the other major centres of ancient civilisation, such as Egypt, Mesopotamia and Palestine. Consequently, the archaeological record in Bactria in the pre-Islamic period is extremely patchy and what

little is known of the pre-Islamic religious traditions of the region is subject of much debate. Nor do we have the corpus of ancient texts or inscriptions which are available to historians working in other areas of the ancient world. Consequently, in any comparative study of Gul-i Surkh and attempting to locate the festival in the broader context of the history of religion, we are obliged to rely heavily on circumstantial evidence from early Sufistic texts, Persian literature, Afghan folk lore, local shrine practice as well as similar customs and traditions from regions which can be shown to have had cultural, religious and historical relations with Bactria.

We have noted how, in Bukhara, in the early years of this century, Gul-i Surkh did not coincide with Nauroz but fell in the month of May, i.e. at the end, rather than at the beginning, of spring (Olufsen, 1911:420), whilst the Isfara 'Tulip' Festival fell in early April in 1925 (Peshchereva, 1927:374). On the basis of this disparity, Peshchereva (1927:374) assumes that Gul-i Surkh and the 'Tulip' Festival are different festivals but, as we have seen in Mazar-i Sharif,¹ the further back we go into the known history of this festival, the more we find that the rose and the *lala* play an equally important part in the symbolism of Gul-i Surkh and in the songs that are so closely associated with them. As such, it is more likely that the dichotomy between the two festivals in Bukhara and Isfara came about partly as a result of precession and/or changes in the Persian solar calendar and partly in response to climate variations, since the festival can only take place when the *gul* and the *lala* are in bloom. This does mean, however, that in seeking comparative festivals in other regions of Asia and the Middle East, such ceremonies and rituals are probably more likely to be timed to coincide with the blossoming of similar red flowers during the spring months, rather than with the equinox itself.

¹ Interestingly enough Maj. C.E. Yate (1888:281), who was in Mazar-i Sharif in 1886 claims that the pilgrimage for miraculous cures took place at the shrine of Shah-i Mardan in April.

In fact there is some evidence to support the belief that originally the Bukharan and Isfara festivals were more closely associated with Nauroz than they were in the early 1900s. Olufsen (1911:420) notes that one of the important customs of Gul-i Surkh in Bukhara was the lighting of lamps at the shrines, which he claims is “a remnant handed down from the old Avesta faith.” In Isfara, too, fire played a part, since the procession of flower-bearers (*lālachi*) was led by a man holding a torch (Peshchereva, 1927:374, 376-8). The procession Peshchereva witnessed took place in the evening, and as such the torch may have been purely functional, however, the construction of bonfires and fire-jumping is a well known tradition associated with Nauroz. Until quite recently Faizabad, a village near the shrine of Baha’ al-Din Naqshband, was still the focus for the Nauroz *mela* (‘Aini:81) and Bukhara’s importance, as both a Zoroastrian and Buddhist centre, is well attested by Narshafkhi,² al-Biruni³ and others. Lighting a lamp as a form of votive offering is specifically mentioned in the Balkh verses of *Mullah Muhammad Jan*, although this practice is endemic at shrines in Afghanistan and is not confined to any specific period of the year.

In the early ‘Abbasid period, the Caliph traditionally handed out roses made of red amber to his courtiers (Grunebaum:54). Indeed, Walwalji, the *Andisha* circle and other local historians and intellectuals in northern Afghanistan, suggest that one meaning behind the symbolism of the Balkh poppy, is that the ancient Bactrians regarded it as a representation of the Zoroastrian sacred fire.⁴ In local Dari the phrase ‘*surkh-i āteshī*’ (‘fire-red’) is used to describe any flower whose bloom is of a particularly striking red colour.⁵ In *Sail-i Gul-i Surkh* one verse states: “The

² *TB*, 26-31.

³ *CAN*, 234 (Sachau).

⁴ *Andisha* circle, Mazar-i Sharif, spring 1996.

⁵ Rahim Ibrahim, *interview*, Mazar-i Sharif, July 1997.

Festival of Gul-i Surkh is New Year's Day/The poppy how it fires the heart,'⁶ where an adjectival form of the Persian verb, *afrōkhtan*, 'to inflame', 'set on fire', 'kindle', 'blaze', is used. This symbolism, though, is not confined just to the Oxus basin. Pakistan's national poet, Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938), compares the rose to the sacred fire which Moses saw when he received the law on Mount Sinai (Schimmel, 1994:10) and the Persian poet, Ruzbihan Baqli (d. 1209), cites a *hadith* in which Muhammad was said to have declared the red rose to be the manifestation of God's glory (Schimmel, 1975:299), that is the Islamic equivalent of the *khwarnah*, or *aura gloriae*, of the ancient Iranian Kings. Fire and burning, too, as a metaphor for the passion of lovers, is an ancient image common to both Persian and European poetic tradition.

If we cast our net wider than the Muslim world to areas of the Middle East and Middle Asia which are known to have been influenced by Zoroastrianism, we find one festival, still observed today, that has close semantic and religious affiliations with Gul-i Surkh. Armenia, like Bactria and Bukhara, was profoundly influenced by Zoroastrianism up until the time of its Christianisation in the fourth century AD. During the Achaemenid period, Armenia was part of the Persian empire, which included Bactria, Soghdia and Khwarazm (De Blois:46). Today, whilst Gul-i Surkh has been assimilated into the Islamic ethos of the Oxus basin, the spring festival of Vardavar has been incorporated into the Armenian Orthodox Church calendar by the simple expedient of annexing it to the Feast of the Transfiguration, a time when Christians remember Christ transformed into a brightly shining figure. In the present ecclesiastical calendar, Vardavar is celebrated today on the two days immediately following the Transfiguration, which falls on the seventh Sunday after Pentecost, that is in early August. However it is accepted by

⁶ *gulhā-yi lāla chi dil afrōz i.*

church authorities and Armenian scholars alike that Vardavar's origins have nothing to do with Christianity and it is a survival of a more ancient religious tradition (Ormanian:162; Russell, 1992:63-4).

Etymologically, Vardavar consists of two elements; *vard* -'rose',⁷ the equivalent of the Persian '*gul*', and *-var* which is popularly said to mean 'burning'. This second element, it is said, refers to the red of the rose as a symbol of fire and, at the same time, is representational of the blood of the fifth century Christian warrior-martyr, Vardan Mamikonean, who was killed in the springtime (Russell, 1992:65). Russell, however, has recently argued that the second element *-var* is more likely to mean 'bringing' in the sense of 'bring roses' or bearing them, that is of "giving birth to the blossoms" (Russell, 1992:66-7). In other words, though Gul-i Surkh and Vardarvar cannot be said to be synonymous in semantic terms, there is an extremely close affiliation between the two terms. In both, too, we see there is an underlying association with fire which suggests that the practice of burning lamps during Gul-i Surkh and the torches used in Isfara are related in some way to the original practices of the festival. Furthermore, Vardavar has a number of common features and motifs with Gul-i Surkh and the 'Tulip' Festival in Isfara, namely love and marriage, regeneration/rebirth, red flowers, martyrdom, water-bearing or throwing rituals and visits to shrines located beside running water and in caves.

In some parts of Armenia the traditions of another festival, the 'Mother of Flowers' (*Calkamor ton*), coincides with the celebration of Vardavar, though more commonly *Calkamor ton* falls on the Thursday before Ascension Day, forty days after Easter, in the month of May (Russell, 1987:375-7), that is at approximately

⁷ Cf Arabic, *ward*, 'rose'.

the same time as Gul-i Surkh was celebrated in Bukhara in the early part of this century. Whilst the Armenian Easter, like its Western Christian counterpart, is a movable feast (Russell, 1978:378),⁸ the number of days from Easter to the 'Festival of Mother of Flowers' is static and is exactly the same number of days as are counted from the raising of the *janda* to its lowering in Mazar-i Sharif. This association can be taken further, for one Armenian tradition states that prior to the reform of the calendar in the sixth century, Vardavar was celebrated on 1 Nawasard that is, Nauroz (Russell, 1987:378). Indeed, up until the end of the last century, the peoples of the mountainous regions of Sisian and Zangzur, now part of the modern state of Armenia, still maintained this tradition (Russell, 1987:378).

Divergent traditions of intercalation over the centuries are probably the main reason for such differences from region to region (see Boyce, 1970; De Blois, 1996; Russell, 1987:378).⁹ In the first decade of the sixth century, that is over two centuries after Christianity had replaced Zoroastrianism as the state religion of Armenia, the Sasanid kings reformed the Persian calendar (Boyce, 1970:528; De Blois, 1996). Armenia, naturally, did not follow suit. Instead, some forty years later, in AD 551, a number of changes were made to the ecclesiastical calendar which distanced the Armenian nation from its pre-Christian past. Vardavar was

⁸ It can occur anywhere between 30 April and 3 June.

⁹ See al-Biruni, *CAN*, chaps IX-XI (Sachau). The anomaly between the times that Gul-i Surkh in Bukhara and Mazar-i Sharif are celebrated can probably be attributed to the confusion which arose following the Sasanid reform of the calendar, which was not universally accepted by the priesthood. Bukhara, at that time, lay outside the Sasanid empire whilst Bactria was part of the empire by dint of a series of alliances with local rulers who may, or may not, have accepted the Sasanid reform. With the fall of the Persian Empire and the advent of the Arab empire, the situation became even more confused since the new ruling elite did not understand the Zoroastrian calendar and operated their own lunar one. By the eleventh century, there were probably as many as three different Persian calendars in use. Al-Biruni, *loc. cit.*, for example, notes a number of anomalies existed between the secular and religious observation of Nauroz. Finally, the Saljuq king, Malik Shah, arbitrarily standardised the solar calendar throughout his realms by decreeing Nauroz would fall on the spring equinox every year (see Boyce, 1970; De Blois, 1996). Balkh, as part of the Saljuq realm, would surely have followed the Sultan's ruling whilst Bukhara at the time was in no-man's-land between the Saljuq and Central Asian hordes and may not have made the changes.

moved from 1 Nawasard to its present position immediately after the Feast of Transfiguration which, in turn, was established as occurring on the fourteenth Sunday after Easter (Russell, 1987:378; 1992:64). Thus a popular 'pagan' feast was sanctified by association with a specific event in the life of Christ, in the same way that Gul-i Surkh was assimilated by dint of its association with 'Ali b. Abi Talib and Shaikh Baha' al-Din Naqshband. In the process, however, Vardavar lost its original association with spring and Nauroz. Given the fact that, anciently, Vardavar fell at Nauroz/the spring equinox, could the festival of the 'Mother of Flowers', which falls on the fortieth day after Easter, have originally been held to mark the end of a forty day spring festival which commenced at Vardavar/Nauroz and ended with 'Mother of Flowers'? This would be one explanation for why these two festivals have so much in common.

Vardavar and 'Mother of Flowers' both incorporate rituals involving water and red flowers which are closely associated with the celebration of love, marriage and the determination of fate, particularly the destiny of women. Ecclesiastical sanction for the festival is provided by a procession of the clergy on the first day of Vardavar during which they sprinkle the congregation with rose water (Russell, 1987:378). Once the formal blessing has been given, celebrations start in earnest. People drench each other with water and offerings of flowers and branches are made to statues of the Virgin Mary (Russell, 1987:251-2, 378). At one particular shrine on the slopes of the Ara mountain there is a cave known as the 'Monastery of Flowers' (*Calkevank*) where water seeps down from the roof. Within living memory barren women went to this cave at Vardavar to pray for offspring whilst standing under the drips. If the drops happened to splash on them, then they claim that St. Varvare (St. Barbara) has granted them their wish (Russell, 1987:252).

Even the ancient association between Vardavar and Nauroz can still be found in certain Armenian New Year traditions. On the first day of the year newly weds still go to a spring and silently repeat the following prayer:

*Good one of the water, Mother of the Water
Of the King of the Abyss
Will you give a New Year's gift of water?*¹⁰ (Russell, 1987:379)

In Dersim, within living memory, calves born with a half moon or star on their forehead were sacrificed and offerings of flowers and branches made to the Mother of God (i.e. the Virgin Mary). A source dating from the tenth century records that three doves were released into the sky on this day (Russell, 1987:378).

The Armenian reform of the calendar of AD 551 moved the Feast of the Assumption (*Verapokhumn*) of the Holy Mother of God, which up to that point fell in the same month as Vardavar. This seems to have been a deliberate decision by the church authorities to protect the Christian character of the Virgin Mary from pre-Islamic fertility rites associated with Vardavar which were deemed to be inappropriate to such an exalted figure as the Mother of God (Russell, 1987:378). This change in the church's cycle of feasts failed to remove the association between the Virgin Mary and Vardavar altogether, for Vardavar remains the name day for Armenian women with the name Vard ('Rose'), Vardarp'i ('Rose-Sun') and Mary (Russell, 1992:64). Even the famous fourth century apostle to Armenia, St. Gregory of Narek,¹¹ is attributed with having written a hymn to Vardavar.¹²

¹⁰ This is presumably a veiled appeal for children to bless the marriage.

¹¹ Perhaps not surprisingly, since he was a prince of the royal Arsacidian Parthian dynasty whose family reigned in Armenia from the third century BC. His father, Anak, was a chief of the Surenian military clan, who alone had the right to crown the Parthian King. The accounts of his confrontation with and final conversion of, the Armenian King, Trdat (Tiridites II) includes many Mithraic and Mazdean symbols, especially in his account of the vision of Christ, cf. Thomas's introduction to his translation of *Agathangelos*, pp. xxviii-xxx; *Agathangelos*, chaps 1, 8; Apcar (1897:xv); Hultgard (1982).

¹² Profs J.R.Russell & R.W. Thomson, *personal communications*, 1995. I have been unable to obtain a copy of this hymn which appears to exist only in Armenian and Russian texts.

The 'Mother of Flowers' festival shares many similar features with the customs of Vardavar. On the Wednesday before the festival, virgins go and gather bunches of a flower called *hawrot-mawrot*, whilst others 'steal' water from seven springs. This act of 'theft' must be done in complete silence. They should not turn back or allow the bucket in which they are carrying the water to touch the ground. If they see a man they must pour the water onto the ground and start all over again. The flower-gathering and water-stealing parties then meet in the evening in a garden and place the water into a vessel. Seven stones are thrown into the bucket along with seven types of flower, twigs or grass, depending on the region, along with a distinctive item of the girl's personal possessions. Finally an ornamental cross, or *vichak* (lit. 'lot' as in 'casting lots'), is placed over the top. The tub with the water is left overnight under the stars whilst the girls guard it from the young men who make token attempts to steal it (Russell, 1987:376-7). Whilst guarding their precious bucket, the women sing the following song:

*Come bring a great craftsman
Design a beautiful dress
Make its front the Sun
And its lining of the Moon
Decorate it all in clouds
Draw thread of silk from the sea
Make its buttons of stars
And sew all the love there is inside* (Russell, 1987:376).

It is commonly believed that on the Wednesday night, that is the eve of Ascension Day, "all waters cease to move for an instant and receive great powers of fertility" (Russell, 1987:377). Consequently it is the custom of many to bath in water to which seven flowers or green plants have been added. To do this will cure illness, banish sleep and ensure your dreams will come true (Russell, 1987:377-8).

Following the night vigil, on the Thursday morning proper, before noon, the *vičak* cross, decorated with flowers, is paraded about and special songs are sung. A seven-year old girl, wearing a red mask, is selected to act as a 'bride' (*hars*) and

holds the *vichak* whilst flowers are poured into the water. The personal items are extracted from the bucket, and quatrains, also known as *vichak*, about love and marriage, are read. In some areas these verses are referred to as *jan gulum*, which Russell translates as “flower of my heart” (Russell, 1987:376-7) but in colloquial Persian, from which the phrase is derived, it could just as well mean “the flower who is dear to me.”¹³ In the village of Xert’, in the region of Xnus, south of Erzerum, there was a spring which flowed for only three months of the year. As the Mother of Flowers festival occurred during this period, it was the custom of Armenians in this region to sacrifice a lamb at the spring on this day (Russell, 1987:379). Another Armenian custom is the baking of a milk-based pudding during the ‘Mother of Flowers’ festival (Russell, 1987:377).

Vardavar and ‘Mother of Flowers’ can be seen as local avatars of a widespread tradition of fertility cults which took place throughout the ancient world during the spring and which survive in Western Europe, for example, in the form of the May Pole tradition. However, there would seem to be good semantic, ritualistic and cultural evidence to support the thesis that Vardavar and Gul-i Surkh have emerged from a common root which may date back as far as the Achaemenid period but possibly to an even more ancient religious tradition.

In their modern incarnations Vardavar, ‘Mother of Flowers’ and Gul-i Surkh have evolved differently inasmuch as each tradition has adapted itself to the customs and prejudices of two distinct and divergent monotheistic traditions. Yet in the pre-Islamic and pre-Christian eras, both Armenia and Bactria were deeply influenced by Zoroastrianism as well as by the religious traditions of Mesopotamia

¹³ *Jan* can mean ‘soul’ but is also used colloquially as a term of endearment when referring to someone who is dear to you, or a close friend. In this case, since the women seek to divine through the medium of these verses who their future husbands might be, the translation I have suggested is perhaps more logical.

and Greece. When the State of Armenia adopted Christianity, religious and cultural links with the Iranian and Mazdean world were gradually loosened, a process which was accelerated by the fall of the Sasanids and the subsequent Islamisation of Iran and Central Asia. The ancient traditions of Vardavar and 'Mother of Flowers' have been far better preserved in Armenia than those of Gul-i Surkh, probably because Armenian Orthodox tradition tolerated saint cults and from an early period made official concessions to well-established 'pagan' festivals by incorporating them in the ecclesiastical calendar in association with celebrations of important landmarks in the life of Christ. In Islam, however, whilst the festivals of Gul-i Surkh and the 'Tulip' were redirected to the shrines of 'Ali and other saints, no official sanction would have been possible for aspects of the festival which celebrated female sexuality, since Islam's attitude towards this phenomenon was far more puritanical and ambivalent. However, we can still see this element preserved in songs such as *Mullah Muhammad Jan* and the *Nakhsh* ballads of Isfara, which clearly celebrate erotic love.

As far as Vardavar and the 'Mother of Flowers' is concerned, the rituals juxtapose virginity and its loss (as signified by marriage) with water throwing rituals and ceremonies associated with the arrival of spring, wells and running or dripping water. Using a bucket of water as a means of determining fate is a custom known to be practiced at the New Year period outside of Armenia. In Iranian Khorasan it was customary to fill a pot with water on the eve of Nauroz, the water being thrown out on New Year's Day to prevent any evil destiny from staying in the house (B.A.Donaldson:120). The Zoroastrians of Yazd still perform a ritual known as *ab zohr*, in which the priest pours milk mixed with rose petals and herbs into a stream (Russell, 1978:379).

Armenian scholars tend to attribute the origins of the Vardavar festival to a feast centred around the person of the Mazdean goddess, Anahit(a), or Artemis in Greek texts. Russell, however, suggests Vardavar also contains elements of the orgiastic Roman festival of Rosalia found amongst the Slavic Christians of Russia and Eastern Europe, and which was assimilated to the Christian feast of Pentecost under the name Rusaliile (Russell, 1992:63-4).¹⁴ That there are elements of both Zoroastrian and Babylonian religious tradition incorporated in these Armenian festivals, though, is evident. Russell himself (1987:376-7) finds a direct parallel between the *vičak* custom and similar ceremonies connected with the Zoroastrian rain festival of Tiragan, and the Greek *kledon*. In Van, on the days of Vardavar, the 'Gate of Mihr' is said to open on the Raven's Rock and reveals a cave in which Mihr, that is Mithra, sits astride his horse "waiting for the end of the world and its evil" (Russell, 1982:4). The *hawrot-mawrot*, which Russell translates as 'tuberous hyacinth', but which other authorities refer to as 'rose campion,' 'tuberose' and even 'poppy', is said by some to be the same as the Persian *sunbul* which is one of the ingredients which makes up the *haft sin* compote which is such an important feature of the Iranian Nauroz celebrations (Russell, 1987:381-3).¹⁵ The name *hawrot-mawrot* can be traced precisely to the Zoroastrian 'Bounteous Immortals'; *Hauravatat* (Pahlavi, *Hordad*), whose name means, 'wholeness'; 'health', and was guardian of the waters, and *Ameretat* (Pahlavi, *Amurdad*), 'life'; 'immortality', who was the protecting spirit of plants.¹⁶ As such, the mythological

¹⁴ But the festival also seems to contain elements of ancient Greek tradition particularly the *Arrhephoria* ('Dew Carrying') New Year rites of Aphrodite which involved young virgins carrying closed baskets (*kistai*) down to an underground spring (Burket:228-9).

¹⁵ I have been unable to obtain a proper scientific identification of the *hawrot-mawrot*.

¹⁶ In the Avesta both are female divinities but, "with the loss of grammatical gender in Pahlavi," they appear to have been thought of later as male (Russell, 1987:380). In the Qur'an (ii:96), perhaps not surprisingly, these two entities are transformed into the demons Harut and Marut, who are accused of revealing the power of sorcery to two angels in Babylon (Russell, 1978:381).

roots which undergird the symbol of the *hawrot-mawrot* are very close to motifs noted above in respect of indigenous Nauroz customs in the Balkh area. In Mazar-i Sharif, of course, Gul-i Surkh is inaugurated by the raising of the *janda* which brings both physical health and good crops for the coming year, but it would seem that Gul-i Surkh probably influenced this tradition. Doubtless, too, the original function of decorating trees with the *lala* in Isfara had similar sexual implications as the *hawrot-mawrot* which adorn the virgins during the Armenian festivals.

In Zoroastrian cosmology, Anahita was the personification of the primordial river and goddess of the waters, whose cult was established in Bactra at the latest during the reign of Artaxerxes II, and persisted down to the Arab conquest and probably for some centuries afterwards. In Armenia her most important temples were sited beside rivers and springs which gave "healing and much life" (Russell, 1987:248). Often such shrines were located in gorges near, or under, high mountains, or at places where rivers emerged from steep valleys (Russell, 1987:241, 248). The association between Vardavar and Anahita survived into the present century, for in Dersim, within living memory, it was believed that on the morning of Vardavar Anahita herself bathed in the river at a point where two streams met. In the same region of Kurdistan there is a spring of Anahit, known as 'Mother's Milk', where warring parties were brought to drink the water as a sign of reconciliation (Russell, 1987:252),¹⁷ whilst on the slopes of Mount Ararat (the sacred mountain of the Armenians) another spring bearing Anahit's name, "cures barrenness and prevents locusts from eating crops" (Russell, 1987:250).¹⁸ The sacrificing of new-born calves with a half moon or star on their forehead, another custom

¹⁷ The Islamicised Kurds of the region have a shrine to Ana-yi Pil (Pers. *pir*), i.e. Anahita the Pir, whilst the Mirag tribesmen refer to their *pir*, as 'great mother' (Russell, 1987:252-3).

¹⁸ In the present day it is associated with the story of St. Jacob of Nisibis who is said to have climbed Ararat in search of Noah's ark (Russell, 1987:250).

associated with Vardavar, is a further identifiable element of her cult (Russell, 1987:245, 251), since cattle owned by her temples were branded with the symbol of a half moon to represent the goddess' planet, Venus, the Morning Star (Russell, 1987:248). The doves, released by Armenians in the mediaeval period at Vardavar are Anahita's familiar bird (Dalton:44-5; Pope, ii:794, fig. 126 c,f), an association which might explain their particular association with the shrine at Mazar-i Sharif.

As in Bactria, it was the Achaemenids who first used state patronage to promote the cult of Anahita in Armenia and she eventually became one of the most popular of all deities worshipped in this region (Chaumont:173).¹⁹ By the first century BC, one whole district of Armenia was known as the "Country of Anaitis" (Russell, 1987:73; cf. Chaumont, 1965). Her most famous temple, at Erez on the banks of the Lycus river, contained an image made of solid gold, which was carried off by Mark Anthony in 36 BC (Boyce, 1984:85-6; Herzfeld, 1947, ii:517; Russell, 1987:240).²⁰ The depth of Armenian devotion to her cult is shown by the fact that St. Gregory of Narek singled out images and temples of the 'Golden Mother' and her Babylonian counterpart, Nana, for destruction (Chaumont:174-7; Ormanian:162; Russell, 1987:241, 248).²¹ Despite this purge, her cult survived in a modified form well into the mediaeval period, as is shown by polemical works by ecclesiastics against practices associated with her worship (Russell, 1987:251). Mary, Mother of God, assimilated the title, *bānūg*, Virgin, which had, in a previous era, been applied to the 'Golden Mother' and Diana/Artemis (Rahner, 1963:160-5; Russell, 1987:245-7).

All Zoroastrian *yazatas* had a 'familiar' planet, animal, bird and flower which were associated with them. Anahita's flower, however, was not the rose or the

¹⁹ Strabo, *Geog.* XI.xiv.16.

²⁰ *Aganhangelos*, 778, 786.

²¹ *Ibid*, 786.

lala, nor indeed any other red flower, but the lotus, a plant particularly associated with Bactra and which held symbolical significance for Buddhism as well as Zoroastrianism (Le Strange 1905:420-1).²² The “hundred-petalled rose” was the emblem of Daena, the deity who initiated Zoroaster into the teaching or religion²³ of Ahura Mazda (Corbin:32, 40-44; Russell, 1992:66). As we have seen (chap. 3), in Zoroastrian metaphysics there is a close link between wisdom, prophetic calling and water. Daena was the offspring of the Spenta Armaiti, the angel-goddesses, one of whom was Anahita (Corbin:57), whose function was so similar to Daena and her sister, Ashi, that Boyce argues that the attributes and functions of these closely related female deities converged and merged from quite an early period (Boyce, 1975, i:72).

As far as trying to establish a cultural and ideological link between Gul-i Surkh, the Isfara ‘Tulip’ Festival and Vardavar/Mother of Flowers is concerned, the worship of Nana, Anahita and Mazdean *yazatas* such as Tishtrya, Ashi and Daena, who were particularly believed to hold the power over the waters and rain, is the most likely bridge, rather than the Rosalia tradition preferred by Russell. We know from historical records that Anahita was worshipped in Bactra from at least the sixth century BC, and that she assimilated aspects of the Babylonian Nana and Greek goddesses too, which, amongst other things, provides an association with Nauroz and spring. The Armenian Anahita, too, was influenced by the Nana cult, whom Greek texts refer to as Athena (Russell, 1987:236-7, 244-5). Temples to both Nana and Anahita are known to have been located adjacent to each other and in the same natural environment. Anahita’s temple at Erez, for example, was on one bank of the Lycus river whilst the temple of Nana was on the other (Boyce,

²² *HA*, 108.

²³ *Pers. din*.

1991, iii:211 & 1984:85-6; Herzfeld, 1947, ii:517; Russell, 1987:235-42). This geographical proximity was matched by metaphysical and ritualistic adaptations by the Mazdean goddess to accommodate her Mesopotamian counterpart, perhaps in an attempt to undermine the influence of the Babylonian 'import'. Babylonian traditions adopted by the Armenian version of Anahita included regarding her as being the adopted daughter of Ahura Mazda, the processing of her statue during the spring equinox in the manner of the Mesopotamian spring festival,²⁴ the placing of the severed heads of enemies on walls of her temple (Russell, 1978:246-9) and, if classical sources can be trusted, temple prostitution, a practice which was an abomination to orthodox Zoroastrians (Chaumont, 178; Russell, 1987:249).²⁵

The association between the Armenian festivals of Vardavar and Mother of Flowers, and women visiting cave shrines to female saints by running water is one which parallels contemporary folk practice in northern Afghanistan in relation to Gul-i Surkh as well as the 'Tulip' Festival in Isfara. Peshchereva (1963:216) notes that the shrine of Khwaja Takrut, one of the most important gathering places for the celebrations, was located in the Turkistan mountains in a narrow gully beside springs and contained a stone which was shaped like a phallus. The *mazar* of Khwaja Ghor, another focal point for the Isfara *mela*, was presumably a cave²⁶ shrine, too. Another shrine, that of Khwaja 'Abdullah-i Surkhi, the 'Red Saint', and brother of Khwaja Takrut, was visited by women who sought children. After performing the *ziyarat* rituals, the women returned to the foot of the hill where they bathed in a nearby river (Peshchereva, 1927:378).

²⁴ Strabo, *Geog.*, XII,iii.36; xiv.26.

²⁵ Strabo, *Geog.* XI.xiv.16. However, since the most important Armenian temples to Nana and Anahita were built opposite each other, it may be that Strabo and other classical commentators mistook the cult practised on the one bank with the traditions of the other, or that he was merely inventing the whole thing in order to show how 'barbaric' was the indigenous culture.

²⁶ Pers. *ghōr* = cave.

In the Tir Band-i Turkistan there are many shrines dedicated to female saints which are located by or near rivers, springs and water falls. Of particular interest are a number of *ziyarat*s near Kauliyan in the upper valley of the Shirin Tagau of southern Faryab province. That of Bibi Shirin is located at the foot of a large waterfall on the western fringes of the settlement. This lady is said to have fallen in love with a certain Farhad, a man from the other side of the mountains. As a test of his love, she demanded that he bring water from the Darzab river, on the other side of the ridge, into the Shirin Tagau. Her lover did this by digging a tunnel with a huge spade, thus releasing the waterfall which now pours out from a cave above Kauliyan at Bel-i Zakhma ('Place of the Spade Cut'). Locally, the story of Bibi Shirin is known as '*Ashuk wa Ma'shuk*', 'the Lover and the Beloved'. Some people assert that the name Shirin Tagau derives from the heroine of this romance. It may be that this is a local variation of the well-known Persian romance of Khusrau and Shirin (see Curtis:65-9).²⁷ At the foot of Bel-i Zakhma, is another *ziyarat*, that of Bibi Maryam, though nothing appears to be known about this saint. The shrine of Bibi Sabira, on a hill near Ghulbiyan, is a site venerated particularly by women,²⁸ whilst in Darra-yi Shakh, in the Qaisar sub district of Faryab, the shrine of Hazrat Bibiana is located in a gorge and beside a large spring gushing from the rock (*Gazetteer*, 1907, ii:139; *Records of the Intelligence Party*, v:155, 233).

Numerous shrines called Chehel Dukhtaran ('Forty Maidens/Virgins')²⁹ exist throughout northern Afghanistan (Ball, 1982, i:172). The one located in the Siya Darra ('Black Valley') gorge some three hours trek S.W. of Ghulbiyan consists of

²⁷ Interview, Kauliyan garrison, October 1996; ; Engineer Ya'qub, personal communication, July 1997.

²⁸ Field work, Sarchakan, October 1996.

²⁹ Archaeological sites with the same name can be found in Badakhshan, Kabul, Kushk and Qunduz.

a fountain issuing from underneath the rock which forms stalactite or stalagmite formations and which locals say represent 40 virgins.³⁰ Near Sarchakan, the administrative centre of Gurziwan, there is a warm spring of the same name around which ancient remains are said to have been found.³¹ A site bearing the same name, located south-east of Balkh, is built on an ancient mound which may have been the remains of a stupa and where at least one Kushan coin has been recovered (Ball 1982, i:72).³² According to Corbin (p. 70) it is said that the Zoroastrian Sayoshant, and his Shi'i counterpart, the Hidden Imam, will come from the east, from Shahr-i Dukhtaran, the 'City of the Maidens'.

Perhaps the most famous of these cave shrines, and one which resembles those of Armenia and Isfara, is that located near Sangcharak in S.E Juzjan province, known as Angusht-i Shah, the 'Finger of the King', that is, 'Ali b. Abi Talib. The 'fingers' in question are two small fissures in the rock face out of which pour two jets of water. In the same spot is a second such phenomenon, known as Bibi Fatimani Emchilari, 'The Breasts of the Lady Fatima'.³³ Prof. Baldauf, who was taken to see this dual purpose shrine by local people in 1978, describes it as consisting of:

... two delicate jets of water shoot out of the rock there. These jets are symbolised by the two wooden ornaments above the entrance door (stylised ibex horns?). For some reason they did not want me to enter the shrine, so I do not know anything about its interior (*sic*). Nor do I know exactly where the sanctuary is located—we left Sangcharak in south-western direction and had a ride of about one hour by jeep on a sand road in ill condition. Anyway, it must be at the very beginning of the mountain range, for just behind the shrine ... there begins a gorge.... We had a walk of not less than 1 hour up the gorge...³⁴

³⁰ Field work, Ghulbiyan, October 1996.

³¹ Field work, Sarchakan, October 1996

³² Personal survey, 1977.

³³ Dr. (now Professor) Baldauf, *personal communication*, 1 Feb. 1986; Isma'il Akbar, *interview and hand-written notes*, July 1997; Rahim Ibrahim, *interview*, Balkh university, July 1997.

³⁴ I. Baldauf, *personal communication*, 1 Feb. 1986.

From photographs kindly supplied by Prof. Baldauf, it seems as if the dual shrine is located in a cave or cleft of a narrow gorge or rock.

Fatima, daughter of Muhammad and wife of 'Ali b. Abi Talib, appears to have assimilated a number of features which were originally attributes of the goddess Ardivi Sura Anahita and other local fertility deities. Amongst the Shi'a of Azerbaijan, Fatima is referred to as 'The Virgin' (*batūl*) a word which is derived from, *bānūg*, the attribute of Anahita. The Azeris believe that Fatima, like Anahita and the Virgin Mary of the Christian tradition, is an eternal virgin, despite her marriage and having given birth to Husain and Hasan. Indeed, the Shi'a often refer to her as 'The Great Mary' (Ayoub:35).³⁵ As such she is both wife, mother and virgin. She is the preserver of the seed and the *khwarnah* of the Hidden Imam, just as Anahita performs the same service for Zoroaster until the appearance of the Saoshyant (Ayoub:70-1; Corbin:33, 51-72).³⁶ Another tradition states that a white dove, the familiar bird of Anahita, entered Fatima's garments during pregnancy (Ayoub:72). At the end of the last century the Azeris of the Caucasus held an annual week-long festival³⁷ to Fatima in which it was the custom for weddings to take place (Lassy:131).³⁸

Fatima is also *al-Zahrā'*, 'The Shining, Brilliant or Resplendent One', a title which harks back to Anahita/Nana's identification with the planet Venus (Ayoub:48-52; Corbin:57-8, 62-4; Lassy:2). For the Isma'ilis, she is the 'Creator' (*fātir*), the 'Queen of Women', the 'Manifest Soul' (*nafs*) the 'Threshold' (*bāb*),

³⁵ *al-Maryam al-Kubrā*.

³⁶ Corbin (p. 70) shows how Shi'i apologists borrowed from Zoroastrian tradition as a source for theological speculation about the Hidden Imam.

³⁷ The Fatima festival was a moving festival, built around the Islamic lunar calendar. It was held from 3-10 Rabi' I each year.

³⁸ There is a further association. Muhammad, 'Ali, Fatima, Ali, Hasan and Husain are referred to in Shi'ism as the 'five persons' (Pers. *panj tan*). The number 5 is connected from time immemorial with the goddess Ishtar and hence with the planet Venus (Schimmel, 1994:78).

the 'Manifestation' (*bayān*), the Divine *Sophia* who ontologically outranks all the prophets and thus came prior to Muhammad, "because it is she who is the source of all their knowledge, revelations, and thaumaturgical powers" (Corbin:64-5). Yet Shi'i sources depict Fatima, like an Islamic version of Aphrodite, being beset by sorrows, persecuted and passing her final days mourning her father. Popular tradition states that she eventually dies an untimely death after having a miscarriage precipitated by beatings inflicted by the enemies of the Shi'a (Ayoub:40, 50-1).

Amongst the Nuristanis of Afghanistan, Fatima assimilated the functions of the Indo-Aryan deity, Disani, goddess of the waters and the hunt, whose familiar animal was the goat. She is said to have decapitated her son accidentally after he had incurred the gods' wrath by planting gardens and starting a water mill without their permission.³⁹ Like Siyawush (see below), his death was annually mourned amongst these peoples during the spring (Jettmar, i:44, 70-2, 103). The survival of this particular tradition into the present age, at least in the memories of old men, is the most important living evidence we have to support the contention that indigenised spring mourning ceremonies in the manner of Dumuzi/Adonis were widespread in the area in ancient times, with each region contextualising the tradition within the mythological framework of their local culture. Doubtless, too, many of the *ziyarats* which today are dedicated to female saints and located near or by water sources in the northern face of the Hindu Kush, originally derive from the worship of such goddesses as Anahita, Daena, Ashi and Disani. This would seem

³⁹ In one hymn to Disani, recorded as late as 1953, the goddess is said to have "18 grades", though ethologists have yet to understand what is exactly meant by this (Jettmar, i:70-1). However, during the spring festival to commemorate her son's decapitation, 18 youths engage in competitions. Could there be here some link here between the 18 men, Disani's 18 grades and the 18 canals of the Hazhda Nahr?

to be particularly so in respect of Angust-i Shah/Bibi Fatima Emchilari in Sangcharak.

As in Armenia, so elements of the veneration of the female, fertility, aspects of water can be shown to have a close link with the spring season and Nauroz as practised today in Afghanistan. The sacrifice of cows and bulls at Nauroz, a tradition derived from the cult of Anahita, can still be found in Afghanistan's Munjan valley, where it commemorates the local *shaikh's* miraculous provision of water, as well as at the shrine of Shah-i Mardan near Ishkamish (Olufsen, 1904:158-61) and the sacred springs of Garm Chashma in Garan, Badakhshan (Olufsen, 1904:28-31). The story of Hazrat 'Ali's miraculous creation of the lake of Band-i Amir which saved Bactria from a huge flood are all, directly or indirectly, associated with Nauroz, spring or the equinox. There are, too, many parallels between such surviving traditions and the mythology associated with the Zoroastrian deities, Anahita and Tishtrya, as well as the Daridic divinity, Bagisht, whose worship was only finally suppressed at the end of the last century. We also find shrines located near or even on springs and rivers, such as Chasma-yi Shafa on the Balkh Ab, still being used as sites for New Year *melas*.

There are a number of other parallels between the Armenian Vardavar and Mother of Flowers traditions, the shrine of Shah-i Mardan and local customs associated with the spring in northern Afghanistan. The baking of special puddings during the 'Mother of Flowers' festival parallels the *nazars*⁴⁰ cooked by women as *fa'al's* to determine fate and destiny in northern Afghanistan and the *chalpak*

⁴⁰ A number of such *nazars* exist in Afghanistan. *Nazar-i Bibi Seshanbe* ('Offering of the Tuesday Lady') is a women's *khairat* practised in Ghulbiyan and the Maimana area. Women cook *armach*, a special dish made from wheat flour, oil and a small amount of rice. It is served with chickpeas and meat and distributed to family and neighbours. It is believed that the person who has cooked it will have a dream during that night which will provide guidance; Ghulbiyan, interviews, October 1996.

tradition associated with the Isfara 'Tulip' Festival (Peshchereva, 1963:216). The tradition of *Ab Jiran*, *Ab Pashi* and the splashing and ducking ceremonies in the Kafir feast of Disanedu, bear some similarities to the water-throwing at Vardavar. Several of these traditions are directly related to the coming of the New Year, and all are associated with the spring season. Quatrains,⁴¹ in which the symbol of wild red flowers (*lala*) and roses appear, are found both in the Gul-i Surkh tradition in Balkh (e.g. *Mullah Muhammad Jan, Sail-i Gul-i Surkh*) and the *vichak* rituals of the 'Mother of Flowers' festival and, dramatically, in the 'Tulip' Festival of Isfara, where the *lala* played an even more important part in the rituals than the *hawrot-mawrot* in Armenia. In all these cases the red flower is juxtaposed with motifs and images of marriage, fate and love, whilst the sacred white doves, the familiar bird of Anahita, are a well-known sight to all pilgrims to the shrine at Mazar-i Sharif.

The affiliation between Gul-i Surkh and Vardavar derives, in part at least, from the cults of Anahita and her Babylonian counterpart, Nana, whose cult, we have seen, was known to have been widespread in Central Asia. It is reasonable to believe that elements of the *akitu* tradition were imported into both Armenia and Bactria with her cult, possibly assimilated to indigenous celebrations of the spring equinox, for, like Nauroz, *akitu* commenced at, or around, the time of the spring equinox (Black & Green:136-7; Roux:397-8)

We know from al-Nadim that such ancient religious tradition persisted well into the Islamic era in the Middle East, particularly in the religion of the Sabians of Harran who worshipped deities who represented the planets. Their year, like the Babylonian one, began in the month of Nisan (March/April), the first three days of

⁴¹ *chahārbatī*.

the New Year being devoted to the worship of "Batha, who is al-Zuharah," the Arabic name for the planet Venus, or al-Shahmiyah, 'The Glowing'. The first day of the month, Ayyar, was devoted to further rituals related to 'Venus', one of which involved smelling the rose. A further seven-day festival in honour of Venus' "marriage" was held in midwinter, probably around the winter solstice. Rituals included the creation of a bower or booth in a chamber in the goddess' sanctuary, which was decorated with "fragrant fruits ... dried roses, citrons, small lemons, and such fruits as they can obtain, whether dry or fresh."⁴² Elements of this ancient tradition, stripped of its more explicit sexual connotations, can clearly be discerned in the traditions of Vardavar, Mother of Flowers, Gul-i Surkh and the Isfara 'Tulip' Festival. Gul-i Surkh, for example, is a time which is specifically associated with marriages and we have seen how many of the songs associated with Gul-i Surkh and the 'Tulip' festival are celebrating sexual love.

An important element in the Mesopotamian ritual was the reaffirmation of kingship, a subsidiary theme which we have noted already in connection with traditions relating to 'Ali, his election to the Caliphate and the raising of the *janda*. The *mela* tradition, too, may have been influenced by Mesopotamian New Year tradition in which festivity was combined with visits to temples and deities enthroned outside the city walls. Most of the *mela* sites and shrines we have noted above are out-of-town locations and it is important to remember that when originally discovered, the grave site at al-Khair would have been a desert location. It was only later, in the Timurid period, that the site become urbanised.

It is, however, another, darker, aspect of the goddess Inanna which provides us with the most dynamic link between Near Eastern religious tradition, Gul-i Surkh and the 'Tulip' Festival. Inanna, though she never married, did have a lover/con-

⁴² al-Nadim, *Fihrist*, ii:755-61. Even Friday was also devoted to Venus.

sort called Dumuzi (the Tammuz of the Old Testament).⁴³ This god appears to have been a “fusion of two prehistoric deities,” the protector of the herds and flocks, who dies in the summer and revives in the spring (Roux:91). In Assyrian and Sumerian tradition, Inanna descends to the Underworld and returns, kills Dumuzi and hands him over to her demonic retinue as a substitute for her own life (Black & Green: 72-3; Burkett:101; Dalley:154-160; Roux:92). Dumuzi gave his name to one of the months of the Semitic and Babylonian calendar, which fell in June/July (Black & Green:72; Dalley:154; Roux:92). In modern Syrian Arabic, the month of July is still known as Tammuz. In this month, a festival to Dumuzi was held throughout the ancient Near East which involved extravagant expressions of mourning, the cult image was washed with pure water, anointed with sweet oil and clothed in a red robe, presumably representing the blood of the ‘dead’ god who had been condemned to the underworld (Dalley:160).

The Cananites referred to Dumuzi as *adhon*, ‘lord’, the Adonis of classical myth, whose annual death was ritually lamented extravagantly by the peoples of the Levant, Jerusalem and even Cyprus (Drijvers:109-11; Fraser:6; Hitti:117; Roux:92-3). In Greek and Latin sources, Adonis, born of incest, was fought over by the goddesses Aphrodite and Persephone. He was eventually killed whilst hunting, after being impaled on the tusks of a wild boar,⁴⁴ and was borne dying to his beloved Aphrodite only to expire at her feet (Jidejian:126; Moscati:108). The annual festival to Nea’man/Adonis, held in the month of Tammuz, involved ritual flagellation, self-mutilation and the shaving of heads as the devotees of the cult mourned the dead god. The following day⁴⁵ the festival’s tone changed as partici-

⁴³ Ezekiel viii:14.

⁴⁴ Cf. the Mazdean deity, Verethraghna, agent of Mithr’s vengeance, whose familiar animal was a boar.

⁴⁵ Depending on the region the timetable of the festival varied.

pants threw themselves into an orgy of sexual indulgence and ritualised pre-nuptial prostitution to celebrate Adonis' restoration to life and the return of Aphrodite from the underworld (Fraser:13-14, 21-3, 126-7; Jidejian:119-29; Moscati:108).⁴⁶

The most famous Phoenician temple associated with the cult was that of Baalat-Gabal, 'Our Lady of the Mountain', at Byblus. Indeed the city fathers claimed that it was in their territory that Adonis was killed by the boar (Jidejian:122-4).⁴⁷ The river which enters the sea, now called Nahr-i Ibrahim, also bore his name (Jidejian:127). At the source of this river, at Aphaca (modern Afka), was the grove of Aphrodite, located high up in a "wild, romantic, wooded gorge" (Fraser:14-15). According to the Syrians, it was at this spot where Adonis met his beloved Aphrodite for the first time and it was here, too, where his mangled body was finally laid to rest (Jidejian:124).⁴⁸ Today, homage is paid still to "the lady of the place," that is, the Virgin Mary, by the placing of "lighted lamps in a small alcove ... and both Christian and Shi'ite natives hang strips of their clothing as vows to restore the sick to health" (Hitti:117), a practice which echoes the vow to put a lamp at the shrine of Shah-i Mardan which appears in *Mullah Muhammad Jan*.

Though the main festival in honour of Adonis fell during the summer, every year in the spring, around the Easter period, the Lebanon river, throughout its course, ran red with alluvial deposits washed down by the melting snows but which local people claimed was the blood of Adonis. This red streak ran down the river and stained the sea by Aphrodite's temple.⁴⁹ At the same time, in the mountains of Lebanon and all down the gorge of Adonis, bloomed the wild scarlet

⁴⁶ Lucian, *De Dea Syria*, 13-15 (Attridge & Doen).

⁴⁷ *DDS*, 13.

⁴⁸ *DDS*, 15-17.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

anemone (*nae'mān*),⁵⁰ a flower which took its name from the dying god. It was said that the flower had sprung from Adonis' tears (Fraser:16, 126-7; Hitti:117-8). The scarlet red of the *nae'man*'s petals represented his blood, whilst the 'black' heart symbolising his untimely death and the sorrow and mourning of Aphrodite. Another variant of the myth held that Adonis himself had turned into an anemone. In the Roman world the myth of Attis-Agdistis was also a focus of a dual spring festival, the *trista*, commemorating Attis' death, the *hilaria* his resurrection (Russell, 1978:236). In English the word 'anemone' derives, via Greek, from *nae'man*, whilst in Arabic the anemone is still called 'the Sibling of Adonis' (Fraser:16; Hitti:117-8).⁵¹ It was said that Aphrodite, in her haste to reach her dying lover, "trod on a bush of white roses; the cruel thorns tore her tender flesh, and her sacred blood dyed the white roses for ever red" (Fraser:127-8). The red rose thus represents the female, the anemone the male aspect of tragic love, divine passion and redemption, as symbolised by their blood which colours the rose and anemone.

The symbolism of the rose and anemone in the Adonis myth provides us with one mythological association with Gul-i Surkh and the 'Tulip' Festival, since both of these fairs are associated with the red rose and a species of wild red spring flower and clearly have links with concepts of human and natural fertility. In the case of Balkh and Isfara, the *lala* could be seen as a convenient local substitute for the *nae'man*. For the *lala* of Balkh, and doubtless Isfara too, like the *nae'man* in the vale of Afka, appears during the spring months.

⁵⁰ Though whether it is scientifically correct to consider the *nae'man* to belong to the botanical species, *anemone*, I have been unable to ascertain. According to Shmida (p. 115), it is the poppy which "is the predominant species on the mountain slopes in the early spring." To add to the confusion, a number of varieties of red Pheasant's Eye (genus, *Adonis*) also grow in the Palestine area but it is a coincidence that the scientific name *Adonis* is associated with this plant, F. N. Hepper, *personal communication*, Dec. 1997.

⁵¹ *shaqīq al-nu'mān*. Steingass claims that in Persian there is a flower known as *lāla-yi nu'mān*.

Vardavar, too, with its etymological link to the red rose, could have been influenced by the same myth. The *hawrot-mawrot* which plays a crucial part in the *vichak* ritual of 'Mother of Flowers' could be the Armenian equivalent of the *nae'man*. Armenian folklore personifies Hawrot and Mawrot as two parted lovers, whilst in Anatolia, Armenians refer to a couple who have fallen in love as "Hawrot having found his Mawrot" (Russell, 1978:382). Regeneration is represented by Vardavar's association with the Transfiguration. A fourteenth century poem entitled, *Today it was a Glowing Spring*, said to have been "spoken ... on the resurrection of Christ," relates how the flowers of spring go out in search of Christ, "the rose" and the "beautiful and comely," *hawrot-mawrot*, is compared to "the Holy Apostles in their rank of twelve" (Russell, 1978:382-3). The *hawrot-mawrot*, and other spring flowers, such as the narcissus (*nergis*), poppy and violet are said to prefigure "the resurrection of men at the end of days" (Russell, 1978:381). Similar symbols can be found in the *Teaching of St. Gregory*. Referring to Isaiah 62,⁵² which makes direct reference to the land being "married" and "no longer desolate", the work portrays the spring flowers as types of the resurrection and "crowns ... for the joy of the worthy."⁵³

On the other side of the coin, the symbol of sacrificial death finds expression in popular identification of the 'red rose' of Vardavar with the death of the Armenian Christian martyr Vardan Mamikonean. Famous as both a nationalist and a martyr, Mamikonean led a revolt against the Sasanids in AD 450 following Persian attempts to reimpose Zoroastrianism on newly-Christianised Armenia. He, and many other Armenians, perished at the Battle of Avarayr (AD 451)

⁵² "Thou shalt be a crown of glory in the hands of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hands of thy God. Thou shalt no more be termed Forsaken; neither thy land any more be termed, Desolate; but thou shalt be called 'My Delight' and the land, 'Married', for the Lord delighteth in thee and thy land shall be married," Isaiah lxii:3-4 (AV).

⁵³ *The Teaching of St. Gregory*, 641-654, 650, Thomas' translation.

(Elishé:4-6, 171). According to the chronicle which records his life and martyrdom, the field of battle was located in “flowering meadows” which were turned by their deaths into “torrents of many men’s blood” (Elishé:171). In Armenia, too, the rose is used as a symbol of the blood of national heroes and martyrs.

We have seen how, in both Armenia and Bactria, the Iranian Anahita, at least at a popular level, underwent a number of changes through contact with Mesopotamian goddess cults to the extent that, in Bactria by about the third or fourth centuries AD, she was regarded as almost synonymous with Nana. Herzfeld (1947, ii:526), for example, sees many similarities between the description of Anahita in Yasht 5 and the Homeric hymn to Aphrodite. This syncretic tendency is dramatically portrayed in the account of the third century Christian woman martyr, Anahit, from Syria, the same region where the cult of Adonis was so entrenched. Though the narrative is set in the Middle East, Anahit’s father, Mahdukht, came from Fars where he was “renowned for his great learning in Magian affairs,” and “held in great honour by the King of Kings and by everyone in the realm” (Brock & Harvey:89-90). The story, therefore, has a strongly eastern Iranian element in it, too. He turned to Christianity after having a vision of Christ in which a martyr’s crown was placed on the head of his daughter. Following his conversion, he was miraculously cured of demon possession and leprosy.⁵⁴ Anahit, on her conversion, became a ‘Daughter of the Covenant’ (*bath qyama*),⁵⁵ taking a vow of chastity, an act which was abhorrent to Zoroastrians (Brock & Harvey:85-6). As a consequence, her persecutors, the Zoroastrian Magi, mockingly referred to her as “Anahid the Mistress (*bānūg*),” the title by which the goddess Anahita herself was known. Indeed, the merging of the myth of goddess with that of the martyr is

⁵⁴ Lepers were forbidden to partake of Anahita’s offering portions (*zaothras*) (Boyce 1975, i:166)

⁵⁵ This celibate Order of nuns had established itself in Bactra by the end of the second century AD.

taken even further by her hagiographer, who records that “the ordinary people [took] her to be an apparition of the goddess” and that she was “more beautiful and desirable than any other woman” (Brock & Harvey:89).

Anahita was finally arrested for the crime of refusing to marry, stripped naked and beaten until blood ran from her “like a stream of water” and lashed “even more assiduously than farmers hack at uncultivated ground to soften it.” But overnight her wounds miraculously healed and her scars disappeared. The next morning her tormentors tied cobbler’s string around her breasts and hung her by them until they were severed from her body. Despite these tortures, she refused to recant her vow of chastity and was taken to a hill to be put to death. Her naked, mutilated body was smeared with honey and swarms of bees flocked around her “as though it were some festival” and stung her to death. (Brock & Harvey:18, 96-99).⁵⁶

In this account there is little attempt to conceal the fact that martyr and deity are one and the same person, the hagiographer having rewritten some ancient myth concerning the torture and death of the goddess Anahita using the more acceptable context of a Syrian Christian martyr.⁵⁷ Yet the depiction of Anahita the goddess and her cruel execution bears little or no resemblance to the Ardivi Sura Anahita of the Avesta or other Zoroastrian texts. Her tortures are depicted by images of spring, her scourgings are compared to the farmer’s ploughing or harrowing his fields in preparation for planting, whilst her flowing blood is likened to streams of water. These images of the goddess dying to bring life to the earth is far more in keeping with Near Eastern and Hellenistic myths of regeneration, such as those of Innana-Dumuzi, Aphrodite-Adonis, Demeter-Persephone or Osiris-Isis. Yet what

⁵⁶ She is said to have been martyred on Friday 18 June in the ninth year of reign of Yazdagird II, that is c. A.D. 455.

⁵⁷ Cf. the shrine of St. Thecla in the Syriac-speaking village of Ma'lula, which, like the cave saints of Armenia is located in a cave, the water flowing from it being said to possess healing powers (E. Siriya, 1979).

makes this whole story extraordinary is the fact that Anahita's father is said to have been a Magi, an important member of the Zoroastrian religious aristocracy from Fars. This would certainly support our contention that the Mazdean Anahita had become an Iranian counterpart of Nana. If this is so, then it would seem the same transmogrification had taken place in Bactria and the eastern reaches of the Iranian empire.

In Bactria and Soghdia, though, it seems the emphasis was placed more on the male aspect of the Aphrodite-Adonis myth. The dismemberment of Khwaja Takrut, the central Islamic figure of the Isfara 'Tulip' festival, is clearly very much part of this tradition (Peshchereva, 1927:217-8). The Chinese Buddhist pilgrim, Wei Cheih, who was in Samarkand in AD 605, relates how, in the seventh month, the people of the city conducted a search for a divine child who was said to have been lost. During this festival, too, people dressed in black, walked barefoot and beat their chests and cried (Lieu:223; Marshak & Raspopova:203; Peshchereva, 1927:218).⁵⁸

This Adonis-like myth was probably rooted in a very ancient tradition, and seems to have been crystallised around the hero of the ancient Iranian epics, Siyavush (D'yakonov:41; cf. Boyce, i:105-6). Narsharkhi (286/899-348/959) records in his *History of Bukhara* that the ancient citadel of Bukhara was built by Siyavush, as was the fire temple in the village of Ramush, outside the city. A shrine, said to be the grave of this hero, located on a hill near the Ma'bad, or Ghuriyan Gate, in the eastern quarter of the city, was still venerated by the Magians and "all the people"⁵⁹ of the area as late as the tenth century (Barthold, 1977:101, 107,

⁵⁸ F. Grenet, *Résumé*, 1996/97.

⁵⁹ "har mardī", Narsharkhi, *TB*, 25.

116).⁶⁰ Siyawush is of great antiquity for the name appears in the Avesta as *Syavarshana* (Curtis:74; D'yakonov, 1951:41).⁶¹

The tragic death of Siyawush, which was said to have taken place in the Oxus basin, is the most famous of all the great Iranian sagas (Curtis:74; cf. D'yakonov, 1951). In the *Shahnama*, Siyawush, having fallen out with his father, the Iranian king Kai Kaus, and in order to escape the jealousy of his stepmother, flees to the court of his father-in-law, Afrasiyab, the despotic and cruel ruler of Turan, i.e. Soghdia. Siyawush accepts sanctuary in return for an oath that he will never attack Afrasiyab. He then settles down and builds two fortress cities, one of which, Siyawushgird, was near Balkh. Very quickly, however, his virtues excite the envy of powerful and unscrupulous parties who set out to effect his disgrace and downfall. Afrasiyab, persuaded by these courtiers that Siyawush is bent on evil, sets out at the head of an army to kill his rival. Bereft of support from his estranged father-in-law, Siyawush is besieged in Siyawushgird but refuses to break his oath to Afrasiyab by taking up arms against his ally. He and his men go out from his fortress and take up defensive positions, but Siyawush orders them not to fight. His army is cut to pieces by Afrasiyab and so great is the bloodshed that the earth is said to have appeared "like 'tulips' (*lāla*) with their gore."⁶² Siyawush is wounded, taken prisoner and condemned to death by Afrasiyab in the following manner:

*Beside the road ... let him be beheaded
On some bare spot where grasses never grow
And pour his blood upon the burning earth.*⁶³

⁶⁰ Narsharkhi, *TB*, 23-24, 33.

⁶¹ Yasht 9:18 (Darmesteter); Narsharkhi, *TB*, 24, says the saga was believed to be 3,000 years old.

⁶² *z khunishān hama lālagūn shud zamin*, *SN*, IV:2382 (English translation after Warner).

⁶³ *kushīdish z rāh/kunīdish bakhunkhur, sar az tan jadālbashakhī ke har giz narōyid giyālberizīd khūnish bar ān garm khāk*, *SN*, IV:2390-93 (after Warner).

Having been handed over to Gurwi, agent of Siyawush's most implacable enemy, Garsiwaz, Siyawush is dragged by the beard "vilely through the dust"⁶⁴ out to the desert⁶⁵ site where Siyawush had earlier accidentally wounded Garsiwaz during a tournament. Garsiwaz presents Gurwi with a steel dagger and he puts Siyawush to death in the most cold-blooded and barbaric manner. Placing a golden bowl on the ground, Gurwi turns up the neck of the prince "as 'twere a sheep's" and proceeds to decapitate him. Not content with this act of barbarism, Gurwi gathered the flowing blood of his enemy into the bowl and pours it onto the desert sand.⁶⁶ Firdowsi relates that at the same spot, "from that blood presently sprang a plant ... called 'the Blood of Siyawush'".⁶⁷ Later Firdowsi records that this plant was a fragrant tree which flourished both in winter and in spring and which bore in its leaves the likeness of the dead hero.⁶⁸ As Siyawush's blood is poured into the dry dust of the Balkh plains, the *Shahnama* relates how nature itself mourns the hero's death as thunderclouds gather and a tempest arises blotting out the sun and moon.⁶⁹

News of the slaughter of Siyawush precipitated unprecedented scenes of mourning and self mutilation akin to the rites associated with the death of Adonis. Farangis, Siyawush's wife, rips her cheeks open with her nails and wails for her dead husband whilst cursing both her father, Afrasiyab, and Garsiwaz. Afrasiyab, in order to force her to stop, commands his daughter to be seized, stripped naked, beaten and condemned to death. Kai Khusrau and other Iranian nobles, when they

⁶⁴ *SN*, IV:2492 (after Warner).

⁶⁵ *dasht*, *SN*, IV:2504 (after Warner).

⁶⁶ *SN*, IV:2506-13 (after Warner).

⁶⁷ *khūn-i siyāwush*, *SN*, IV:2513-15.

⁶⁸ 'z *khākī ki khūn-i siyāwush bukhōrd* *ba abr andar āmad yakī sabz nard*
nigārīda bar barghā chihir-i ūi *hama būi mushk āmad az muhr-i ūi*
SN, IV:2750-51.

⁶⁹ *SN*, IV:2516ff.

hear of Siyawush's death, mourn his passing with similar shows of grief and don black garments.⁷⁰

The slaughter of this Iranian Abel deeply impressed itself on the population of the region to the extent that, in Bukhara, his death was commemorated by the city's population by two festivals which occurred during the spring.⁷¹ Narsharkhi, writing in the first half of the tenth century, records how on the morning of Nauroz, before the sun had risen, the Magians and "all the people" went to the tomb of Siyawush where each sacrificed a cock.⁷² In emulation of the mourning ritual of Farangis, the Soghdians "lament ... and cut their faces," for Siyawush and, by extension, all the dead.⁷³ Hymns (*sarūd*), known as 'Lamentations of Siyawush'⁷⁴ and 'Lamentations of the Magi',⁷⁵ were sung in his honour. Though Narsharkhi does not say so in as many words, it would seem that the Bukharans believed that Siyawush's murder took place on Nauroz. Twenty-eight days later, on 28 Nausard, a further ceremony took place at the Ramush temple,⁷⁶ a sacred site founded, according to local tradition, by Siyawush himself. Indeed, Narsharkhi records that it was believed to be the most ancient place of worship in Bukhara (cf. Barthold, 1977:107; Curtis:75; D'yakanov, 1951:41-2).⁷⁷

A number of elements in the saga of Siyawush are quite inconsistent with orthodox Zoroastrian practice and indicate that, like Anahita, he too, belongs to a

⁷⁰ *SN*, IV, 2555ff.

⁷¹ Narsharkhi, *TB*, 25. At the time of writing, the Nauroz of the Agriculturalist fell on the spring equinox which coincided with 1 Nausard (i.e. Nawasard), but the religious New Year of the Magians took place five days later due to the problem of lack of intercalation over the years, cf. al-Biruni, *CAN*, 220 (Sachau); Boyce (1970); De Blois (1996). This did not seem to affect the celebration of the death of Siyawush which fell on the spring equinox.

⁷² *Har sāli har mardī ānjā yaki khurūs bord wa bukushad, pēsh az barāmadan-i āstāb-i rōz-naurōz*, Narsharkhi, *TB*, 32-3.

⁷³ al-Biruni, *CAN*, 222 (Sachau).

⁷⁴ *Kīn-i Siyāwush*, Narsharkhi, *TB*, 23. Probably Firdowsi's poetic account of the death of the Iranian hero drew on this oral tradition.

⁷⁵ *Gristān-i Māghān*, Narsharkhi, *TB*, 33.

⁷⁶ Narsharkhi, *TB*, 22-3; al-Biruni, *CAN*, 221 (Sachau).

⁷⁷ al-Biruni, *CAN*, 221-2 (Sachau); Narsharkhi, *TB*, 23-4. Translation of D'yakanov's Russian article kindness of Oliver Dirs.

more ancient Indo-Aryan tradition (D'yakanov:40-2). The shedding of a man's blood on the earth and the method used by Gurwi to slaughter Siyawush violates the sacredness of the earth as well as condemning Siyawush never to enter paradise. According to orthodox Zoroastrian teaching, sacrifices should not take place during the hours of night, yet in Bukhara the Magi appear to have done so before dawn on Nauroz in commemoration of the death of Siyawush. Official sanction for the ceremonies was reinforced four weeks later when further ceremonies took place at the fire temple of Ramush. Nor would Zoroastrians usually make a sanctuary of a grave for "they have a horror of the uncleanness of a corpse, and regard the committal of one to the earth a sin" (Boyce, 1967:30). The commemoration of the hero by such scenes of ritualised mourning, hair-tearing, disfigurement and suchlike is also anathema to Zoroastrians (Boyce, 1967:43).

In Sogdian mythology the grieving Nanai (the local name for Nana/Anahita) sees her young lover, Siyawush, raised from the dead by dogs who lick him back to life (Russell, 1987:237). In a variation of the same legend, the Assyrian queen Semiramis orders her dogs (*aralezk*) to heal her dead lover, Ara, back to life (Lieu:233; Russell, 1987:245, 344, 415).⁷⁷ It may be that there is some link here with Babylonian religion since Marduk, the god of the dead, is referred to as 'Lord of the Dogs', or possibly with ancient Indo-Aryan customs. Marduk, too, is closely associated with the Babylonian *akitu* festival, as was Nana.

It is probable, therefore, that the Mourning of Siyawush which took place at Nauroz, and the saga itself as recorded by Firdowsi, had assimilated elements of religious myths from the ancient Near East and Greece, such as the Dumuzi and/or Adonis cult. A survival of this tradition appears to have survived until the end of the last century amongst the Kafirs with the myth of the rape of the goddess hunter

⁷⁷ Strabo, *Geog.*, XII.3.

Disane/Disni (Robertson:382-3) and her subsequent murder of her own son, Bagisht (Jettmar, i:71-2). Though Firdowsi does not refer to the *khun-i siyawush* as a *lala*, calling the plant a tree or bush, it may be that under the influence of the Adonis myth the Balkh poppy, or similar genus of red *lala*, such as *anemone bucharica*,⁷⁸ were regarded as suitable local substitutes for the *khun-i siyawush*. If this is the case, then we should also expect to find references to the red rose, as the female counterpart of the *nae'man*. As we have already observed, the rose plays an important part in the symbolism of Gul-i Surkh, indeed the very name of the festival can be translated as both "red rose" and "red flower." One direct survival of Siyawush tradition of Gul-i Surkh as recorded by Narsharkhi, is the practice of sacrificing a cock at the shrine of the dead hero before the dawn of Nauroz (D'yakanov:41). Today in Mazar-i Sharif the Shi'a still perform this ritual, though nowadays it takes place on the evening of the Nauroz festival rather than on the actual day itself.

Who Siyawush's female counterpart was in this Soghdianised ritual, if indeed he had one, is hard to tell. Certainly there is some evidence to suggest that this position may have been filled, in some way yet to be properly explained, by Anahita. She is seen bearing a 'tulip' on Sasanid seals and through her assimilation to Nana she would have some part to play in any local version of the *akitu* festival.

Scenes of ritualised mourning have been found in Uzbekistan in the form of the wall paintings of Panjikent (5th century AD) and as representations on Zoroastrian and Buddhist funeral chests from Tok-kala (Grenet, 1984:pl.XLIV(a)(b), XLVII(a)(b); Frumkin:73, fig. 14; 101, fig. 24). The Panjikent paintings, which

⁷⁸ Hepper suggests a number of possible red wild flowers native to Iran and Afghanistan, *personal communication*, Dec. 1997.

depict acts of self mutilation similar to the Phoenician ritual lamentations for Adonis led, initially, to their identification as the Soghdian mourning of Siyawush (D'yakanov, 1951; Frumkin:72-3). However, more recent research has revealed that the paintings in question are more likely to represent the Greek version of this myth, the death of Persephone and the mourning of Demeter (Burket:159-61; D'yakanov, 1951; Roux:93),⁷⁹ a myth also portrayed on a Graeco-Bactrian plaster medallion excavated from Begram.⁸⁰ Parallels between Siyawush and this myth can be taken a stage further since one of the Demeter mystery rituals required blood to be drawn from a man's throat and ritual floggings (Burket:149-53).⁸¹ It may be that the mysteries of Demeter and Persephone were one of a number of similar mourning traditions of which the lamentation of Siyawush was but the most indigenous Iranian expression. Different celebrations drawn from diverse religious traditions may well have existed side-by-side and been celebrated at different venues according to the religious proclivities and cultural background of the participants (see Marshak & Raspopova, 1997). Given the duality implicit in the Adonis myth, of suffering and love, these spring ceremonies had both a sad and a happy aspect, similar to the *tristia* and *hilaria* tradition associated with Attis and Agdistis. This would be one explanation for why, before dawn on Nauroz, the people of Bukhara took part in mourning rituals at the shrine of Siyawush yet appear to have also celebrated the joys of the Persian Nauroz on the same day.

The mourning tradition for Siyawush survived well into the Islamic era in Central Asia, as attested by Narshafkhi, and the detailed version of the saga recorded by Firdowsi (d. 416/1035) which was composed some years after Nar-

⁷⁹ Prof. N. Sims-Williams, lecture, Royal Asiatic Society, 8 May 1996; F. Grenet, F, *Résumé*, 1996/7.

⁸⁰ Personal inspection of recovered item in possession of Society for the Preservation of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage, Islamabad, autumn 1996.

⁸¹ The punishment inflicted on Iphigeneia and Orestes for the theft of the goddess' statue.

sharkhi wrote his history.⁸² Undoubtedly, the story as we have it in the *Shahnama* is the version familiar to the population of Balkh, Bukhara and Khwarazm. Narsharkhi does not specifically mention the *lala* or other red flowering wild plants nor, indeed, the *khun-i siyawush*, as playing any part in the New Year rituals surrounding the death of Siyawush. However, Firdowsi makes it quite clear that this symbolism, and a plant, bush or suchlike, was an essential part of the saga. A recent study of the Panjikent paintings has revealed convincing iconographic evidence that the 'tulip' played an important part in the Nauroz celebrations in Soghdia. At the same time, the festival is directly associated with the goddess Anahita in the paintings. In a Sasanian seal this goddess is even depicted holding a 'tulip' (Marshak & Raspopova, 1997). Furthermore, it is hard not to identify the decorating of poplar and other poles, trees and branches with red *lala*, which Peshchereva noted at the Isfara 'Tulip' Festival, as being inspired, at least in part, by the legend of Siyawush. The 'tulip' adorned trees being physical representations of the bloody tree which, according to the legend, sprung out of the desert where his innocent blood had been shed. This fits in well with the fact that the most important shrine of the Isfara festival was that of Khwaja Takrut, the dismembered saint, whose blood is represented by the *lala* which spring up around his tomb (Peshchereva, 1963:216-8).

This same association is found in *Vis and Ramin*, a romance of Parthian⁸³ origin which originally existed in ballad form until it was finally written down in the middle of the eleventh century AD (Minorsky, 1943-6:741). The story appears to

⁸² Firdowsi claimed that he based his 'history' on a written composite translation from Pahlavi texts commissioned by Abu Mansur 'Abd al-Razzaq, governor of Tus. However, scholars have recently questioned this claim as being an invention of Firdowsi to provide authentication for his work which was more likely to have drawn on an oral tradition of heroic poetry and balladry of considerable antiquity, see Davis (1996).

⁸³ The Parthians ruled the Iranian lands for some five centuries from ca. 247 BC to AD 224 (Minorsky, 1947-8:24).

have been extremely popular throughout the region with storytellers and bards during Nauroz, for Gurgani's commission to record it came from the Saljuq governor of Isfahan after he had heard extracts of it being narrated during this season in the bazaar (Gurgani, 1972:xi; Minorsky, 1943-6:742-4). Indeed, the whole drama of this romance is played out with spring time as the seasonal backdrop (Minorsky, 1943-6:745).⁸⁴

Ramin, younger brother of king Moubad of Merv, is brought up together as a child with Vis, the daughter of Shahru, queen of Mah, and shares the same wet nurse, thus making them tantamount to brother and sister. Yet, at the same time, the two children are representatives of mutually hostile dynasties. As they mature, the two children are separated and Vis' mother betrothes her daughter to her son, Viru, despite having previously sworn to marry her to King Moubad. On Vis' wedding day, a half brother of the King of Merv, Zard, arrives and demands that Shahru fulfil her vow and hand over Vis. Shahru refuses and war breaks out between the Queen Shahru and King Moubad. Eventually, Moubad kidnaps Vis, brings her to Merv and forces her into marriage. Ramin, however, catches a glimpse of her and falls in love with his old playmate. Once back in Merv, Vis' nurse, a sorceress, places a spell on Moubad and renders him impotent. Meanwhile, *Vis and Ramin* consummate their union.

Moubad eventually becomes suspicious and imprisons Vis in the impregnable fortress of 'Cave of the Demons'⁸⁵ situated on a high mountain in Gharchistan, east of Herat. Ramin, sick with love, sets out to find her and eventually locates her

⁸⁴ Numerous references to *naubahar* and *bahar* occur and most of the major events surrounding the two lovers are said to take place during this season. cf. *VR*, 9, 19, 30-31, 72, 86, 107, 214-15 (Morrison's English translation). Despite these references Marshak & Raspopova (p. 203) claim that the custom of wearing garlands of 'tulips' (*lala*) in the romance has nothing to do with Nauroz "since spring begins in the ninth month, Adhar."

⁸⁵ *Ishkāf-i Dēvān*.

place of incarceration. He scales the walls and spends the next nine months in her company whilst Moubad is away fighting a war. Moubad, however, eventually hears what has taken place and marches on the fortress, but Ramin, informed of his approach, escapes with the help of Vis' nurse who lets him down from the walls. Vis is then brought back to Merv where she again sees Ramin and after an attempt by Moubad to assassinate him, Ramin asks to be appointed as General in Mah. Here he meets Gul, a Parthian princess, but eventually his love for Vis draws him back to her and together they plot to overthrow Moubad. Just before the battle, however, Moubad is attacked by a boar and is gored to death.⁸⁶ Vis and Ramin then return to Merv where they become king and queen (cf. Curtis:62-5; Gurgani, 1972; Minorsky, 1943-6:745-53).

In the opening section which sets the scene for the meeting of the two lovers, a New Year's festival is held in meadows near Merv which are full of spring flowers, prominent amongst which are the *lala* ('tulip') and the rose. That the *lala* in question is red is clear from the allusion a few lines above where it is said "there were two kinds of tulip in the face of the lover, from beauty and from the cup."⁸⁷ In describing this Nauroz *mela*, it is said that "everyone had a crown of tulips (*lala*) on his head" (Gurgani, 1972:20).⁸⁸ In other words, 'tulip' is probably a misnomer, the flower in question being more likely one similar to the Balkh poppy or the Isfara *lala*. The symbolism of these coronets of red flowers is not explained in the poem, though they could have represented the regal crown or aura of the kings of the area.⁸⁹ This self-same custom appears to have been perpetuated into the early decades of this century at the Isfara 'Tulip' Festival (Peshchereva,

⁸⁶ Cf. the Phoenician myth of Adonis who was mortally wounded by a wild boar.

⁸⁷ *ba rūi dōst bar dū gūna lāla/ba tār rā az bukūniwa z piyāla, VR, 29.*

⁸⁸ *'z lāla har kasī rā bar sar-i afsar, VR, 30.*

⁸⁹ Cf. the allusion to Khusrau's crown in Rabi'a Balkhi's poem, *Balkh Spring*.

1963:216) and may well have been once part of the Gul-i Surkh tradition at Mazar-i Sharif, for in the ballad, *Sail-i Gul-i Surkh*, pilgrims at the shrine of 'Ali are said to wear a red rose or flower about their persons.⁹⁰

Vis and Ramin, too, has other features in common with the Adonis-Siyawush myth. Vis' nurse, attempting to persuade Ramin of the impossibility of he and Vis ever being able to unite, says that such an event will happen only when he has the power to "make tulips (*lala*) blossom from the face of a rock" (Gurgani, 1972:81).⁹¹ Ramin, far from enjoying Nauroz, wanders heartbroken for his beloved, singing sad songs and shedding "bloodstained tears" (Gurgani, 1972:73) and prophesies that because of Vis' imprisonment, the rivers flowing from the Ghur mountains will be turned to blood (Gurgani, 1972:184-5).⁹² Given the setting of the story around the spring, such allusions may well draw on the imagery of the saga of Adonis/Siyawush. Nauroz and spring in *Vis and Ramin*, as in the ballad *Mullah Muhammad Jan*, are thus not just the season of love, but a time of suffering and sorrow too, exemplified by the tragedy of the parted lovers, a tradition which runs deep in mediaeval Persian poetry.⁹³ The same dualism can be seen in the life of the poetess, Rabi'a Balkhi, whose poem, *Balkh Spring*, with its imagery of red roses and poppies, has been cited above (chap. 5). Not only is Rabi'a famous for her poetry, but Farid al-Din 'Attar records details of her life which mingles love, tragedy and images of red flowers (Ishaque, 1950). The narrative of Rabi'a's tragic romance, which probably mingles ancient traditions of tragic ro-

⁹⁰ *gul bā jānim*.

⁹¹ *z rūi sang lāla shukufāni*, VR, 117.

⁹² *'z kōh-i ghūr gar āb-i tū zāyadlba jāi-yi āb zin pas khūn namāyid*, VR, 267-8.

⁹³ Several works entitled *Gul wa Nauroz*, were composed in the 14th/15th century such as the *Diwan* of Lutfi, who died in Herat in AD 1465/6. A narrative poem of the same title was composed by the Persian poet Jalal Tabib in AD 1333, which is built around the trials and tribulations of two other distracted lovers, *Great Soviet Encyclopaedia*, 15, 193(c).

mance and elements of historical biography, is still a favourite theme of storytellers in northern Afghanistan.⁹⁴

According to 'Attar, Ka'b, amir of Balkh, had a son named Haris and a daughter called Rabi'a, known as Zain al-'Arab on account of her beauty. When dying, the amir left his daughter in the charge of Haris, who had a handsome slave named Biktash (Ishaque:1-2), who, from his name, is clearly of Turkish origin (see also, N. H. Dupree,1967:77). Rabi'a conceived a deep passion for this slave, communicated her love through a maid servant and found that her love was reciprocated. A clandestine correspondence ensued which 'Attar and other mystics try to explain away as a platonic allegory (Ishaque, 2,8), but her love affair can be clearly seen to draw on the same ancient and preIslamic tradition out of which emerged the romances of *Laila and Majnun* and *Vis and Ramin*.⁹⁵ Oral tradition current today in Afghanistan, states that as a sign of his love and fidelity, Bektash gave Rabi'a a red rose (N.H. Dupree,1967:77). Through a combination of circumstances, her letters to Bektash are discovered and handed over to Haris who falls into a terrible rage and forbids the liaison on pain of death. Rabi'a, however, defies her brother's wishes and in retaliation he orders a barber to slash the arteries in her wrists, has her thrown into a hot bath (*hammam*) sealing the door and windows on her to prevent all chance of escape. As she was dying, she is said to have

⁹⁴ There are numerous ancient oral romances of considerable antiquity which are very popular amongst the population of Afghanistan and probably originate from the same cultural ethos. Perhaps two of the most well known are the stories of *Saif al-Muluk and Badrul Jamal* ('Ali 1969:1144-138) and *The Lovers of Dilaram*, which have many features common to the more well-known stories of Laila and Majnun, etc. *The Lovers of Dilaram*, for example, concerns the woodcutter Khadi, and his lover Bibo, and is set unapologetically in the context of pre-Islamic (Zoroastrian) Sistan around the settlements of Dilaram ('lover') and Gulistan ('rose garden') ('Ali 1969:115-133). Shrines to these two doomed lovers still exist in the villages of these names.

⁹⁵ Ishaque, on the basis of his study of her seven surviving poems, concludes that "five are erotic and two are nature poems," though, as we argue above, at least one of the two nature poems contains subliminal references to erotic love as well. Summing up her work, Ishaque (p. 8) remarks, "Though according to the unanimous testimony of the saints, Rabi'ah was a mystic, her poetry betrays no elements from which we can pronounce her to be a mystic poet."

written a moving poem about love's agony, in her own blood on the wall of the bath (N. H. Dupree, 1967:77-8; Ishaque, 2).⁹⁶ Bektash, hearing of the barbaric way in which Rabi'a's brother had slaughtered his beloved, seizes a convenient opportunity to decapitate his enemy and then, like Majnun, goes to the grave of his beloved where he commits suicide by plunging his dagger into his own breast (Ishaque, 2). We can see how, in this myth, the rose is again used to represent the female, Aphrodite, aspect of tragic love, a symbol which, though absent from the saga of Siyawush, is clearly an important part of the culture of the Balkh area at the time of Narsharkhi and Firdowsi.

The Sufi as the Lover is, of course, a common image in mystical poetry and Sufistic treatises exploit the symbolic ambiguities of the rose, juxtaposed with the nightingale, to the full (cf. Schimmel, 1975:287-343). In Armenian Christianity the same symbols have been incorporated into Orthodox imagery, the nightingale becoming the symbol of the Holy Spirit which sings to Mary, the rose (Russell, 1992:65). In a *Qasida*⁹⁷ of the twelfth century Persian poet Qiwami, the rose's beautiful petals and its fragrance are juxtaposed with an image of bloodshed and pain as the thorny stem pierces the lover's body (Browne, ii:71).⁹⁸ Al-Muqaddisi (d. 679/1280) in his, *Revelation of the Secrets of the Birds and Flowers*, merges the Zoroastrian tradition, which allocates individual flowers and birds as familiars of particular deities, with the Aphrodite one.⁹⁹ In the process he transforms the

⁹⁶ An English translation of this quartain is given by N. H. Dupree (pp. 77-8), for the Persian see Ishaque (pp 4-5) which is probably the poem alluded to by Nancy Dupree.

⁹⁷ lines 76-82 in particular.

⁹⁸ *man wa zulfin-i ū nigūnsārim, lik ū bar gul ast wa man bar khār* (based on Browne's transliteration of the poem). Al-Nadim, *Fihrist*, i:320-1, records that the historian, Ibn Abi Tahir (20/819-94/280), son of a family of government employees from Khurasan, wrote a work called "The Glory of the Rose and the Narcissus," though he does not elaborate on the subject of the treatise.

⁹⁹ A similar process of adaptation of ancient symbolism took place in Armenian, see *The Teaching of St. Gregory*, 641-60, where individual flowers and birds are transformed into symbols of the resurrection of Christ and the dead.

ancient dualistic image of love and suffering into a parable of the Sufi's struggle for the One. The rose is the "guest who comes between winter and summer" which wears "both the colour of the mistress and the garb of the mystic who is a lover." The rose complains about its sufferings and asks why it has to endure:

... the harshness of fate which brings me only bitterness, so that whenever I open a bud thorns encircle me and press me from all sides? These prickly stings and sharp arrows wound me, shedding my blood on my petals, to stain them vermilion ... I am plucked by the hand of the Nazarines and taken from amidst the flowers to the imprisonment of a vase: then my body turns to water and my heart is burned; my flesh is torn and my strength is sapped; my tears fall, yet no one stops them, no one feels pity. My body falls prey to the ardour of fire, my tears themselves drown, my heart is distressed. The moisture I make is a token of the torments I endure by fire. Those consumed by a burning heat receive from my essence a lightening of their pain and those troubled by desire are grateful to breathe my musk-like scent.¹⁰⁰

His allegory of the anemone (*al-shaqīq*), however, is far more ambivalent, perhaps because, in Arabic, this flower is much more closely linked, both semantically and culturally, with the Adonis cult, and al-Muqaddisi, whilst exploiting the ancient symbolism, wished to distance himself from its idolatrous associations. Thus, whilst the symbol of the anemone as blood is preserved, as is its association with lamentation, the religious symbolism is stood on its head. The *shaqiq* is the hypocrite "whose soul harbours vileness; outwardly, his merits deserve lauding to the skies, inwardly he is but nothing." Its leaves are "branded by its petals' blood-red tint," and the ancient image of mourning is transformed into the wailing of the hypocrites "sunk in sorrow at the scorn of their divine friend" and who are urged to "lament their pain and shed countless tears."¹⁰¹ Could it be that this transformation was an indirect attack on the excesses of the Dumuzi mourning ceremonies of pre-Islamic times?

As in the tradition of early Christian martyrology, Islamic hagiography, too, borrowed directly from the same Near Eastern passion myths. This is vividly por-

¹⁰⁰ al-Muqaddisi, *Revelations*, 11 (Hoare & Gayle).

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, 27.

trayed in the death of the most famous of all Islamic martyr-mystics, al-Hallaj, who was executed for heresy and blasphemy in 310/922. Al-Hallaj was born in Fars, a region which was still steeped in Zoroastrianism. He later moved to Basra but opposition to his controversial declaration, 'I am the Absolute Truth' (*ana' l-Haqq*), forced him to leave and he spent many years travelling in Khurasan, Transoxiana and Northern India where some suggest he may have been influenced by Manichaeism, Hinduism and other pre-Islamic traditions (Browne, i:430-1, 434-5; Schimmel, 1975:66-8). On his return to Iraq, he was eventually arrested and condemned to death for blasphemy by the Caliph al-Muqtadir.

Hallaj's death is depicted in terms reminiscent of the slaughter of Siyawush, both in terms of its barbarism,¹⁰² his steadfast courage in the face of death, and a refusal to compromise principles. So much so, that his death is referred to as a "passion" rather than mere martyrdom (Massignon, 1922; Schimmel, 1975:68-9).¹⁰³ During his tortures Hallaj wiped his own blood over his face declaring, "the cosmetic of heroes is their blood ... the ablution is not perfect unless performed with blood."¹⁰⁴ One source records that as Hallaj walked to the execution ground the crowd stoned him, but his friend and close associate, Shibli, threw a rose instead. This action is said to have drawn a sigh from al-Hallaj who declared, "they do not know what they do, but he should have known it," apparently interpreting the act as sign that his friend had, in some way, joined with his enemies (Massignon, i:454-5). Attar,¹⁰⁵ on the other hand, records that Shibli cast a clod of earth.¹⁰⁶ More likely Shibli, aware of the mystical symbolism of the rose for Sufis

¹⁰² He was first scourged, then his hands and feet were cut off, finally his head removed from his body, his corpse burnt and the ashes thrown into the Tigris (Browne, i:4290-30; Schimmel, 1975:69).

¹⁰³ Attar, *Tadhkirat-i Auliya'*, 266 (Arberry).

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 270.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 269.

¹⁰⁶ This story, and indeed much of the symbolism associated with Hallaj's death as recorded by Attar and other mystics, is certainly a much latter addition to the bare historical facts of Hallaj's

and its ancient association with both divine love and the passion of martyrs and gods, sought to show his identity with Hallaj in a discrete way which would not condemn him to the gallows too.¹⁰⁷ Schimmel (1978:69) states that this gave rise to the well-known Turkish proverb, "the rose, thrown by a friend, hurts more than any stone." Pir Sultan Abdal, a Turkish Bektashi Sufi who was also executed in 1560 in Sivas, makes reference to the same act by Shibli in one of his poems (Schimmel, 1978:338).¹⁰⁸

Rabi'a Balkhi's tragic romance and death is mirrored in her ode, *Balkh Spring* (see ۴۴.۱۳۷۳). The poem combines the image of the red rose (*gul*) and the *lala* in the context of spring, probably inspired by this season in her presumed home town of Balkh. In the ode, the dew is said to assume the blood-red colour of wine as it distills in the scarlet cup of the *lala*, which, as we have seen, is more likely to be a poppy or a similar genus of flower, rather than the tulip. This image is very close to ones used in *Vis and Ramin*, where the *lala* is both the red blood which fires the lover's cheeks and the wine in the cup.¹⁰⁹ The rose, too, is mentioned, its colour being that of the blushing cheeks of Laila, the beloved of Majnun. Though such an allusion to these famous lovers is conventional in Persian poetry, the metaphor

death. Al-Tabari, *Ta'rikh*, xxxvii:199-200, whose account is much more contemporary, makes no mention of such occurrences.

¹⁰⁷ Al-Shibli was held in high respect as a Sufi and earns an entry in Attar's *Tadhkirat* (pp. 278-86) which would suggest that his action was a mystical sign between the two men which the others around would fail to understand. Even amongst Sufis, who are known to disguise their true character and teaching by contradictory and even bizarre statements and actions, Shibli was considered eccentric. Shibli was from Khurasan and a close associate and friend of Christians, one of whom is said to have accompanied him on Hajj. Since Hallaj was crucified, perhaps Shibli was using the rose to symbolise that he, like Christ, was dying for the sins of others. Christ as the rose is, of course, a common image in western Christianity, as we have already noted above in the Armenian context and a tradition which surely derives from the same Near Eastern source. Shibli, when dying, refused to utter the customary *shahada* confession, despite being urged by those around him.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Menemencioğlu's translation of a poem by Abdal in which a "lout" enters the garden and tears the rose from its stem, a symbol of martyrdom and death, *Penguin Book of Turkish Verse*, 1978, p. 135.

¹⁰⁹ Amir Mu'izz's (d. 542/1147-8), poet laureate to the Saljuq ruler, Sultan Sanjar, draws on the same tradition when he compares the eye to the *lala* since it is a "blood-drinker" is "bloodthirsty," inasmuch as its glance "wounds the hearts of lovers" (Browne, ii:329).

takes on a much deeper and sombre meaning. The red of the rose and *lala* symbolises both natural and physical beauty, as well as alludes indirectly to the bloody end suffered by the "death-marked"¹¹⁰ lovers, Laila and Majnun and to Rabi'a Balkhi's own tragic end. Indeed, there are a number of interesting parallels between the two romances. Like Rabi'a Balkhi's slave lover, Majnun becomes mad¹¹¹ with love for Laila, the daughter of a local king, but she is eventually forced by her father to marry another man. Laila finally despairs and kills herself whilst Majnun, hearing of her suicide, comes to her grave to mourn where he dies of a broken heart (Browne, ii:406-8).¹¹² This allusion to the rose in *Balkh Spring* is made even more poignant when one remembers that oral tradition states that Rabi'a Balkhi's bitter-sweet love is distilled in the image of the rose which was given to her by her slave lover, Bektash. Perhaps, by including what, superficially, may seem to be a mere conventional metaphor about Laila and Majnun, Rabi'a alludes indirectly to her own secret passion for Bektash and the pain and sorrow which is sure to follow from such a liaison. According to 'Attar, many of her poems were written specifically for her lover. Laila, too, has an indirect link to Gul-i Surkh through the *melas* which take place during the forty days of Gul-i Surkh in the *dasht* named after her near Shibarghan. This wilderness is renowned for its wild flowers and, particularly, the Balkh poppy.

Khusrau II (AD 579-90), the archetypal Zoroastrian ruler, and his crown, is another element in the ambivalent symbolism of *Balkh Spring*. The crown represents the regal splendour, blessing and bounty (*khwarnah*) bestowed on the Shah by Ahura Mazda (Boyce, 1975, i:103-5). We have seen in *Vis and Ramin* that it

¹¹⁰ *Romeo and Juliet*, preface.

¹¹¹ *majnun* means 'mad' in the sense of distracted as a result of unrequited love.

¹¹² See, J. Atkinson, 1894, *The Loves of Laila and Majnun*, London, a poetic translation of Nizami's (d. 599/1202-3) famous work. Al-Nadim, *Fihrist*, ii:719, 723 mentions it along with other stories of 'passionate lovers' which came from the pre-Islamic past.

was customary to wear a crown of 'tulips' during Nauroz, whilst in the account of the death of the Syrian martyr, Anahit, the 'crown' seen in her vision is that of the martyr's. The *Teaching of St. Gregory*, on the other hand, referring to Isaiah 62:3-4, claims the spring flowers as types of the resurrection and calls them "crowns ... for the joy of the worthy."¹¹³ At the same time, the reference alludes to another famous story of distracted and parted lovers of ancient Iran, that of *Khusrau and Shirin* (Browne, ii:404-6; Curtis:65-9).¹¹⁴

Another Adonis theme, that of vicarious passion, runs side-by-side with the imagery of the poppy, the red rose and spring in Rabi'a's poem, *Balkh Spring*. The variety and abundance of flowers is compared to Mani's magical book of flowers (*arzhang-i mani*).¹¹⁵ Mani is another prophetic figure who suffered a barbaric death, being flayed alive and finally crucified, by order of Vahram II (267-93)¹¹⁶ c. 273-76 (Lieu:109; Moffett, i:110). Indeed, Mani's passion is probably one of the models on which Sufi hagiographers drew when eulogising the passion of al-Hallaj.¹¹⁷ Manichaeism made a significant impact on Iranian and Central Asian religious and cultural life from the third century AD onwards and had certainly reached Bactra by the end of the 4th century AD, and probably earlier.¹¹⁸ An oblique

¹¹³ *The Teaching of St. Gregory*, 650.

¹¹⁴ *Khusrau and Shirin* was first written down by Firdowsi in the *Shahnama* and, in more detail, by Nizami two centuries later, that is well after the death of Rabi'a Balkhi.

¹¹⁵ *Balkh Spring*, line 1. Also called *artang-i mani*. Rabi'a alludes to Mani in another of her nature poems (Ishaque, 6-7).

¹¹⁶ OF BAHRAM.

¹¹⁷ The 'Abbasids actively persecuted Manichaean sympathisers, accusing them of disguising their true beliefs by token acceptance of Islam. Referred to as *zindiq* (pl. *zanādiqa*), this term was derived from Mazdean theology, where it was used for someone who introduced novel or allegorical interpretations of the Avesta. A Manichaean sect, founded by Sad Orhmizd, known as the *Denawars* ('The Pure Ones'), but to Muslims as *Dinawariyya*, survived in eastern Khurasan until the end of the seventh century. Lieu (pp. 8, 106-14); Massignon, *SEI*, 659-60.

¹¹⁸ Mani's famous emissary and successor, Mar Ammo, had close links with the Parthian and Soghdian royal families and when persecution broke out in Iran, Mani fled to the Kushan rulers of Bactria who operated a policy of religious tolerance, pluralism and syncretism. In the persecution which followed Mani's execution, many Manichaeans from Iran found sanctuary with the Kushans and in Soghdia and Parthia. Merv became the eastern centre of Manichaeism and amongst the various Manichaean documents which have survived, there is a letter addressed to Mar Ammo at Zamb, the modern Karki, on the Oxus, to the N.W. of Andkhui. Manichaeism survived in the

reference is also made to Eastern, or Nestorian, Christianity, a faith which established itself in Bactra as early as the latter half of the second century AD, through the work of the 'Daughters' of the Covenant' (*bath qyama*), a militant, celibate sisterhood (Mingana:5; Moffet, i:79). The Syrian martyr, Anahit, mentioned above, was a member of this Order and died more for refusing to give up her virginity than for her faith in Christ. Wine, of course, in the Christian tradition, is the supreme symbol of Christ's blood shed 'for the remission of sins', an allusion which is made more pertinent by the fact that the Christian festival which commemorates the suffering and crucifixion of Christ, that is Easter, falls during the early months of spring. Indeed, one of the curious facets of Rabi'a poetry is that, whilst early sources claim she was of Arab stock, though 'Khurasanian-ized', an examination of her surviving works, published by Ishaque, reveals that there are hardly any allusions to Islamic tradition, whereas numerous references to Biblical tradition and to Manichaeism can be found in her poetry (Ishaque:3-7).

Baldick (1990), in a study of two other early Sufi women, also called Rabi'a, argues that whilst there is historical evidence to suggest that these women actually lived, the stories of their conversion, as well as much of the literature attributed to them, were grafted onto their names subsequently by Sufi hagiographers. The stories of their conversion to Sufism, in particular, parallel the stock courtesan conversion narratives of eastern Christianity, narratives which in turn hark back to the Biblical record of the conversion of Mary Magdelene. Such courtesans would have also been minstrels and likely to be affiliated to temples of Aphrodite, Nana or other fertility goddesses of Syria or Iraq. Perhaps, too, 'Attar's story of Rabi'a Balkhi's tragic death borrows from a similar pre-Islamic tradition which we know

towns and cities either side of the Oxus well into the ninth century AD. and in Eastern Turkistan until the 13th. C and beyond (Lieu, 1992).

played an important part in the religious life of Balkh well after the arrival of Islam.

In the light of these ancient symbols and associations, the allusions to red roses, the *lala*, the suffering of parted lovers and exhortations to weep and lament in the ballad of *Mullah Muhammad Jan*, can be seen as part of the same heritage. Not only so, it provides a coherent explanation for why such motifs are so closely associated with Nauroz and, particularly, the New Year celebrations at Balkh, as far as this ballad and *Sail-i Gul-i Surkh* are concerned. Indeed, we can take this a step further, for it is evident that *Mullah Muhammad Jan* and *Vis and Ramin* share a number of other common features. Not only do they both relate the sufferings of parted lovers, the course of Mullah Muhammad Jan's love for 'A'isha closely parallels that of his Parthian predecessor. Both romances existed originally in ballad form and have a particularly close association with 'Nauroz', or rather, Gul-i Surkh, though, probably, even this name is not the name by which the festival of the Balkh poppy and rose was originally known. The lovers in both cases are brought up together like brother and sister, are separated at puberty, and then meet again some years later and fall in love. The two women are married or betrothed to other men against their will. In *Vis and Ramin* the nurse plays a crucial rôle as a go-between and in trying to reunite the lovers, whilst in the story of *Mullah Muhammad Jan* the nurse becomes instead a female relative of 'Ali Sher Nawa'i who facilitates the reunion of the lovers during a secret assignation in a garden.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ According to Minorsky (1943-6:742), 'Ali Sher Nawa'i, whose name is associated in popular legend with *Mullah Muhammad Jan*, was familiar with the romance of *Vis and Ramin*, for in 896/1490-1, he records that Gurgani's poem was unobtainable, but speaks of the work as being the measure of Gurgani's "perfection and discernment," which suggests that Nawa'i at least was aware of the epic, the outlines of the story and its poetic power.

Textual allusions make it clear that some of the most important events of *Vis and Ramin* take place in the mountains north-east of Herat. Vis, for example, is incarcerated in a fortress of Ishkaft-i Divan, in Ghor (Gurgani, 1972:160fff; cf. Lee, 1982:108-9 & Minorsky, 1943-6:749). If 'A'isha was originally Vis, it would make sense of the phrases, "crying out at the top of a high mountain," having "reached the pass top" and the mysterious and illicit glance cast through her window. Vis, as we have seen, was imprisoned in an inaccessible fortress which was situated on the top of an unscalable mountain at the edge of a sheer gorge (Gurgani, 1972:160ff). Could it be that *Mullah Muhammad Jan* is an Islamicised version of the ballad tradition from which Gurgani compiled *Vis and Ramin*?¹²⁰

If *Mullah Muhammad Jan*, in its original form, was sung in the context of the original Gul-i Surkh festival, one aspect of which was the mourning of Siyavush/Adonis, it would explain why there are so many references to suffering in a song ostensibly celebrating Nauroz at the shrine of Shah-i Mardan. Indeed, it is only by placing this song in the context of such a festival and the *Vis and Ramin* tradition that we can make any sense of its verses. Since the Balkh poppy and rose are symbols of Adonis and Aphrodite respectively the exhortation to weep, lament and mourn as if someone has died (refrain of Kabul version) and the mention of "afflictions ... beyond measure" are perfectly understandable, whereas this is not the case in the context of the present Nauroz festivals or the shrine of Shah-i Mardan. The same explanation explains the juxtaposition of death, suffering and spring in *Balkh Spring* and the *Isfara Nakhsh* songs.

There remains one other problem, however, and that is how the person of 'Ali b. Abi Talib came to be the focus of this ancient Gul-i Surkh festival. We have

¹²⁰ Cf. *Adam Khan and Durkhane* where a very similar romance has been placed in the context of the Yusufzayi tribe ('Ali, 1969:147-159).

seen already (chap. 4) how in the Islamic era, 'Ali assimilated aspects of Yima, or Jamshid, especially his heroic deeds and the association with flood myths and Nauroz. The Shi'a, many of whom came from Iran and the eastern empire, developed a tradition that Imam Husain, son of 'Ali, had married a captive Sasanid princess, Shahrbanu, the 'Lady of the Land'. Tradition states that she was the daughter of the last Sasanid monarch, Yazdagird III, and subsequently became the mother of Zain al-'Abidin, the fourth Imam and the only surviving son of Imam Husain (Ayoub:36; Boyce, 1967:33 & 1984:151-2; Browne, ii:280-1).¹²¹ The name, or more correctly the title, Shahrbanu, has been shown to be originally applied to the goddess Anahita. Boyce (1967) argues on the basis of her study of two active shrines near Yazd, the Zoroastrian Banu Pars ('Lady of Pars'), and Bibi Shahrbanu, venerated by the Shi'a, that both share similar stories about the daughter of Yazdagird III, and concludes that both shrines were originally dedicated to Ardivi Sura Anahita. The shrine of Banu Pars is the focus of Nauroz pilgrimage for the Zoroastrians of Yazd to this day (Boyce, 1967). One wonders if the proliferation of Zaidi Shi'i shrines and *qadamgah*^h in northern Afghanistan which took place in the Ghaznavid and Saljuq eras had not something to do with this tradition of Bibi Shahrbanu. If so, this would be another rationale for why shrines to Zain al-'Abidin and his offspring became the focus for Nauroz *mélas* and Janda Bala in northern Afghanistan.

It is, however, in Shi'i pietistic tradition surrounding the passion of Imam Husain at Karbala' and the festival of 'Ashura', where we find the Adonis/Siyawush tradition preserved almost intact (Grunebaum:89).¹²² Shi'i hagiography depicts

¹²¹ For a discussion of the authenticity of this claim and sources see Boyce (1967:33-5). 'Ali Ashgar, Zain al-'Abidin, is traditionally believed to have been the only male member of Husain and 'Ali's family to have survived the massacre at Karbala'.

¹²² Nakash (1993) argues, on the basis of similarities between the flagellation of the Shi'a and mediaeval monastic tradition, that 'Ashura' derives from Christianity, and completely ignores the

Husain, like Siyawush, foreseeing his death and yet still choosing martyrdom “voluntarily and unconditionally” for the salvation of the Faithful (Ayoub:122-4). His small force, like Siyawush’s, is wiped out by the enemy, leaving the Imam “totally alone” yet still showing bravery “beyond all human limitations.”¹²³ Having been repeatedly stabbed, Husain is left “naked on the sand” where he is eventually decapitated and his mutilated torso left unburied in the desert. His death precipitates the most terrible mourning amongst the women of his entourage for the man whose body was “naked under the sky, soiled with his own blood and dismembered” (Ayoub:115-9; cf. D. M. Donaldson:94). Shimr, the individual traditionally held to have decapitated the Imam, is characterised as a latter-day Gurwi, being the most evil individual imaginable. His action of beheading the Imam is portrayed in the hagiographies, quite unhistorically, as the epitome of cruel vindictiveness. Shimr is said to have knelt on the breast of the Imam and reviled him, then “turned the *Imam* over on his face, and slew him from the back of the neck” (Ayoub:127).

All the prophets of Islam, from Adam onwards, are said to have mourned on the field of Karbala’ and many of them shed their own blood on the sacred field (Ayoub:27-36; D.M. Donaldson:95). God, informing Adam of the future death of Husain, is said to have said the Imam would be “slain like a lamb, from the back of the neck” (Ayoub:28), a phrase reminiscent of Gurwi’s slaughter of Siyawush, from behind, “like a sheep.” Adam, having been expelled from Eden, cut his foot on a stone at the spot and his blood poured from the wound. Noah’s Ark passed over Karbala’ on the day of ‘Ashura’, causing Noah to mourn and weep. Abra-

rituals of self-mutilation and extravagant mourning which we know to have taken place in the ancient Near East during the Dumuzi and Adonis rites. Nor does he mention the Iranian custom of mourning for Siyawush as a paradigm for this Shi’i tradition.

¹²³ Cf. the martyrdom of Vardan Mamikonean at the Battle of Avarayr, discussed above.

ham is said to have wished he could have slain his own son “so his heart might experience the grief of a father who slays his own son” and thus participate more in the suffering of the Imam. Abraham is said to have shed his blood here after hitting his head on a rock following a fall from his horse (Ayoub:32-3).

Shi'i tradition relates, as does the *Shahnama* concerning the death of Siyawush, that when Husain died “the heavens darkened and the sun was eclipsed” (Ayoub:130), whilst the poet Abu'l-'Ala al-Ma'arri compares the red of the sunrise and sunset to the blood of 'Ali and Husain respectively (Goldziher, 1971, ii:301). Other traditions state that the redness at sunset was not known until that day when Husain threw his blood to the sky and that it rained blood *for forty days* (in some traditions six months) after the Imam's death (Ayoub:131, 145). This blood is regarded by some as the actual tears shed by celestial beings for Husain (Ayoub:130-1; cf. Goldziher, 1971, ii:301). So too, in the Adonis myth, the dying lover's tears are transformed ^{to} in the scarlet anemone. The blood of the Imam is said to have had miraculous properties, both healing those who mourn his death and judging those who caused it (Ayoub:132). The dust of his shrine is said to possess miraculous powers when eaten, for it is like eating the blood of the Imam (D.M. Donaldson:89-90).

The passion of Imam Husain is commemorated by the 'Ashura' festival, held during the first ten days of Muharram, which in the Arabian lunar calendar is the first month of the Muslim year, in the same way that the mourning for Siyawush took place on the first day of the Soghdian Nauroz (Curtis:74-5; cf. Grunebaum:55-6). This identification runs even deeper in early Islamic history. When the Caliph 'Umar decided to introduce dating on the basis of a specifically Muslim era, because the calendar was already fixed by the Qur'an it was decided

not to make the first day of year, 1 Hijra, coincide with the actual day of the migration from Mecca to Medina. Instead, the day in the year AD 622 which coincided with 1 Muharram was used. In the Seleucid calendar, this equated with 16 Tammuz, the month in which the period of mourning for Dumuzi/Adonis took place.¹²⁴ The first day of the new Islamic era thus, ironically, coincided with a month which was dedicated to the mourning of Adonis.

Muharram is a period of deep mourning for Shi'is throughout the world, culminating, on the 10 Muharram, in the well-known rituals of self-flagellation, extravagant lamentation and the *ta'ziya* passion play, in which the passion of Husain is re-enacted (Ayoub:148-58; Nakash, 1993). An important element in the 'A-shura' rituals is the use of lamentation poetry and sacred song, another tradition which it has in common with the mourning of Siyawush and Adonis. Indeed, Muharram poetry uses the same imagery to describe the passion of Husain. At the beginning of this century Lassy recorded the following Muharram song in praise of Imam Husain amongst the Shi'a of Azerbaijan:

*Thou, my beloved brother, fell to this woeful ground
A garland of bloody tulips opened on thy handsome shape (Lassy:96)¹²⁵*

The Ottoman traveller, Evliya Chelebi, writing of the Muharram festival in Tabriz in 1640, records how men armed with razors:

...cut the arms and breasts of all loving believers, who desired to shed their blood on this day of remembrance of the blood shed by the imam; they make such deep incisions and scars that the ground appears as it was blooming with tulips (Nakash:175).

Schimmel (1994:21), states that for the Shi'a 'tulips' (*lala*) are symbolic of the blood shed by the martyrs of Karbala', and Husain in particular, the black spot at

¹²⁴ B. Carra de Vaux, 'Hidjra', *SEI*, 139.

¹²⁵ Lassy provides only a translation so one can only assume here that he is following the convention of translating *lala* as 'tulip'.

the centre of the flower being seen as representational of the suffering of the martyr's heart, burnt black by grief and pain.

Perhaps the most coherent explanation for why the imagery and tradition of Adonis-Siyawush became assimilated to the figure of Shah-i Mardan rather than Imam Husain, at least as far as Balkh is concerned, was because there was far more uncertainty about the whereabouts of the body of 'Ali b. Abi Talib than of Imam Husain. 'Ali, it should be remembered, had been assassinated and his death came to be regarded by the Shi'a as vicarious. Over the course of the centuries the Iranification of Imam Husain and Fatima also affected pietistic tradition concerning 'Ali b. Abi Talib, who is considered to be of higher rank than his son, Husain. Shi'a tradition stated that it was at Nauroz when 'Ali b. Abi Talib succeeded to the Khalifat (see, Goldziher, 1971, ii:300-1; Lassy:130), a myth which is today believed by Sunni *ishans* and worshippers at Mazar-i Sharif. This claim has no historical basis since 'Ali's election to this office is generally accepted to have taken place on 18 Zu'l-Hijja 35/17 June 656. In Zoroastrian tradition, though, Nauroz was the day when Jamshid ascended to the throne and ushered in a golden age. Some even refer to Janda Bala as 'Janda-yi Maulad-i 'Ali', that is, the Birthday of 'Ali.¹²⁶

Another Shi'i tradition emphasises 'Ali's saintly virtues and his role as the warrior-king, a kind of Islamic St. George, fighting against evil and particularly, as far as Afghanistan is concerned, slaying dragons with his fabulous sword, Zu'l-fikar. This tradition certainly incorporates elements of the Iranian sagas of Rostam (Curtis:51). In the *Shahnama*, it is Rostam who brings up Siyawush like a father brings up his son, and teaches him the arts of chivalry (Curtis:42-3; 74-6). However, there is a Shi'i tradition in which 'Ali too is said to wait "unmoved for the

¹²⁶ *Field notes*, Mazar-i Sharif, March-April 1978.

attack of the enemy.”¹²⁷ ‘Ali even acquired attributes associated with ancient nature worship, particularly thunder, lightning and rain (Goldziher, 1971, ii:301; Mélikoff:136).¹²⁸ In some areas of Anatolia, he has assimilated aspects of a solar deity, with worship being conducted at sunrise (Mélikoff:133). In the same manner the *janda* at Mazar-i Sharif, which purports to represent the banner of Shah-i Mardan, is also raised early in the morning just after dawn.

There is one Shi‘i tradition which links ‘Ali and Husain together with the symbolism of *khun-i siyawush* and Adonis. The story relates how a thorn bush in the desert had grown to great size and “exhibited other astonishing properties” after Muhammad had poured the water of his ablutions at its base. At his death, the bush cast its fruit but subsequently yielded smaller fruit. Thirty years later, it again shed its fruit and “its beauty departed” to mark the assassination of The Commander of the Faithful. But on the day of Husain’s martyrdom the bush “became perfectly dry, fresh blood sprang up under it and bloody water distilled from its leaves” (Rice:33).

The festival of Gul-i Surkh, we conclude, is the last extant celebration of an ancient spring ritual which appears to have once been common to both sides of the Amu Darya, though possibly celebrated at different times in different areas due to climatic demands and possible divergences in local versions of the Iranian calendar. Certainly, there is some evidence to believe, however, that there was some close link with the spring equinox, or Nauroz, possibly through the myth of Siyawush which merged with elements of the Babylonian *akitu* festival, the Dumuzi-Inanna and Adonis/Aphrodite myth. The Adonis myth is symbolised by two red

¹²⁷ Huart, ‘‘Ali b. Abi Tālib’, *SEI*, 30.

¹²⁸ In *Balkh Spring* Majnun is representational of the sky god whose tears, in the form of rain, fertilises the earth, whilst his blood, symbolised by the tulips, resurrects the dead soil and brings it to life, an image which subsequently became associated with ‘Ali and the shrine at Mazar.

flowers, the rose and the scarlet anemone, which represent the female and the male aspects of love and suffering. So too, with Gul-i Surkh we find the rose and a wild red flower, the *lala* performing the same symbolic role in the folk songs of this and the 'Tulip' Festival in Isfara. In both cases, the rose appears to represent the feminine aspect of the passion myth, the red *lala* being symbolic of the blood of the dying god/hero.

In the case of the Oxus basin, however, the Adonis myth was adapted and assimilated to the semi-divine Persian figure of Siyawush, whose blood, shed in the desert, brought forth a plant or tree. Ritual mourning for the Iranian peoples of the area, at least as far as the spring equinox is concerned, was probably thus focused on Siyawush though this would not preclude a further period of mourning in the summer, which might have been more specific to Dumuzi/Adonis or the Demeter-Persephone mystery.

Given the fact that both Bukhara and Balkh are closely connected with the saga of Siyawush in the *Shahnama*, there is at least a possibility that there were rival shrines to Siyawush in the two cities, which reflected the ancient Iran/Turan rivalry which is one of the major themes of Firdowsi's epic and the saga of Siyawush and Afrasiyab.

Following the Islamic conquests, elements of the Adonis myth was incorporated into the emerging Shi'i passion myths surrounding Imam Husain, whilst Bibi Fatima assimilated aspects of the character, function and titles of Anahita. Since the Imams are all believed to have died a martyr's death, we find that another element of ancient Persian culture, the death of the *jawanmard*, Siyawush, became grafted into these passion stories. As Islam gradually ousted all other faiths, a more Islamic focus for the Gul-i Surkh festival was required, which was provided

by the convenient discovery of the grave of the neo-Iranian Islamic *jawanmard*, 'Ali b. Abi Talib at a site near Balkh, which may well have been a former religious site associated with Siyawush and/or Zoroaster.

Today, little remains of the original customs and traditions in the only surviving example of Gul-i Surkh at Mazar-i Sharif. However, we can still detect memories of ancient rites in the belief that the Balkh poppies of the deserts around Mazar-i Sharif blossom ^{because of} the prayers of Khwaja Alwan, and in the shrine of Mirzrab Pahlawan in Shibarghan, the only shrine in the Balkh area dedicated to a hero, as opposed to an Imam or Imamzada, where a New Year *janda* is raised on the basis that the shrine marks the spot where the *pahlawan*'s blood was shed.

CHAPTER 7

NAUROZ AND JANDA BALA

The main focus of Nauroz in Mazar-i Sharif is the elevation of the *janda* in the morning of 1 Hamal, that is, the spring equinox, the raising of which is said to be accompanied by miraculous healings. From interviews with Afghans, both inside and outside of the country, it is clear that it is this event, rather than Gul-i Surkh, which is the main reason why hundreds of thousands of pilgrims come to Mazar-i Sharif at Nauroz.

Early on the morning of 1 Hamal, around 8.00 a.m., a pole, twelve metres long, wrapped around with layers of embroidered cloth and surmounted by a silver finial and banner, is raised on the *qibla* side of the shrine, between the sanctuary and the nineteenth century mosque. It is this finial and banner which, according to the shrine's guardians, are the true *janda*, or 'standard', and not the pole. The pole is prepared the night before Nauroz and, presumably, carried into position by the *ishans* well before the crowds gather. Four lengths of rope, held by four of the shrine's shaikhs, are attached to the pole and are used to pull the pole into position and to steady it whilst it is being elevated. A well-established custom requires the ruler of Afghanistan or a senior member of the ruling elite, to inaugurate the event, which provides an opportunity to publicly affirm the government's Islamic credentials and to harangue the crowd about pertinent political issues.



PLATE 5: Raising the *janda* in the western quarter of the *rauza*, Mazar-i Sharif, Nauroz, 1978

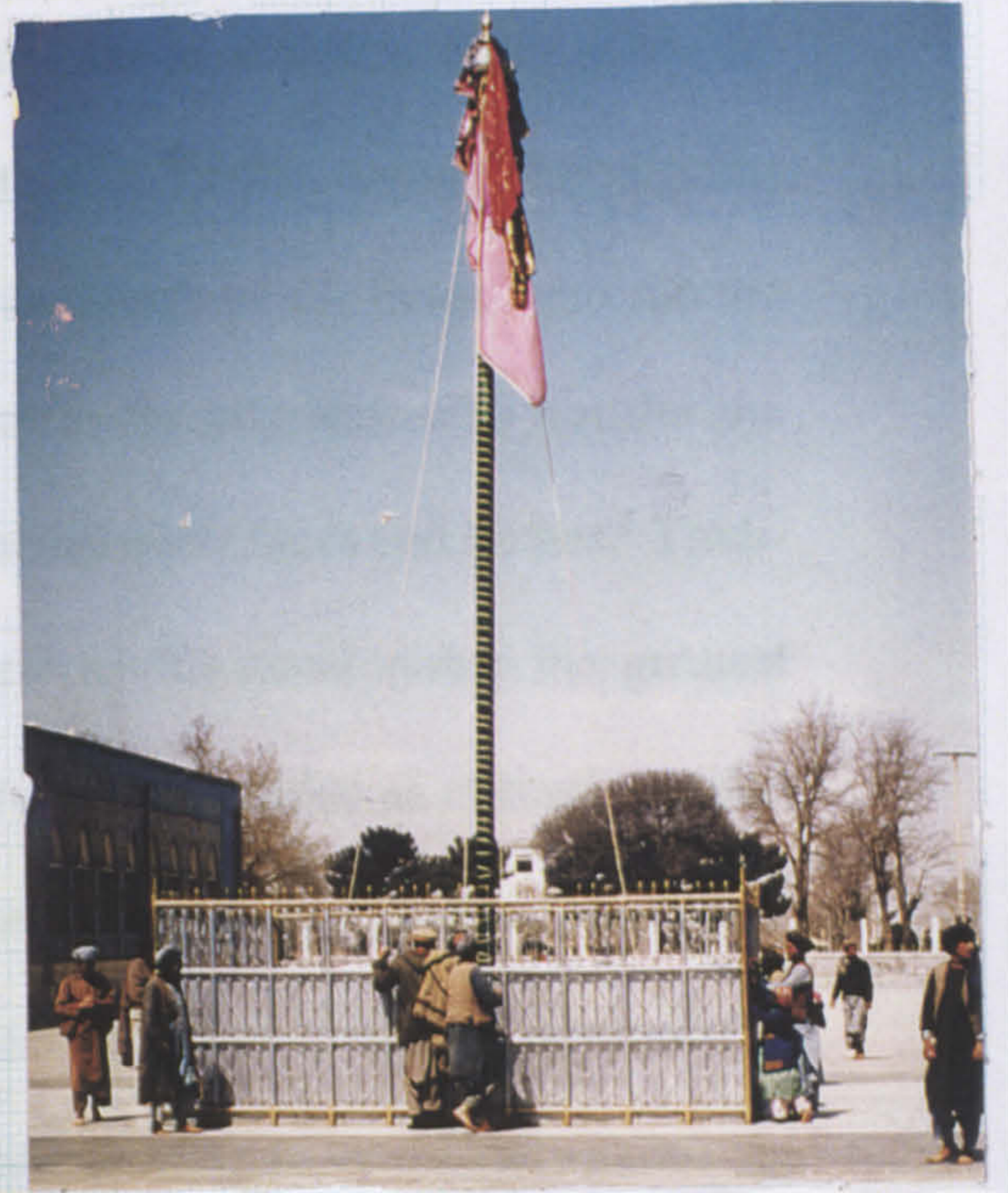


PLATE 6: The raised *janda* in western quarter of *rauza*, Mazar-i Sharif, April 1996



PLATE 7: Devotees eager for cures, surround the newly-raised *janda*. Mazar-i Sharif, Nauroz 1996



PLATE 8: The raised *janda* at the shrine of Sakhi Jan, Kabul, March 1996

After an appropriate prayer by a senior religious figure, the pole is raised. Once in position, the crowds press around the protecting fence, which is designed to prevent the *janda* from being toppled by the enthusiasm of the crowd. The pilgrims throw clothing to the guards stationed around the inside of the fence, who rub the clothing against the pole and passed them back to the pilgrims, who transfer the *baraka* to their bodies by passing the clothing across their faces and bodies.¹ Tradition asserts that the person who is first to perform this ritual stands the greatest chance of being healed. Although the *janda*'s power is regarded as efficacious until it is finally lowered forty days later, the vast majority, and greatest, of these miracles are said to occur at Nauroz. Those who are too ill to attend the ceremony in person, send a representative with a piece of their clothing to be rubbed against the pole and which is subsequently wrapped around the bedridden patient. However, the power of the *janda* is seen to be much wider than just healing the sick. All pilgrims who attend, whether sick or not, are anxious to have some personal possession touch the *janda*, whilst at Sakhi Jan in Kabul, where access to the *janda* is unrestricted, they kiss the pole and pray before it. Cloth which has come in contact with the *janda* is frequently cut into small pieces and distributed as charms² to family and close friends. The less scrupulous sell the pieces off to the needy.

In 1995 a number of individuals suffering from congenital diseases, such as blindness and lameness, had taken a vow to devote themselves to the shrine for the forty days prior to Nauroz and had taken up residence in the *chilla khana*,³ a small,

¹ *Personal observation*, Nauroz 1977; interviews with shaikhs, *ishans* and intellectuals in Mazar-i Sharif, 1992-1996.

² *tawiz*.

³ The *chilla khāna* (literally, '40-day house') is usually associated with spiritual retreat of Central Asian Sufis. In north-central Afghanistan most *khanaqas* and even some mosques contain such rooms within their walls, though in Badghis and Ghur *chilla khanas* are frequently remote caves. The adept declares his intention of undergoing the ordeal of 40 days solitary retreat and he is sealed inside the cell with a small aperture in the roof through which water and a small amount of food is passed. During his retreat, the adept undergoes spiritual initiation, part of which is said to

covered room attached to the N.E. wall of the central *haram* of the shrine which provides direct access to the tomb area and overlooks the mosque. According to the *mudiriyat* of the shrine, this facility is usually extended to selected individuals, though on what basis is unclear.

The shrine's reputation for the miraculous means that many days before Nauroz thousands of beggars, suffering from various diseases and handicaps, begin to congregate in and around the shrine, swelling the numbers of *fakirs* who regularly depend for their livelihood on the *rauza*. On the morning of Nauroz proper, hundreds of thousands of pilgrims mill around the forecourt of the shrine, hoping for a place near the *janda* and in expectation of a miracle. In the past, very little attempt was made to control the surging crowd of devotees, other than the construction of a chest-high iron railing around the securing point of the pole. On occasions this has resulted in people being trampled underfoot and, in more recent times, some elementary attempt at crowd control appears to have been introduced. In 1995/6, the numbers of people allowed into the forecourt around the *janda* was limited to government officials, tribal leaders, religious personages and other people of influence. What space was left around the *janda* had been reserved for the chronically ill and disabled. In order to prevent spurious claims to healing, a number of doctors were engaged to examine individuals who claimed to have been healed and to provide official verification, in the form of a signed certificate,⁴ that they had been truly healed. In 1995, it was said that some twelve individuals had been healed, including two men who had been blind and one who was lame. Balkh

be employing techniques to control the *jinn*. Those who fail this trial have been known to emerge from the cave or cell having lost their mind, see Utas (1980:64 and fig. 11); *Personal observation*, Langar, Badghis province, April 1994. Utas suggests that the custom of the *chilla khana* is dying out in Afghanistan but in Langar, an important and ancient centre for Sufism, it was alive and well in 1994.

⁴ Pers. *sanad*. Interview, *mudir* of shrine, spring 1996.

Television interviewed one of these individuals who had been blind, though unfortunately I was unable to obtain the video of the interview. In the same year, the *mudir* of the shrine claimed to have been healed of a war wound which had left him somewhat lame.

The *janda* seems to have particular potency for curing the terminally ill, the blind and the lame. Indeed, there is hardly anyone in Afghanistan, from the very highest social class⁵ to the most underprivileged, who does not claim to have a kinsman, or a friend, who has been healed of some disorder as a result of being present at Janda Bala. Locating people who have had their eyesight restored or found been able to walk again, however, is much more difficult and during the six years of research I was unable to find anyone who had experienced, at first hand, the miraculous to this degree. Despite this, the belief in the efficacy of Janda Bala and the *baraka* of Mazar-i Sharif is common to people of all social, racial⁶ and religious groups, including the Shi'a.

The *janda* stands for forty days, that is until the end of the festival of Gul-i Surkh, which falls on 29 Saur (usually 19 April).⁷ When it is lowered, in the evening of this day, pilgrims gather as they do on 1 Hamal, though not in such great numbers. As the pole is lowered, a melee ensues as people rip off pieces of the *janda*'s cloth for use as *tawiz*. Officials of the shrine and mosque state that this lowering ceremony can be quite dangerous. The pole is heavy and has to be lowered by means of hand-held ropes, but as soon as the *janda* comes within range of peoples'

⁵ In 1978 a member of the Tarzi clan, a descendant of Amir 'Abd al-Rahman Khan, claimed that several people whom she knew had been healed at Janda Bala, including a member of the Egyptian diplomatic corps.

⁶ In 1977 hundreds of nomadic Kuchi (Pushtun) women were present at the festival.

⁷ When Nauroz occurs in a Common Era Leap Year, such as in 1996, the date is 18 April whilst Nauroz in this CE year falls on 20 March. The date in the Afghan solar, or *shamsi*, calendar, however, remains unchanged. In Afghanistan, when there is a Leap Year (*sāl-i kabīsa*) the intercalary day is added as the 31st day of the last month, Hut, in the *shamsi* year, which falls on 20 March of the following CE year (Glassman:272).

hands the rush for the *baraka* laden cloth is such that on occasions the ropes have been torn out of the attendants' hands by the sheer weight and pressure exerted on the pole. It is not unknown for people to be seriously injured by the *janda* crashing down onto their heads. Those who do acquire fragments of the cloth, treasure them as potent protection against disease or injury whilst soldiers use the charms to ward off the misfortunes of war.⁸

The gold and silver finial, which is set on the top of the pole, is said by the Ansari *mudir* of the shrine, to be "very ancient"⁹ and it is locally believed to be a part of 'Ali's own battle standard, or possibly symbolic of it.¹⁰ During the rest of the year, this precious relic is kept secure in the inner sanctum of the shrine where, doubtless, it is an object of veneration for pilgrims.¹¹ From verbal descriptions, it would seem that it is probably Timurid, and more than likely dates from the reign of Sultan Husain Baiqara. If this is the case, then this would support the theory that the *janda* was raised at Khwaja Khairan at the time of the rediscovery, for such an item would not have been donated were not a banner of some sort being raised on the site at the time.

The mosque imam, the *ishans* and other sources reiterate the belief that if the *janda* falls, or is blown down during the forty days of Gul-i Surkh, or if it is not raised properly at Nauroz, this is a harbinger of national disaster. As an illustration of this, the imam related how, in 1977, the then Head of State, President Daud,

⁸ In May 1995 one of the soldiers at the shrine showed me a piece of cloth which he obtained during the *janda* lowering. He treasured it greatly and kept it wrapped in a handkerchief in the breast pocket of his tunic.

⁹ 'beysār qadīm'.

¹⁰ Interview, *mudir* of shrine, May 1995.

¹¹ Interviews, *mudir* and *ishans* of shrine, May 1995. I was repeatedly told that as a non-Muslim I would not be allowed to enter the innermost sanctuary, for fear that the presence of a non-Muslim might offend radical mullahs who would use it as an excuse to condemn Dostam's administration (which some religious establishment figures regard as 'communist') for permitting the violation of the sanctuary by unbelievers. As the finial was stored inside the sanctuary, I had no chance to examine it. The *mudir* promised to show it to me but never did.

presided over the raising of the *janda*. Due to a variety of circumstances, the *janda* was raised with great difficulty and only after several attempts. Those present saw this as an omen of trouble, a belief which was vindicated some six weeks later when the government was overthrown, President Daud assassinated, and a Marxist coalition, led by Nur Muhammad Taraki, took over the country. On the other hand, if it rains or snows on Nauroz, as it did in 1995 and 1996, it is a sign of good luck and promises well for the planting season and forthcoming harvest. In 1995, it was being put about by nationalist-minded Uzbek and Turkman intellectuals and members of Dostam's administration, that the New Year rain, and the various remarkable miracles which had occurred during the raising of the *janda*, were a sign of God's favour on the semi-independent north and a harbinger of peace returning to Afghanistan.

Tradition dictates that the pole used for Janda Bala be a fixed length of 12 metres, though the imam of the mosque was unable to explain satisfactorily the significance of this number.¹² Twelve, of course, is the number of Imams in Shi'i tradition. The current pole is made of two straight trunks of poplar wood, such as are used as ceiling supports in traditional flat-roofed houses in Afghanistan. The two tree trunks are held together somewhat precariously, by an iron bracket made in the local bazaar. The pole(s) were "a gift of the government of Uzbekistan" some twenty years ago, presumably when President Daud was still in power.¹³ The same pole is used over and over again until it is considered to be unsafe and is discarded. No pole, however, is ever destroyed or recycled, but is preserved in the shrine precincts. Presumably it is considered to still retain its sanctity long after it has been put to one side, and the shaikhs fear that if it is sold to the bazaar it might

¹² *Interview, imam and ishans of shrine, May 1995.*

¹³ *Interview, imam of Mazar shrine-mosque, May 1995.*

be desecrated by being used for unlawful or unholy purposes. In May 1995, four discarded poles were still lying around the shrine; three in the N.E. corner of the courtyard, and one inside the mosque where it lay alongside the one in current use. According to the mosque's imam, only five poles have been used since the days of Sultan Husain Baiqara. The three poles in the forecourt were said to be very old and an examination of them revealed that, unlike today, the poles were made from a single tree trunk. This suggests that in former times these poles were grown specially for the purpose, for poplar trees in Afghanistan are pollarded long before they reach the sort of diameter and length required for use in the *janda* ceremony. One of the poles, possibly the one used up until two decades ago, was reinforced throughout its length by a cladding of sheet iron which would have certainly added considerably to the dead weight of the pole. Like the present pole, it was two trunks joined by an iron sleeve. It had clearly split on a number of occasions and had been repeatedly repaired.¹⁴

The lengths of cloth which are wrapped around the flagpole are donated each year by individuals who prepare the material some weeks in advance of Nauroz. In any single year, several such lengths of cloth may be donated. Tradition demands that each length of cloth be 35 metres in length and of a single colour, though it is not necessary for all the coverings to be of the same colour as the others. The *imam*, however, stated that green was preferable, since it was the colour most closely associated with Islam, whilst black or red cloth was forbidden. He was, however, unable to give reasons for these prohibitions, though one suspects that in the case of black, it is an expression of the ambivalent relationship between Shi'i and Sunni regarding the shrine, black being traditionally associated with Shi'ism.¹⁵

¹⁴ *personal observation*, Mazar-i Sharif, May 1995.

¹⁵ Though the 'Abbasid flag was also black.

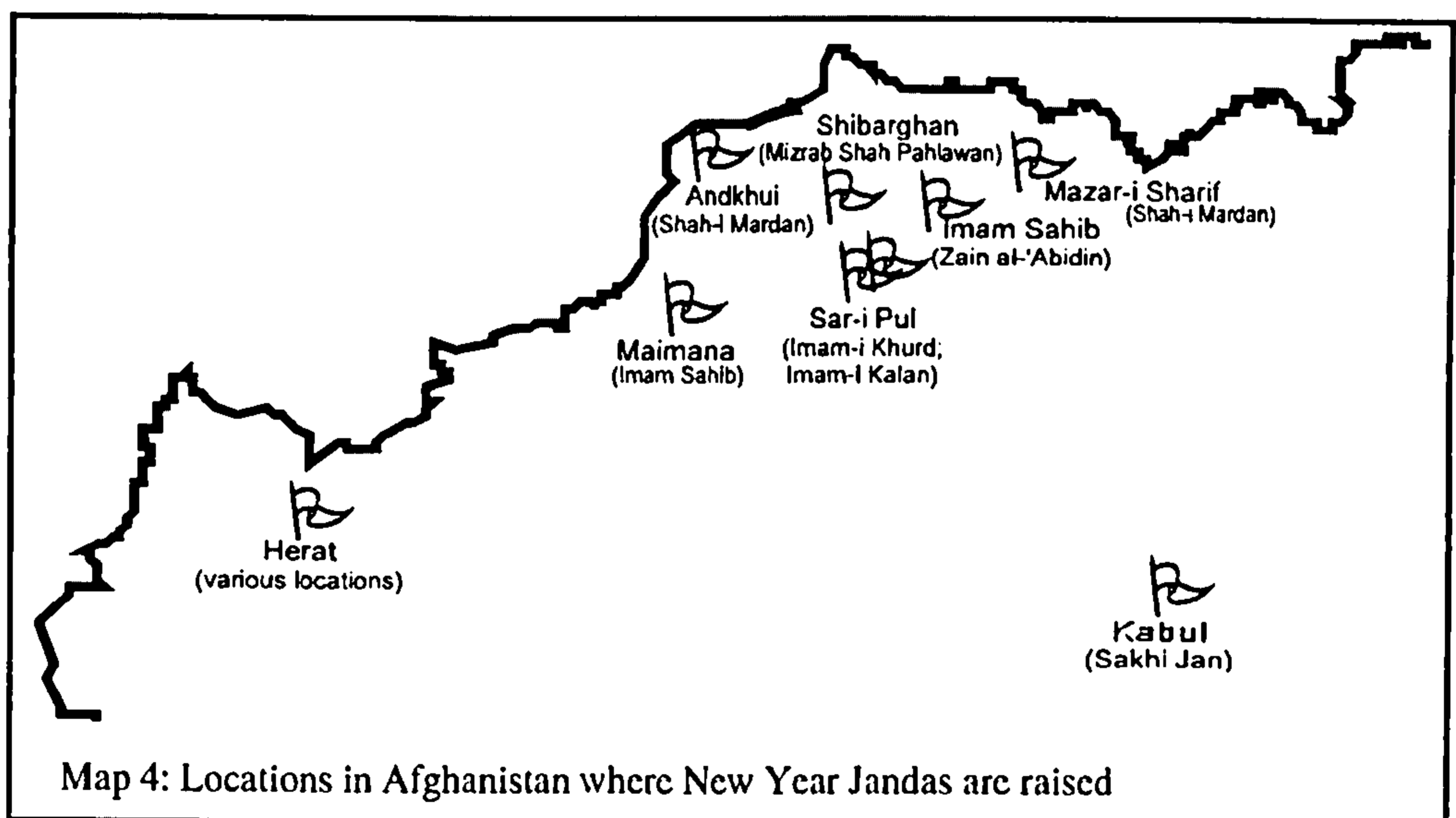
The following year, however, the cloth covering the pole was black (Plate 6) and it would seem that the *imam* was expressing an opinion of the '*ulama*', and the taboo was not taken seriously by local people or the authorities. As for the ban on red, the *imam* attributed this prejudice to the association of this colour with Communism and, by extension, the anti-Islamic stance of the various Soviet-backed Marxist governments who ruled the country from 1978-1992. This taboo, therefore, is of recent vintage and reflects the changing nature of the whole festival which can be detected over the last two hundred or so years of recorded history of these events. In 1978, when President Daud was still in power,¹⁶ the cloth of the *janda* was completely red (Plate 5) and in 1996 red and pink flags were tied to the top of the pole (Plates 6-7). Indeed, given the fact that the raising of the flagstaff marks the inauguration of Gul-i Surkh, one would expect that, traditionally, red would be the likeliest colour to be used for the banners and wraps at this ceremony.

Another aspect of the changing face of Janda Bala is the recent proliferation of copycat ceremonies at shrines associated with Shi'i Imams in other areas of Afghanistan. This development appears to have taken place over the last fifty or so years, at least as far as all but one site is concerned. Today, *janda*-raising ceremonies are performed at the shrines of Imam Sahib, Maimana, the *ziyarat*s of Imam-i Kalan and Imam-i Khurd, Sar-i Pul, at the *qadamga*^R of Zain al-'Abidin, adjacent to the grave of Baba Hatim, in Imam Sahib, Juzjan province, at Shah-i Mardan of Andkhui and at the *ziyarat* of Mizrab Shah Pahlawan in Shibarghan (Map 4).

All of these shrines, with the exception of Mizrab Shah Pahlawan, have close connections with the 'Alids. Those at Sar-i Pul are Zaidi, that of Imam-i Khurd, in

¹⁶ *Personal observation*, Mazar-i Sharif, 21 March 1978.

particular, marking the historical grave of Sayyid Yahya, son Zain al-'Abidin (see chap. 1). Imam Sahib of Maimana is associated with the Imamzada, Muhammad Baqir, grandson of the sixth Imam, Ja'far al-Sadiq,¹⁷ whilst the Imam Sahib of Aqcha is dedicated to Imam Zain al-'Abidin himself. As is the case with Mazar-i Sharif, none of these shrines are controlled by Shi'i shaikhs and the celebration of festivals such as Ashura and other Muharram rituals are strictly forbidden. In the case of Shah-i Mardan of Andkhui, the 'Alid connection, as we have seen (chap. 2), is related to the translation of the body of 'Ali b. Abi Talib and the legend of Abu Muslim.



In the majority of cases, the *janda*-raising tradition at these shrines commenced within living memory. This fact is reiterated by the shaikhs and *mutawallis* of the shrines in question as well as by knowledgeable elders and intellectuals from these places. At Imam-i Kalan, the tradition was inaugurated after the Soviet withdrawal of 1989,¹⁸ and whilst a *janda* has been raised a number of years previous to this date at the shrine of Imam-i Khurd, the shaikhs state that the custom was started

¹⁷ See Chap 1, n. 73.

¹⁸ In the spring of 1995 the shaikhs stated the custom began "within the last five years," i.e. 1990 or 1991.

within living memory.¹⁹ A similar situation obtains at Imam Sahib of Maimana according to the *mutawallis*.²⁰ However, old men at Imam Sahib of Aqcha,²¹ and Shah-i Mardan of Andkhui, claim the Janda Bala has been performed at these shrines all their lives. In the case of Shah-i Mardan, the performance of this ritual is closely linked with the Gul-i Surkh festival, for the site has, of old, been the focus of Andkhui's Nauroz *méla*.²² As such, there would seem to be a *prima facie* case to suggest that a century ago there were, at the most, only one or two sites in northern Afghanistan which raised a *janda* at Nauroz.

The pre-eminence of Mazar-i Sharif's *janda*, however, is demonstrated by the deferring of all other ceremonies at provincial shrines until after 1 Hamal. At Imam-i Khurd, the *janda* is hoisted five days after Nauroz, at Imam-i Kalan, ten days later.²³ At Imam Sahib of Maimana, the ceremony is performed between four and ten days after Nauroz.²⁴ These *jandas*, however, still remain standing at these shrines for the full forty days, with the consequence that the lowering ceremonies take place after the *janda* at Mazar-i Sharif has been brought down. The guardians and shaikhs of these provincial shrines, assert that this staggering of Janda Bala is pragmatic and has no mystical or religious significance. Rather it is an attempt to provide for people's spiritual needs at a local level in the wake of the break up of the country, the lack of security, and the fact that increased poverty resulting from hyper-inflation has meant that fewer people can afford to risk the long, dangerous and expensive journey to Mazar-i Sharif. Local shrines, with historical or mytho-

¹⁹ Interviews, *ishans* of Imam-i Khurd and Imam-i Kalan, spring 1995 & 'Abd al-Ghafar Baiyani, Sar-i Pul, May 1995.

²⁰ Interviews, *mutawallis* of Imam Sahib, July 1978; Oct. 1996 & 'Abd al-Ghafar Baiyani, May 1995.

²¹ Interview, Sayyid Hashim and family, Imam Sahib, July 1997.

²² Interviews, elders and *ishans* of Shah-i Mardan, Andkhui, April 1995.

²³ Interview, *ishans* at shrines of Imam-i Kalan and Imam-i Khurd, May 1995.

²⁴ Interviews, *mutawalli* of Imam Sahib shrine, Maimana, July 1978 ("four days after Nauroz") and October 1996 & Mir 'Alim Kokan, Maimana, Oct. 1997.

logical associations to 'Ali or the Imams, have stepped into this vacuum and now provide regionalised ceremonies which are accessible to the ordinary person. At the same time, in recognition of Mazar-i Sharif's preeminence as the Nauroz shrine *par excellence*, as well as to allow those pilgrims who can afford it to make the journey to the town, their own *janda* raising is deferred until after 1 Hamal.

In Herat, Iranian influence is strong and the city is well-known for its large Shi'i minority. Here, Nauroz is celebrated in the traditional Persian manner and last for a fortnight.²⁵ The customs of Gul-i Surkh do not appear to be practised by Heratis nor in the mountains of Badghis to the east. Yet despite this, a number of shrines in the city are said to raise *jandas* at Nauroz.²⁶ One of the locations used for this ceremony is the shrine of Imam Wahid, who is said to be a son of Ja'far al-Sadiq. In the spring of 1994, however, I observed no *janda* at this shrine, but this may have been due to the extensive restoration work being undertaken that year.²⁷ I was unable to ascertain whether this custom, like others in the northern provinces, is a recent innovation and which merely seeks to emulate the festival at Mazar-i Sharif.

There are two other shrines in Afghanistan which raise the *janda* on Nauroz (1 Hamal). By far the most important and famous of these is the Shi'a-controlled shrine of Sakhi Jan on the Koh-i 'Usmani in Kabul (Khalil:228). The tradition, furthermore, would seem to be one of considerable antiquity. Built in the heart of the Hazara ('Twelver' Shi'i and Isma'ili) quarter, Sakhi Jan is one of the most important centres of pilgrimage for the Shi'i of Kabul, for it is said to be a *qadamga*

²⁵ Pers. *pānzda rōz*.

²⁶ Veronica Doubleday, *personal communication*, February 1997.

²⁷ Situated on an elevated knoll outside the Qandahar Gate. It was used by government and Soviet forces as an artillery position during the 1980s and suffered considerable damage as a result of incoming shells and mortars. In 1994, the area around the shrine was unsafe due to mines and unexploded ordnance.

containing a handprint of Hazrat 'Ali and a stone he is said to have split with his sword, Zu'l-fiqar.²⁸ At Nauroz, the hill and graveyard around the shrine is packed with thousands of devotees,²⁹ or at least such was the custom until the recent ethnic war of 1994 which resulted in the migration of hundreds of Hazara families from the Koh-i 'Usmani, to the Hazara *jat* or Pakistan.

Yet despite the fact that Sakhi Jan is the only place in Kabul where the *janda* is raised, it is not the most important Shi'i shrine in the city. This reinforces our contention that Sakhi Jan, Mazar-i Sharif, and the one or two other sites where Nauroz *janda* is a long-standing tradition, are associated with the tradition not by virtue of their associations with 'Ali b. Abi Talib and his descendants, but *vice versa*. That is, these locations were, from pre-Islamic times, regarded as sacred areas for the performance of Nauroz rituals and Janda Bala, a tradition which has been preserved and protected by the subsequent association with Shah-i Mardan and the Imams. Their Islamic link is thus a matter of ideological convenience and the significance of the ritual, and that of Gul-i Surkh which is closely associated with Janda Bala, comes from a more ancient, indigenous tradition. Had the *janda* ceremony had well-known historical association or significance for Shi'is as a whole, one would expect the custom to be a common feature at Shi'i shrines throughout the Muslim world, or at least in Iran. In the case of Sakhi Jan, however, it is one of the very few shrines where this tradition is performed which is controlled by Shi'i shaikhs. Since it is but a *qadamga*, and makes no claims to be the actual burial place of 'Ali b. Abi Talib, the Shi'a of Kabul are able to enjoy the benefits of the Nauroz festivals without being bothered by the ambivalence that would present itself were they conducting the same rituals at Mazar-i Sharif.

²⁸ *Verbal communication*, Sayyid Mousawi, Oxford, Oct. 1997.

²⁹ *Personal observation*, spring 1975.

As far as the claim by the Hashim clan that Janda Bala has always been performed at the shrine of Zaid al-'Abidin in Imam Sahib, it should be remembered that this family are Pushtun settlers who have held the guardianship of Imam Sahib for a century at the very most. As such, the *janda* tradition here cannot be said to be of great antiquity just on the basis of their own memories. Shah-i Mardan of Andkhui probably belongs, though, to the Sakhi Jan tradition in Kabul, and was probably a site associated with the Mazdean Nauroz and Gul-i Surkh from ancient times.

The *qadamga* of Imam Zaid al-'Abidin at Imam Sahib is of particular importance to barren women. Inside the *gunbad* there is a small aperture in the brick floor to the east of the mausoleum in which women place their hand and grasp a handful of the dust. If, when they withdraw their fist, they find the dust contains a grain of wheat, they believe they will conceive a son, if they discover a grain of barley, they say they will bear a daughter.³⁰ The grains as representations of male sperm and, by extension, fertility as a whole, is an association which probably relates to rituals associated with ancient fertility gods and goddesses. Another shrine where the tradition of Janda Bala has ancient roots is Hazrat 'Ali at Namatgut near Ishkamish in Badakhshan. We have already seen (chap. 4) that elements of the Nauroz festivities at this shrine, such as the sacrifice of a bull and the blowing of horns, suggest that they originally were part of pre-Islamic rituals associated with similar fertility cults. Olufsen (1904:158) noted that in the interior of the shrine were two "yak-ox" tails, one white, one black, hanging from a piece of wood inside the shrine and "three flagstaffs" with red and white banners which passed from the "altar" through a hole in the roof. Although it has been impossible to visit this site, it

³⁰ Interview, Sayyid Hashim and sons, Imam Sahib, July 1997.

is likely that these 'flagstaffs' are actually *janda* which are raised, or renewed, at Nauroz in the same manner as they are at the shrine of Mizrab Shah Pahlawan in Shibarghan.

The Nauroz *janda*-raising at the shrine of Mizrab Shah Pahlawan of Shibarghan appears to be another location where the tradition is of great antiquity. Unfortunately the guardian of this shrine, though an Uzbek, is from Aqcha and only recently took on the post following the death of his predecessor. Consequently, his knowledge of the traditions of the *ziyarat* is limited to what he has gleaned from his predecessor and from pilgrims. This shrine, however, is well-known as the most popular place of pilgrimage in Shibarghan, particularly for women.³¹ Not much is known about the figure buried in the grave but at Nauroz a *janda* of healing is raised in the same manner as at Mazar-i Sharif. However, here the custom differs for the *janda* is not lowered at the end of Gul-i Surkh, but remains standing throughout the year. Each year, presumably on the evening of Nauroz, the *janda* is lowered and the cloth around the flagstaff replaced, the old material being cut up and distributed in the usual way, as charms. The present *mutawalli*, citing traditions and folklore imparted to him by pilgrims, stated that the shrine is dedicated to a great hero,³² who was wounded at this spot whilst fighting against unnamed infidel. The shrine was built over the place where his blood had been shed. The blood of Siyawush, as we have seen, too was said to have turned into a bush or tree and it may be that at the shrine of Mizrab Shah Pahlawan we have one of the few surviving examples of an ancient association between this ancient Iranian hero and Janda Bala.

³¹ Interview, Dr. Wahidi, Shibarghan, July 1997.

³² *pahlawān*, the word is also used for 'wrestler' but in this context it means a hero, champion, warrior, someone renowned for bravery and strength.

The traditions and customs of the miracle-working *janda* of Mazar-i Sharif and its association with Nauroz and Gul-i Surkh, is unique in the Muslim world today. Less than a century ago, however, trees and poles taken from trees were a central part of the 'Tulip' Festival held in the spring in the Isfara area of the Kokand sub-district, located on the frontier of modern Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Here, the association between the pole and *lala* is much closer. In Charku, it was the tradition for the young men to leave for the mountains at day break, where they would collect baskets of *lala* and tie them onto forked sticks, whilst in Varukh, the *lala* were tied to branches of white willow (Peshchereva, 1927:215). In Isfara itself, the trees of the garden where the main festival is held were decorated, whilst branches and even large tree trunks were cut down, stripped and adorned with the red blooms. These flower-adorned trees were then carried in procession to the '*sailya*' (viewing?) area, which appears to be the central focus of the festival. The poles and trunks are then lowered into post holes dug for this purpose. During the procession and erection of the tree trunks and branches a choir sings the four *Nakhsh* songs, whilst the crowd let off guns and fireworks. During the procession and after the trees have been planted, it was customary for '*bachai*' dancing to take place, though by 1925, when Peshchereva witnessed the festival, the Soviet authorities had banned this tradition (Peshchereva, 1927:376). Undoubtedly the reason for this ban was that the dances performed by the young men (*bacha*) were probably sexually explicit. Maybe these dance troupes were even drawn from the transvestite dancing boys for which the Amirates of Bukhara and other Uzbek Khanates were notorious in the nineteenth century. In the evening, the flower-adorned trees were brought into the settlement and placed in the corners of the *chaharsu* bazaar. The following day, the women, in particular visit the shrines (Peshchereva, 1927:378).

The poles and trees of the 'Tulip' Festival of Isfara were clearly far more closely associated with motifs of sexual and nature fertility than the *janda* of Mazar-i Sharif today. Originally the poles and tree trunks adorned with *lala*, being probably phallic symbols. In Mazar-i Sharif, the fertility element of Gul-i Surkh having been subsumed, to a far greater degree than in Isfara, by dint of the fact that the original symbolism of Janda Bala and Gul-i Surkh has been overshadowed by the cult of miracle and because the festival has been far more Islamicised through its association with the shrine and person of 'Ali b. Abi Talib. However, given the close association between poles and 'tulips' in Isfara, it would seem reasonable to conclude that the *janda* of Mazar-i Sharif originally fulfilled the same ritual function as the *lala* poles in the Ferghana oasis. Indeed, this association goes even further for in the *Nakhsh-i Kalan* (no. 1) song used in the 'Tulip' Festival, 'Ali and his sons, Hasan and Husain, are petitioned to help (Peshchereva, 1927:380). Even today it is said by the shrine authorities that traditionally the pole for the *janda* used to be supplied from 'Uzbekistan', which would suggest that a century ago there may well have been a much closer association between the *janda* of Mazar-i Sharif and the 'Tulip' Festival poles. Unfortunately, Peshchereva does not provide the Persian or Uzbek word used to describe the poles, or tree trunks, which were paraded in the park of Isfara.

Elements of this same *janda* tradition appear to have survived, howbeit in a much more muted form, in the shrine of Mu'in al-Din Chishti at Ajmer (537/1143-589/1193). One of the greatest Sufi shaikhs of India, the Khwaja Sahib, as he is popularly called, is often referred to by the exalted titles of 'Prophet of India' (Nabī-yi Hind), 'Sun of the Kingdom of India' (Aftāb-i Mulk-i Hind) and 'Prince of India' (Sultān-i Hind), for tradition ascribes to him the apostolic role of

converting much of north India to Islam (Currie:85-6; Sarda:83). On 25 Jamadi al-Sani, a few days before the saint's *urs* festival, which falls on 1 Rajab³³ according to the Islamic lunar calendar, a standard, known as the *nishan jhandā*,³⁴ is hoisted over the Buland Darwaza,³⁵ or High Gate, of the shrine. This standard is representative of the shaikh's presence and appears to have no specific healing properties. It is, however, considered as *tabbaruk*, that is one of the several relics directly associated with the Khwaja Sahib in the same way that the *jandā* at Mazar is associated in popular tradition with Shah-i Mardan (Moini:70ff). The shrine is built on the ruins of a Hindu temple dedicated to Shadi Dev, the local deity "who had no equal in the whole of Hindustan" (Currie:86). Some of the carved stones of this ancient Hindu shrine are even incorporated in the Buland Darwaza (Currie:88).

Tradition asserts that after subduing the demonic Hindu god, Mu'in al-Din took over the temple and converted it into a Sufistic retreat. Today, the site is still regarded as sacred by Hindus and one tradition claims that inside the cellars, over which the tomb of Mu'in al-Din is built, there is an image of Mahadeva "on which a sandal used to be placed every day by a Brahman"(Currie:86-7). A Hindu family is still employed by the shrine to prepare the sandal which is now presented on the grave of Mu'in al-Din (Currie:87; Moini:63). Ajmer was an ancient and major centre of Hinduism. Some seven miles west of the city proper lies the sacred lake of Pushkar, 'King of Sacred Places' which is a major Hindu cult centre with dozens of temples around its banks (Currie:88; Sarda:15, 391-5).

³³ Rajab is the seventh month of the lunar calendar. Prior to the arrival of Islam in Mecca, it was the sacred month when the pilgrimage to the Ka'aba took place (*'umra*) and was, consequently, the month of sacred truce. Later, 27 Rajab became important for Muslims as it commemorated the Night Journey of Muhammad.

³⁴ *jhandā* in colloquial Urdu is a flag, banner, standard, ensign, with the diminutive *jhandī*, a small flag, etc.

³⁵ Cf. Currie (p. 104) for a plan of the shrine complex For a photograph and description of the gate see, Currie (Plate 3); Sarda (pp. 84, 88).

A narrative recorded in the last century regarding the trees which grew around the shrine of Shah Shams al-Din Daryai, ruler of the Delhi Sultanate during the lifetime of Mu'in al-Din Chishti, takes the association between trees and the divine one stage further:

Some years after the death of Daryai some carpenters felled a *Siras* tree which grew close to [the] tomb and began to cut it into several pieces to use in a building. Suddenly a terrible voice drew their attention, the earth began to tremble and the trunk of the tree raised itself up at the same time. The workmen ran away frightened and the tree did not delay in becoming green (Currie:9).³⁶

Today Hindus still retain the guardianship of this holy place, despite the fact that the shrine is dedicated to an Islamic saint and a member of a dynasty whose forefathers, the Ghurids, wreaked havoc amongst the Hindu population of northern India.

The Muslim conquerors of northern India, from the Ghaznavids to the Mughals, all came originally from the area now knownⁿ as Afghanistan, or from Central Asia and there can be little doubt that the Islam they brought with them had strong Central Asian features. As such, it is hardly surprising to find that there appears to be some ritual and symbolic link between aspects of the *urs* fair at the shrine of Mu'in al-Din in Ajmer and the Nauroz festival at Shah-i Mardan in Mazar-i Sharif. The veneration of the grave of Mu'in al-Din Chishti, promoted particularly by the Mughals, was important not just as a source of shaikhly *baraka* but was a visible link between their Central Asian past and culture for rulers, who were regarded as aliens by the non-Muslim majority. Ajmer was a substitute for the beloved shrines of Bukhara, Samarkand, Turkistan and other pilgrimage centres, which were inaccessible to the Mughals since they lay in the hands of their enemies, the Shaibanid Uzbeks. The Mughal ruler, Shah Jahan (1592-1666), for example, in a dedicatory

³⁶ Quoting from, J.H. Garcin de Tassy, 1869, *Mémoire sur les Particularités de la Religion Musulmane dans l'Inde*, Paris, 92ff.

inscription, declares the shrine at Ajmer to be a companion, and twin, to the Ka'ba (Currie:190). Undoubtedly, one of the reasons why rulers such as Akbar the Great promoted the cult of Khwaja Sahib was because, like the Mughal rulers themselves, Mu'in al-Din Chishti was not native to India but came from Chisht in Ghur,³⁷ the mountainous region west of Herat, from which the earlier Muslim conquerors of India, the Ghurids, originated. Interestingly enough, tradition claims that originally the Chishti *tariqa* was brought to Ghur by a certain Abu Ishaq, a descendant of 'Ali b. Abi Talib (Sarda:83-6).

Shrine cults in the Indian subcontinent were the main means by which Islam in the subcontinent adapted culturally and theologically to Hindu traditions and provided a bridge between monotheism and monism. Although attacked by puritanical theologians as promoting unacceptable polytheistic and syncretic practices, their polemic has had little impact on ordinary Muslims of the subcontinent. The *jhanda* tradition at Ajmer would seem to be part of this assimilative tradition, for belief in the totemistic powers of trees, banners and poles can be found in early Indo-Aryan tradition, in the Brahminical traditions of the Rig Veda, in early Zoroastrianism as well as in Shamanism of Central and Middle Asia.

The most direct parallel between the *jandaljhanda* tradition would seem to be the banners, or *jhandi*, which are a feature of Hindu temples and the yards of private houses of Hindus in North India and Trinidad. The Hindu *jhandi* consists of a bamboo pole, suitably sanctified, from the top of which different coloured pennants or flags fly. It is said that these *jhandi* are "the abode or shelter of some deity"(Vertovec:202). In the villages of Uttar Pradesh and northern India *mahaviri jhandi* banners are raised in honour of the monkey god, Hanuman

³⁷ At Chisht there are two Ghurid monuments, either madrasas or mausoleums, dating from the twelfth century, see Ball (i:212); L. Dupree (1977:265-7).

(Vertovec:200-2). *Jhandi* feature prominently in annual family *pujas* in which Hanuman, too, features. Red banners are used to represent Hanuman, white ones for, Satyanarayan, or Surujnaryan, a solar deity (Vertovec:114-5). Like the *janda* at Mazar-i Sharif, the *jhandi* are never destroyed but are left to disintegrate with weathering. Every time a new puja is conducted, new *jhandi* are erected in the same spot (Vertovec:201).

Around the *jhandi* a sacred area of some four square metres is set aside as holy ground and kept clean by family members. At the base of the bamboo pole, a *tulsi*, or sacred basil tree, is usually grown and symbolic items such as *saligrama* stones (associated with Vishnu), Shiva *linga* and conch shells are placed around it. Usually a *deya* house containing the images or pictures of the deities is also constructed. At dusk each evening family members recite mantras beneath the *jhandi*. Unfortunately, little is known about the origins of these *jhandi*, though it is known that they are commonplace amongst the Hindus of India and migrant communities elsewhere in the world (Vertovec:226, n. 5,6,7).

We do know, however, that sacred trees and poles are an important feature in the worship of a number of Vedic deities. The *yupa*, an octagonal pole to which a sacrificial horse was attached, is closely linked with the worship of Vishnu and represented “the vertical axis which forms the centre of the universe linking heaven and earth as well as aspects of regal authority” (Gonda:82-3). Built to the same height as the sacrificer, it is called “ever green,” “thousand branched,” “Lord of the forest” and “the tree of divine sweetness” (Stutley:351). The top of this pole is made of wheat (Gonda:83) and, according to tradition, the position of the *yupa* determines the amount and extent of rainfall (Gonda:81; Stutley:351).

Another pole/banner, referred to as *dhvaja*, features prominently in festivals dedicated to Vishnu and Indra and shares many similar aspects of the *jhandi* mentioned above. According to the ancient legend the gods,

... unable to resist the children of darkness, approached Brahmā for assistance. He advised them to obtain from Visnu the ensign (*ketu-*), at the very sight of which the demons would fall back. After being duly praised, Visnu, now called Nārāyana, gave them the standard (*dhvaja-*) produced from his lustre and energy (*tejas*) which was carried on an eight-wheeled fulgent chariot beaming as if it were the sun. By raising this *dhvaja*- which was adorned with many tinkling objects, garlands, sunshades, bells and trinkets, Indra annihilated in battle the host of the enemy. He then presented the bamboo flagstaff (*yasti-*) to Vasu the sky-traveller (Uparicara), Lord of Cedi..... The banner ... would also be able to forebode by tokens what good or evil consequences await mankind. In the days of yore monarchs desirous of victory and increase of power honoured that standard by Indra's command (Gonda:255-6).

This banner, known as *Indradhvaja*, or Indra's standard, was anciently the centre of an important regal festival known as *dhvajamahah sriman*, which took place in the autumn (September-October) and which lasted for seven days (Stutley:119). Dedicated jointly to Vishnu, the creator of the banner, and Indra, the victorious warrior who used it to throw back the forces of evil (Gonda:257; Stutley:119) the *dhvaja* was ceremonially hewn from a tree in the forest. After having its branches trimmed (Ganda:257; Stutley 119), the *dhvaja* was:

... carried in a festive way to the accompaniment of horns and other instruments, into the town. The staff (*yasti-*) is covered with new cloth and enveloped in garlands, perfumes, and incense... The magical powerful ornaments ... with which the gods once decorated the divine banner (*suraketu-*) or prototype are enumerated.... the king addresses the flagstaff with auspicious formulas containing, inter alia, the epithets "source of vigour" (*urjaskara-*), "unborn, imperishable, eternal, unchangeable one... Visnu, the wild boar, the primitive soul. Thereupon the king invokes Agni and Indra, the killer of Vrtra, and prays that his warriors may be victorious.... After four days the king must, "for the weal of his army", with all reverence cause the standard to be removed (Gonda:255-7).

The base of the *dhvaja* was secured by four clamps and held by eight cords from the top of the standard, the cords being pegged into the ground at one of the eight points of the compass. During the seven day festival, the standard was regarded as Indra himself, and addressed as such. In some Hindu temples the *dhvaja-stambha*

represents the linga of Shiva. When placed inside a temple, the *dhvaja-stambha* must rise through and above the roof of the sanctuary, “so as to indicate infinite height ... whoever hoists a flag on top of a temple will dwell in Visnu’s (*sic*) realm for thousands of years” (Stutley:78).

The ritual associations accorded to the *yupa* and *jhandi/dhvaja* in Hinduism suggests that the *janda* tradition in Afghanistan and the poles of Isfara originated from a common Indo-Aryan cultural root. The Indra standard and *dhvajamahali sriman* festival too is performed to ensure, “a prosperous growth of seedlings or all sorts of cereals and leguminous plants” (Gonda:261), Vishnu, in particular, being regarded as particularly responsible for the growth of plants, the fertility of the soil and the supply of sufficient food for the coming year (Gonda:261). There are clear parallels therefore, between Vedic and Mazdean tradition where sacred poles/trees, notions of kingship, victory, solar symbolism and the harvest come together.

Another important influence in Bactria from the Achaemenid period onwards was Mesopotamian religion. The cult of Anahita, established in Bactra under Artaxerxes II, was influenced by Babylonian deities and particularly that of Nana/Inanna who too is associated with symbolic sacred trees. In the myth of ‘Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Nether World’ Inanna transplants a sacred *halub* tree to Uruk, subsequently using the wood from this tree to make her chair and bed (Black & Green:109). The motif of a stylised tree is an important element in Mesopotamian art, though their significance is hotly debated. However, it is often associated with the winged disc, symbol of divine power, flanked by humans and eagle-headed deities. Some scholars have linked this tree with the fertilising of the date palm, a myth associated with the god Tammuz (Dumuzi) (Black & Green:170-1) whose

cult, we have argued above, was one of the influences behind the Bactrian-Soghdian tradition of the mourning of Siyawush.

In the heyday of Bactra's 'Naubahar', that is the Buddhist monastic settlement of Nava-vihara, the chief building of this complex (presumably *nava-sangharama*) was surmounted by a great cupola called al-Ustun, from the apex of which flew a great silk flag "which the wind blew out at times to a fabulous length" (Le Strange 1905:421-2). Perhaps, too, the tradition of Janda Bala banner harks back to this Buddhist flag which once dominated the skyline of Bactra.

The pole or banner as a symbol of sacred authority and power is not confined to Hinduism but appears to be part of a broader Indo-Aryan tradition. Wands, poles and banners, often with the hand of Fatima on the end of them, are not an uncommon feature of Sufis and the more fringe mystics of Central Asia and northern India. Trees under which saints are said to have sat or dreamed are considered sacred (B.A. Donaldson:59). Flags and banners, as vehicles for *baraka*, are commonly used by Turkic Muslim mystics. Juzjani, for example, records how, in the early thirteenth century, the Saljuq governor of Fars, Atabeg Sa'd, sent a banner every year with pilgrims going to Mecca and when they returned he had it erected before the entrance to his palace. Every time he came to the Audience Hall he used to perform two genuflections under the banner before mounting the throne.³⁸

The perpetuation of this Inner Asian totemistic practice was doubtless justified by the Islamic tradition of the *Láwa al-Hamd*, or 'Banner of Praise', a green flag carried by Muhammad at the Last Day and around which the Faithful will rally before being led into paradise (Schimmel, 1994:30). It is very likely, however, that this Islamic tradition is of Persian origin anyway. In the fourth book of the *Shahnama*, Firdowsi records the story of Kawa the Blacksmith who refused to sub-

³⁸ Juzjani, *TN*, i:178.

mit to the tyranny of Zahhak. Forced into armed rebellion, Kawa took the leather apron which he used to protect himself from his fire, nailed it to the end of a spear and proceeded to rally the population around him. He and his followers finally unite with Faridun's army and in honour of Kawa's bravery, his standard is decorated with yellow, red and violet cloth and the image of a full moon, symbol of the goddess Ardivi Sura Anahita, patron goddess of Faridun³⁹ and, by extension, the Iranian monarchy. Thus Kawa's crude banner was transformed into the regal standard, or national flag, of Iran, the *Dirafsh-i Kaviyani*,⁴⁰ which was carried into battle against the enemy and featured prominently during the coronation of all subsequent Iranian kings (Curtis:34-5). As such, Kawa's banner became a symbol of Iranian national identity and the refusal of the Iranian peoples to submit to tyranny.

The parallels between this standard and the *janda* of Mazar-i Sharif, would suggest that there is at least some justification for believing that the latter has assimilated aspects of the former. Apart from the decoration of both poles with multi-coloured cloths both, in different ways, are potent symbols of national pride and identity. Indeed, according to the lore current today in Mazar-i Sharif, the *janda*, or rather the silver capping, like Kawa's standard, is said to symbolise 'Ali's military prowess, inasmuch as it is alleged to have been part of the Imam's own battle standard. Shi'is and Sunnis in Mazar-i Sharif continue to maintain the belief that Nauroz was the day when 'Ali succeeded to the Khalifate, a tradition which can be traced to the mythology of a much earlier Iranian hero, Jamshid. His coronation at Nauroz would, of course, have included the *Dirafsh-i Kaviyani tak-*

³⁹ Zahhak had requested Anahita to allow him to denude the Seven Climes of men but had been refused, instead, when Faridan beseeched the same deity for her help in freeing Iran from the tyrant he was given her aid, see *Shahnama*, I, v:35ff; cf. Warner's English translation (i:135-41).

⁴⁰ al-Biruni, *CAN*, 208 (Sachau) says it was made of the skin of a bear or lion "and was in later times adorned with jewels and gold."

ing a prominent place in the proceedings.⁴¹ Even though 'Ali and the Ahl-i Bayt were Arab, from an early period Shi'i theologians in particular came to regard 'Ali, Husain and, to a lesser extent, the other Imams, as representatives of the ancient Iranian tradition of chivalry and the *jawanmard* of old who stood up to tyranny and shed their blood for the cause of justice and freedom (Ayoub:29, 72; Corbin:62-70).

In the native religion of Afghanistan's Kafir tribes, which also has Indo-Aryan roots, poles and sacred trees play a symbolic role in the mythology, particularly in respect of the chief god Imra and his consort, Disani, who are closely associated ritually and mythologically with the celebration of the New Year and fertility. Imra, the creator god, gave birth to Disani from his right breast and then proceeded to cast her into the centre of a lake where she concealed herself in the form of a tree:

The tree was so big, that if any one had attempted to climb it, he would have taken nine years to accomplish the feat; while the spread of its branches was so great that it would occupy eighteen years to travel from one side to the other. Sataram became enamoured of the tree, and journeyed towards it. On his near approach he was suddenly seized with a mighty trembling, and the huge tree burst asunder, disclosing the goddess Dizane (*sic*) in the centre of the trunk (Robertson:382).

In another variation of this creation myth whilst the tree trunk was Disani, the roots of the same tree were another goddess, Nirmal, and the seven branches of the tree seven clans of brothers (Robertson:386). Imra is also believed to have created special trees called *küggun* and *kundat* (Jettmar, i:49).

The sacred tree and its regenerative and fertilising power was symbolically represented outside the main Imra temple at Presungul, "undoubtedly the most sacred village in the whole of Káfiristán" (Robertson:389), where a square enclos-

⁴¹ In Sikh tradition the *nishān sāhib*, a saffron or blue banner bearing the Sikh sacred symbols of a wheel and two swords, is flown over the *gurdwara*, see Cole (1978:63,131-2,171 & 1984:192,302).

ure of wood and stone was built with four poles at each corner. These poles were, “surmounted by rams’ heads [and] certain stones, believed by the Kafirs to bear the impression of Indra’s hand in the shape of sacred writing”(Robertson:392, 394). Robertson noted similar poles at temples dedicated to other male deities such as Gish, the god of war (Robertson:395).

The Kafir myths of Imra and Disani show close affiliations with the creation myths of Zoroastrianism which derive ultimately from Indo-Aryan religious tradition. According to early Mazdean beliefs, the primeval ‘Tree of All Seeds’, was the source of all plant life. This mother of all trees was located in the centre of the Sea of Vourukasha which, in turn was fed by the river Harahvaiti, personified in the person of the goddess Anahita. On the tree grew all manner of plants and the fabulous Simurgh bird was said to have made its nest in its boughs. Nearby was another tree, the mighty Gao Karana, the ‘Tree of All Healing’, or ‘Remedies’, around which grew all healing plants which, when eaten, gave immortality to the resurrected bodies of the dead (Boyce, 1984:2 & 1975, i:72, 137-43; Corbin:25-6; Curtis:19; Herzfeld, ii:517). It was at this lake that the battle between Tishtrya and the Apaosha and Duzyairya took place, the success of which determined whether the spring rains would come (Boyce, i:74). The sacred tree thus is a symbol of the life force of creation, renewal, health and immortality in the same way as the *janda* at Mazar-i Sharif.

Amongst Zoroastrians the plane and cypress trees were visible symbols of these two great mythological trees. At the court of the Achaemenids, there was an artificial plane tree adorned with gold and jewels which was the centre of its own cult (Boyce, 1975, i:142-3; Russell, 1987:522n.). Zoroastrian temples usually incorporated both a tree and a spring within their sacred precincts (Russell, 1987:13). The

*Shahnama*⁴² relates that Zoroaster himself was said to have brought a cypress tree from Paradise to Iran which Gustasp planted at the gate of the fire temple of Burzen Mihr in the village of Kisshman⁴³ in Parthia. This tree grew to a great height and by the time of the Muslim conquest, was famous throughout the region. It was finally cut down in AD 861 by the orders of the iconoclastic Caliph al-Mutawakkil, who used the wood to construct a new palace (Boyce, 1984:158; Russell, 1987:387). The memory of this act of iconoclasm has persisted down to the present century. B.A. Donaldson (p. 143) records that, "almost any Iranian in Khorasan" was able to relate this story. In the populist version she records the tree, felled by orders of the more well-known 'Abbasid Caliph, Harun al-Rashid, assumes almost human proportions, no doubt reminiscent of the Mazdean world-view in which trees concealed goddesses and *jinn*. The tree in question was renowned shelter for birds and even whilst the tree was being sawn apart birds continued to use it as a nesting site. Finally the trunk was sawn up but as the woodsmen were about to forward the planks to Baghdad for the Khalifa's palace, news arrived that he had died. Harun's death, of course, is attributed to the desecration of the sacred tree.

According to Josephus, tree 'worship' was an important part of Parthian religion,⁴⁴ and as early as the 9th-8th century BC, the Urartean King, Rusa of Armenia, was said to have planted a grove of sacred white poplars. A bas relief from the same period shows a man standing in an attitude of supplication before a tree (Russell, 1987:32-3). The Arewordik, or 'Sons of the Sun', community of Armenia worshipped poplar trees and flowers like the lily and sunflower,⁴⁵ whose face always turned to the sun (Russell, 1987:518). Plane trees even performed an oracular

⁴² *SN*, IV:1498-9.

⁴³ One of the heroes of *Vis and Ramin* is named after this village, Russell (1987:387).

⁴⁴ Josephus, *Antiquities*, XVII, 744.

⁴⁵ In modern Afghanistan the sunflower is still known as *gul-i aftab parast*, the sun-worshipping flower.

function in Armenia, for it was thought that the will of the gods could be determined by the noise the wind made in them (Russell, 1987:40, 375). This tradition has passed into Armenian Christianity which continues to affirm the sacredness of the plane tree by virtue of the fact it is said to have provided shelter for the Christ-child as he was fleeing (Russell, 1987:52).⁴⁶

The tree as a symbol of healing and fertility passed into Islamic belief from the very earliest period. The basis of the Islamic view of Paradise (*jannat*) has much in common with the Persian paradise (*firdous*), a garden through which rivers flow. In the Qur'an the Tuba tree⁴⁷ is the symbol of eternal bliss (Schimmel 1994:17), whilst at the boundaries of the created universe and *jannat* stands another tree, the *sidra*, or lote.⁴⁸ According to popular tradition recorded in Mashhad, Eastern Iran, the *sidra* tree is said to be located:

... in the seventh heaven, upon the loftiest point, on the right hand of the throne of God. Each leaf is said to bear the name of a person and every year, on the night of 15th Ramadan, this tree is shaken and the leaves that fall are ones upon which are written the names of those who are to die during the ensuing year. Water in which the leaves of the *sidra* have been steeped preserve the body ... (Donaldson:142).

At the vernacular level, oriental plane,⁴⁹ walnut, mulberry and pistachio trees are common features at Islamic shrines, a tradition clearly influenced by Zoroastrian tradition (B.A. Donaldson:141-5). Living trees, dead trunks and wooden lattice work placed around shrines, frequently have iron nails hammered into them by local people who wish to relieve toothache or similar infirmities.⁵⁰ Trees at shrines

⁴⁶ A variant of this seems to be a belief amongst Lebanese Christians that the cedars of Lebanon had provided shelter for Christ; BBC Breakfast TV, interview with Christian Lebanese conservationist, March 14 1997.

⁴⁷ Sura xiii:29.

⁴⁸ Suras xxxiv:16; liii:14; LVI:28.

⁴⁹ *chinār*. B.A. Donaldson, *loc. cit.* records how the death of a man in Mashhad was attributed to his having cut down a very ancient *chinār* tree.

⁵⁰ Dozens of examples can be given of this practice in Afghanistan, to cite but a few, the dead tree trunk in the Bagh-i Umumi, or Central Park, of Maimana, the shrine of Chahrda Ma'sum in Shor Bazaar, Kabul, and numerous shrines in and around Balkh and Herat.

are hung with rags and other reminders of the visits and prayers of pilgrims. Indeed, in some remote mountain areas of northern Afghanistan the tree itself appears to be an object of veneration.⁵¹ Planting a tree on someone's grave is even said to lessen the dead person's punishment as well as console the deceased (Schimmel 1994:30). In Mazar-i Sharif it is commonly believed that "anyone who plants a tree on Nauroz will be blessed,"⁵² whilst Lassy recorded that the Azeri Shi'i believed that at Nauroz all trees and plants burst into leaf (Lassy:220).

Perhaps more extraordinary, this symbolic association is found even in relatively recent theological works from the area. The Shi'a apologist, Muhammad Karim Khan Kirmani (d. 1870), in a candid passage, incorporates ancient mythological concepts of the tree in his discussion of the coming of the Hidden Imam. He refers to a vision given to Zoroaster in which Ohrmazd shows him a tree with seven branches,⁵³ the shadow of which reaches to the farthest ends of the earth. Each branch is made of a different metal which is also represented by a colour. Like Daniel's vision of the great image, the tree symbolises successive dynasties. The last branch, black and iron, represents the 'Abbasid period, black being both the colour of the 'Abbasid standard and a symbol of the dark days the Shi'a endured following the 'Abbasid revolution. Following the 'Abbasids came troubles and afflictions in the form of the Mongol conquests and the overthrow of the Caliphate. However, Ohrmazd consoles Zoroaster by assuring him that from a city in the east, Shahr-i Dukhtaran ('Town of the Maidens') will arise the Iranian hero, Bahram who is given the attribute, Varhavand, or the *khwarnah*, Divine Glory, equated with the Hidden Imam (Corbin:69-70; 222-39).

⁵¹ *Personal observation*, upper valley of Darra-yi Shakh, Gurziwan, summer 1978.

⁵² Information provided from local sources by Miranda Johnson of SERVE, May 1996.

⁵³ Representative of the seven *kishwars*, or climes, of the world, cf. Disani's tree and her seven 'brothers' in Kafir mythology.

In another of the epic narratives of the *Shahnama*, that of the death of Siyawush, the tree is transformed into a symbol of redemptive suffering.⁵⁴ Firdowsi records how after Siyawush's throat had been cut and poured into the dust of the desert, that:

*From the dust that drank his blood
There rose an evergreen⁵⁵ of sweet perfume,
Upon whose leaves his likeness was portrayed,
Exhaling through his love the scent of musk,
And flourishing in winter as in spring
Would be a prayer-place for the sorrowful.⁵⁶*

Referred to earlier in the epic as the 'Blood of Siyawush',⁵⁷ this tree symbolised the blood of the martyr-hero who dies for his principles. This Siyawush tradition, as we have argued above, is one of the strands of ancient mythologies out of which the Gul-i Surkh festival arose and would certainly explain the association between trees and *lala* in the Isfara 'Tulip' Festival. Aspects of the Siyawush myth, too, have been assimilated into the hagiography of the Shi'a Imams which provides us with one cogent reason why Janda Bala has become a feature of shrines dedicated to the Imams. This, in turn, would suggest that the association between Gul-i Surkh, Janda Bala and the spring equinox/Nauroz, is an ancient one and not merely a modern coincidence of convenience. The shrine of Mizrab Shah Pahlawan would appear to retain some vestige of this ancient association, for here the *janda* is actually raised over the the place where an ancient hero⁵⁸ is said to have shed his blood.

Poles and banners, too, are an important motif in Inner Asian native religion, or Shamanism, a tradition which underlies many Sufi practices and shrine cults in

⁵⁴ *SN*, IV:2340-2550.

⁵⁵ *sabz nard*.

⁵⁶ *SN*, IV:2750-54 (English translation after Warner).

⁵⁷ *SN*, IV:2515.

⁵⁸ i.e. *pahlawān*.

northern Afghanistan down to the present. For the eleventh century AD, the ethnic and political balance in Balkh *wilayat* was gradually transformed by the arrival of successive Turco-Mongolian tribes who established dynasties such as the Saljuqs, the Ghaznavids, the Mongols, Timurids and Uzbeks to name but a few. The Turco-Mongolian tribes who settled in the area not only changed the ethnic composition of the region to the detriment of the ancient Persian inhabitants, they also imported their own religious and cultural world view. As such, the perpetuation of the *janda* tradition and even Gul-i Surkh in this area may be due to the fact that both Persian and Turco-Mongolian cultures shared a common mythological tradition and belief in respect of the totemistic potency of trees, poles and banners.

In Turco-Mongolian native religion, the shaman is said to be hatched from eggs laid in a huge tree by the Great Mother, who is symbolised by a bird of prey. This Cosmic Tree symbolises the Lord of the Earth and the Axis of the World (DeWeese:44ff; Eliade:39, 120). The ascent of this cosmic tree is a vital part of the shaman's initiation, since it depicts the would-be adept's "magical flight" to the heavens and, by extension, his contact with the spirit world. This tree is represented in the physical world by a tent pole, whilst, in some traditions, the shaman's ascent is signified by a rope run between two trees which is adorned with ribbons of various colours depicting the various celestial regions and degrees of ascent. (Eliade:120-1).⁵⁹ In Altaic native religion, the sacred tree of ascent is a birch and is topped by a flag. It protrudes through the centre vent of the shaman's tent where it acts as a symbol of his power and presence (Eliade:191). Among certain Altaic tribes, the tree is a "holy golden poplar" which grows out of the sacred milk sea (DeWeese:44-5), whilst the Tatars and the Buryats regard the tent pole itself as sacred, indeed it is accorded an almost divine status by virtue of the fact that a

⁵⁹ Cf. Sufi concepts of the *qutb* as the supreme adept of the *tariqa*.

stone altar is placed at its foot on which offerings are placed. At the apex of the pole blue, white and yellow cloth is tied (Eliade:182).

According to Eliade, because shamanism is but another branch of ancient Indo-Aryan mythological tradition, there is a direct link between Inner Asian native tradition and the Zoroastrian 'Tree of All Healing', for the tree, or tent pole, both lives and gives life and is a symbol of re^surrection, renewal and immortality (Eliade: 271-2). In Vedic tradition, the same concepts are found in the Cosmic Pillar, or *yupa* (Eliade:122n, 126, 403; cf Gonda:82-3) and in Indra's *dhvaja-stambha*, both of which can be shown to have a number of other symbolic and ritualistic similarities to the *janda* of Mazar-i Sharif.

At a wider level, Inner Asian religious tradition revolves around a "mythic complex of Mountain/Tree/Cave/Water/Goddess" which is "one of the primary religious conceptions central to traditional Inner Asian life" (DeWeese:44). All these elements, with the exception of the cave motif, are present today at the Nauroz festivals in Mazar-i Sharif, though we have noted that there is some possible association between the rites of Gul-i Surkh and shrines to female saints located near waterfalls and caves. The mountain is the Koh-i Alburz out of which the Balkh Ab river breaks, the tree is the *janda* itself, the water the life-giving Hazhda Nahr and the goddess, Anahita/Nana and, probably other local mother goddesses. Added to this is the celebration of the ancient Indo-Aryan tradition of the spring equinox which, in turn, is bound up with the remembrance of shamanistic initiation tradition paralleled today by the belief that 'Ali b. Abi Talib succeeded to the Caliphate on Nauroz.

As well as being a survival of an indigenous Zoroastrian tradition, therefore, it is evident that the customs and ceremonies associated with Janda Bala have to be

seen as including aspects of the symbolic and mythological tradition of ancient Indo-Aryan tradition regarding the regenerative potency of trees and poles which themselves represent gods, such as Indra, and suprahuman beings such as the shaman. That there is common symbolic ground between the *janda* and the customs of Gul-i Surkh, is graphically depicted in the 'Tulip' Festival of Isfara where the trees are actually decorated with the *lala*. The *janda* and the *lala*, therefore, were probably part of a fertility and regeneration cult, associated with the spring equinox which, as we have seen, included elements of many religious traditions which had influenced the region. The origins, though, of the custom of Janda Bala and the *lala* trees is probably rooted in the worship of pre-historic Indo-Aryan deities.

CONCLUSION

It is evident from our study that from a very early period Bactra and the Hazhda Nahr held a paramount place in the religious life of the southern Oxus basin as well as being closely associated with epic myths of ancient Iranian kings and heroes. Despite the arrival of Islam with its iconoclastic theology and the destruction of pre-Islamic cult centres in the region, the psychological, cultural, religious and nationalistic need to assert Balkh's ancient role as a centre of power was not eradicated, and eventually found new expression in an Islamic cult dedicated to 'Ali b. Abi Talib which sanctified the perpetuation of various pre-Islamic festivals associated with spring and the vernal equinox. However, in order to accommodate these rituals within the the overall context of the shrine, devotees and hagiographers have, in effect, been obliged to adopt a heterodox view of an important event in Islamic history. As such, the cultural and religious influences have resulted in mutual compromise, with the Islamic tradition perhaps more compromised than the ancient Bactrian one, given the pivotal Islamic concepts of *tawhid* and *shirk*. Though this process of adaptation of indigenous practice to accommodate the prevailing religious ethos is hardly unique in the Muslim world, however, several features of the shrine at Mazar-i Sharif make it stand out from run-of-the-mill shrines which are frequently the focus of syncretic practices.

There is a certain irony in the way which one of the most important historical figures of early Islam who, as 'Commander of the Faithful' is celebrated in Muslim tradition for leading the *mujahidin* against the 'infidels', has been co-opted to pro-

vide a cloak of respectability for the perpetuation of ancient Bactrian spring festivals. This is more so, given that Janda Bala and Gul-i Surkh, in particular, have strong overtones of Indo-Aryan nature and fertility cults and, in the case of the latter, with the Bactrian 'Great Mother' goddess, Ardivi Sura Anahita. However, as Corbin (1990) has shown, the recasting of 'Ali b. Abi Talib into an Iranian mould was not unique to Balkh, but rather was a much wider phenomenon associated partly with the rise of Shi'ism and partly with the reassertion of Irano-Khurasanian national identity from the tenth century onwards. Myths and symbols associated with ancient Iranian heroes such as Siyawush, Rostam and Jamshid, were transferred onto the lives and personalities of 'Ali and Husain in particular and, by extension, all the Shi'i Imams. This went hand-in-hand with the recasting of Zoroastrian philosophy and cosmology in the form of Shi'i theology of the Imams and the grafting of aspects of the cult of Anahita onto the person of Bibi Fatima. Even the fact that 'Ali was an Arab was glossed over, by the propagation of the widely accepted, but quite unhistoric, tradition which claimed that Imam Husain had married a daughter of Yazdagird III, thus making him and his successors, the Imams, 'rightful' heirs to the Sasanid throne. One is reminded of how, in an earlier era, Alexander the Great, too had sought to legitimise his conquest of Iran by marriage to an Achaemenid princess. Another element in this adaptation was the incorporation of elements of the popular Tammuz/Adonis cult, which was a particular feature of southern Iraq, the heartland of early Shi'ism.

Though the creation of this shrine to 'Ali in eastern Khurasan in the twelfth century has to be seen, therefore, as another aspect of a wider cultural resurgence which sought new Iranian Islamic heroes to replace the ancient *jawanmard*. In the case of Mazar-i Sharif, this process of indigenisation is taken beyond the mere

grafting of Iranian epic tradition onto the personality and attributes of the Commander of the Faithful and his descendents. For despite being ostensibly a shrine focused on the person of 'Ali b. Abi Talib, in reality today Mazar-i Sharif's most important annual event involves the celebration of three spring festivals which arose from the interaction of Indo-Aryan, Babylonian and Iranian religious tradition centuries before Islam appeared on the scene. Yet these festivals continue to be celebrated with gusto by the population of Afghanistan and, indeed, the surrounding countries, without too many theological eyebrows being raised. Though doubtless, were the Taliban ever to take control of Mazar-i Sharif for any length of time, they would outlaw all three New Year festivals as unIslamic.

Another unusual feature of Mazar-i Sharif is that this Islamisation, or perhaps Iranification, process required devotees of the relics to accept that, rather than being buried in Najaf, the remains of Shah-i Mardan were translated to an obscure grave in a remote hamlet of Eastern Khurasan. This version of early Islamic history flies in the face of the facts of early Islamic history which, with hardly any exceptions, are accepted by Sunni and Shi'i alike. Yet despite its patently unhistoric claims, the authentication of the relics went ahead with very little serious opposition, a situation which has been maintained throughout the shrine's chequered history down to the present. In the original discovery narrative, the objections of the *faqih* in al-Gharnati, after all, are quickly overcome, or he is browbeaten into submission and soon disappears from the record, leaving the field free for the advocates of authenticity to erect a mausoleum over the spot. The rediscovery, under Sultan Husain Baiqara, is even more remarkable, inasmuch as no voice seems to have been raised by the '*ulama*' regarding the dubious authenticity of the relics, probably because the impetus for acceptance came from the Sultan himself, who

was more concerned with legitimising his regime than the historical validity of the shrine. On the back of this burst of popular enthusiasm and heavy state patronage, Timurid hagiographers embellished and enlarged on the myth with impunity, through the creation of a suitably heroic story centred around the great Khurasanian hero, Abu Muslim. This was but a further *step* in the process of indigenisation of the shrine and its cult whilst, at the same time, the mythologisation papered over some of the more glaring cracks in the tradition regarding the translation of 'Ali's mortal remains to Balkh. The writings of Khwandamir and Jami thus played, and continue to play, a vital role in legitimising the cult and festivals at Mazar-i Sharif.

Another important feature about this shrine is that its original discovery and subsequent refounding during the Timurid period are recorded in contemporary, or near contemporary, sources, rather than being based on hearsay, local folklore or shaikhly tradition handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. These discovery narratives thus provide us with a case study of the processes used by mediaeval Muslims to authenticate relics and the way in which they were exploited for a variety of political, religious and sectarian purposes.

Khwandamir's rewriting of the historical record and attempts to authenticate the shrine's relics by appeal to sources which were conveniently lost, may seem unjustifiable by the standards of western scholarship, but it merely demonstrates that Timurid, and Islamic religious priorities, were quite different to those of modern academics. It demonstrates the degree to which historical and archaeological criteria were subordinated to arcane techniques of authentication. To the mediaeval mind, relics authenticated themselves by the power of *baraka* latent in them and which was transmitted by a process of esoteric osmosis into the soil in which they were buried, the shroud around the body, or indeed anything else which came into

contact with the sacred remains. This occult force operated on the human psyche at the conscious level by permitting their 'fortuitous' discovery during times of national crisis, by miraculous acts of healing and by preserving themselves intact despite the ravages of time and the vicissitudes of history. At the subconscious level, this same arcane power provided authentication by inspiring visions and dreams, particularly of Muhammad or 'Ali, which was particularly directed at persuading vocal opponents of authentication to change their minds. Such displays of the nature of the force *immanating* from the relics, being as it was decidedly ambivalent and highly unpredictable in nature, made it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for any Muslim of good standing to openly doubt the authenticity of such discoveries. For to do so was to risk incurring the wrath of the dark side of the all-pervading *baraka* and to leave oneself open to a charge of infidelity, as the unfortunate *faqih* of al-Gharnati's account found to his cost. Faced with such violent demonstrations of occult powers, history, as understood by modern historians, was deemed to have been proved to be wrong. Consequently the act of recreating history in the light of the relic's own testimony, for the hagiographer was not an act of scholarly *hara-kiri*, but a highly meritorious act which 'justified the ways of God to man'. Khwandamir's pious mythologising would have seemed perfectly justifiable, for example, to mediaeval Christians, to whom the acquisition and possession of 'authentic' relics, associated with the heroes of first century Christianity and, if at all possible, with the Holy Family itself, was an essential part of faith. At the same time, the two separate discovery narratives reveal the extent to which ancient patterns of religious tradition, particularly shamanism, continued to influence Bactrian society well after the arrival of Islam. It is evident that the process of Islamisation in this region had a long way to go, even as late as the twelfth century.

This belief in the occult nature of the shrine's history spills over into the relationship between Sunni and Shi'i. Despite some authors mistaking it for a Shi'i shrine, Mazar-i Sharif, as we have seen is, and, with only one notable exception of a few years, always has been, Sunni sponsored and controlled. For while many Sunni intellectuals cannot accept that Mazar-i Sharif is the authentic burial place of 'Ali b. Abi Talib, they still venerate its *baraka* and healing power. For the local Turco-Tadjik population, too, this power has an ethno-political dimension, inasmuch as the shrine remains the paramount symbol of 'Turkistanian' national identity. It has even won the devotion of many Pushtun *naqil*, or colonists, who settled, or were relocated, to the province of Balkh over the last hundred years. By the same criteria, the Shi'a, whilst forbidden to perform any overtly sectarian rite within the precincts and despite being shut out of the administration and patronage of the shrine, continue to venerate the Rauza as a convenient substitute for distant and inaccessible Najaf. For both Sunni and Shi'i devotees who pray at the shrine and gather in their thousands during the Nauroz ceremonies, the issue of its historicity remains subservient still to the proven power of its *baraka* to perform the most remarkable miracles, as well as bestow innumerable other benefits. In other words, the 'signs and wonders' are far more important than the religious context in which these miracles take place.

Not only so, but never, during the whole of my research on the shrine in Afghanistan, was I ever conscious of serious strife over the issue of the rights of Shi'i or Sunni to hold the guardianship of the shrine, nor of sectarian conflict or rivalry being stirred up over the issue of its authenticity. In this respect, the history of the shrine, with a few notable but mercifully brief exceptions, has been noticeably free of sectarian or communal strife and violence between Sunni and Shi'i. In

this respect, Jami's verses which adorn the entrance to the shrine, could not be more appropriate. The fact that Shah-i Mardan's Divine Light (*nur*) is believed to radiate from the shrine is sufficient. Whether his bones are actually in Najaf, Mazar, or, indeed, anywhere else in the Muslim world is, if not irrelevant, certainly a much lesser issue for the devotees of the shrine than for the archaeologist.

In another irony of history, the Hanafi Amirs of Afghanistan, especially the Muhammadzais, many of whom spent years living in Balkh, paid increasing deference to the shrine and, in the present century made a point of attending the Nauroz festival. Doubtless this latter decision was made in an attempt to win the support, if not the affection, of the population of a region which, as I have argued in another place (Lee, 1996) they had no historically legitimate claim to sovereignty over and which was annexed to Afghanistan by conquest. Yet by so patronising the shrine, the Amirs enhanced its prestige, with all the attendant risks implied in such a move since, as McChesney (1991) has shown, the shrine has a long history of association with the Chingizid supremacy which dominated the Oxus basin for half a millennium. By attending the Nauroz festival, and insisting on supervising the raising of the *janda* in person, the Amirs may have felt they were co-opting the tradition to themselves. However, such patronage cuts both ways, since it both served to enhance the popularity of a quasi-nationalistic event and opened the Amirs to criticism by Pushtu religious elites, steeped in the *jihad* and anti-syncretic polemic of the Mujadidi Naqshbandi Order and Sayyid Barelvi's *Jihad* Movement.

The break up of Afghanistan as a centralised nation-state over the last three decades, the Afghan Amirs' policy of suppression of the Turco-Tadjik indigenous culture and urban encroachment on the garden of the shrine, have all contributed to a serious loss of cultural continuity. Gul-i Surkh, in particular, appears to have lost

much of its symbolic richness over the last century and today few people can provide any coherent explanation for the custom, let alone its origins. The current lack of personal security, grinding poverty, the break down of central government and the consequent problems this poses for all but very localised travel, and the more recent decision to cordon off the forecourt of the mosque for local dignitaries alone during Janda Bala, has led to a dramatic decline in attendance during Nauroz over the last four to five years. This process will certainly continue as long as the area remains a battle field between rival militias. Regrettably, despite General Dostam and his *pahlawans* lavishing huge sums of money on the refurbishment of the shrine in 1996, the process of cultural decay has, if anything, been exacerbated. The initial optimism of local people at having achieved an element of autonomy under a local, Uzbek, leader, has been dashed with hyper-inflation, the break down of law and order, arbitrary misuse of power and internecine strife between various militias. The regionalisation of power and the rise of semi-autonomous military fiefdoms has been reflected in the way in which the tradition of Janda Bala has proliferated throughout the Northern Territories. This diffusion of a tradition once probably unique to Mazar-i Sharif not only had undermined the shrine's paragoncy in other respects but has indirectly drawn attention to the extent to which Shi'ism has influenced the religious life of northern and western Afghanistan.

Our study of Gul-i Surkh in particular, reveals how important a role Bactria played in the diffusion and dissemination of many diverse religious traditions throughout Central Asia and Iran, including Zoroastrianism, Babylonian and Greek religion, Buddhism, Eastern Christianity, Manichaeism and Islam and how much influence these religious continue to exert on vernacular culture, particularly folklore, ballads and shrine practice. The survival of Janda Bala and Gul-i Surkh, in

particular, marks the shrine of Mazar-i Sharif as unique, for as far as we can ascertain the celebration of these festivals in this form are the last living examples, certainly as far as the Islamic world is concerned.

In our exploration of the New Year festivals and their origins, we have seen how vital it is for scholars, whether anthropologists, ethnologists or historians, to understand the pre-Islamic religious context of the region. Regrettably, this is an area of study which, until recently, has been much neglected. In normal circumstances, such a diverse and rich religious heritage would send archaeologists, anthropologists and ethnologists scurrying to Afghanistan for, as William Maley remarked during a recent visit to Kabul, "there is a thesis under every stone." However, there are few scholars brave (or foolhardy) enough to consider working in the country at present and it is to be regretted that more work was not done when there was relative peace in the region. For undoubtedly some of the greatest discoveries awaiting intrepid archaeologists are to be found in the area of ancient Bactra. The Achaemenid and Alexandrine city, the remains of Anahita's temple of Zar-i Aspa and the site of the ancient Buddhist complexes of Nava Vihara, to name but a few of the most important sites, have yet to be located, the discovery and excavation of which would certainly result in the rewriting of the religious history of early Asia and Iran. Whether such opportunities will present themselves again within the foreseeable future, however, seems highly unlikely. Consequently, the continued degradation and loss of Afghanistan's rich and diverse cultural and historical heritage seems certain to continue, and probably accelerate, over the coming years, for with ethnic and religious division growing ever wider, there is little prospect of any realistic or lasting solution to the Afghan conflict in sight.

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