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Time as Apocalypse: Millenarian Movements in the Safavid, Mughal, and Ottoman Empires

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In the early modern Islamic world the late sixteenth century was a chronological watershed. Two millenarian events marked the period: On the one hand, a Grand Conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn occurred in 1583 while, on the other, the first millennium of the Hijra Era ended in 1591. This rare and unusual combination created an atmosphere of apocalyptic expectation, each empire giving birth to a unique mix of prophets, movements, and ideologies.

Abu Mashar (787-886) was the most prolific and influential astrologer of the premodern Eurasian world. While his works spanned the entire field of medieval astrology, his principal contribution to the Islamic concept of time was the chronological system based on the conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn. The two largest and most distant planets, Jupiter was about 500 million miles from the sun and Saturn about 900 million (the Earth was 93 million.) As a result, it took Jupiter about twelve years to complete one revolution around the sun and Saturn about thirty. Every twenty years or so, when the two planets appeared more or less together, a conjunction occurred. In Abu Mashar’s theory, though, all conjunctions were not equal. Tracked across the sky through the twelve signs of the zodiac, the Jupiter-Saturn juxtapositions that marked the shifts from one triplicity (i.e., group of three signs) to the next and occurred every 240 years were the most important. Leaving out of consideration the conjunctions that occurred every 20 years were the most important. There were four triplicities, each named after one of the four Aristotelian elements: the first, Fire, included the zodiacal houses of Aries, Leo, and Sagittarius; the second, Earth, contained Taurus, Capricorn, and Virgo; the third, Air, had Gemini, Libra, and Aquarius; and the last, Water, included Cancer, Scorpio, and Pisces. The most significant conjunction of all, however, was the Grand Conjunction. Occurring once every 960 years, it marked the completion of a full revolution—when the Jupiter-Saturn conjunctions had cycled through all twelve signs of the zodiac and had returned to the first point of Aries, shifting from the Watery to the Fiery triplicity.

In his Kitab al-Qirnat (Book of Conjunctions) Abu Mashar demonstrated that the great (and not so great) events of the past had been marked by conjunctions of greater (or lesser) rarity. For example, the Grand Conjunction of 3101 BCE (17-18 February) indicated both the...
Biblical Great Deluge and the beginning of the Indic Kali Yuga. Other Jupiter-Saturn conjunctions were equally momentous, coinciding with the birth of the prophet Muhammad (571 CE) and the founding of the Abbasid Empire (749). While Abu Mashar did not have much to say about the future, the calculations of later astronomer/astrologers pinpointed an early modern heavenly event of enormous importance. 1583 (sometimes miscalculated as 1582) would be the year of another Grand Conjunction, a once in a millennium happening. For Muslims this conjunction would be especially significant since it would occur 960 years (a full conjunction cycle) after the founding of the religion (622).

The second millenarian event of the late sixteenth century was the end in 1591 (1 Muharram 1000/19 October 1591) of the first one thousand years of Islamic history. A symbolic occasion of great moment, it sparked the reappearance across the early modern Islamic world of two venerable apocalyptic figures: the Mahdi (Guided One) and the Mujaddid (Renewer).

The word Mahdi did not appear in the Quran or in the earliest hadith collection. It was, however, found in the five later canonical compilations. According to one early hadith: "The Messenger of God said: "The earth will be filled with injustice and crime... God will send a man from me... He will fill [the earth] with equity and justice..." And, according to the historian Ibn Khaldun (1332-82):

It has been well known... by Muslims in every epoch, that at the end of time a man from the family (of the prophet) will without fail make his appearance, one that will strengthen the religion and make justice triumph. The Muslims will follow him, and he will gain domination over the Muslim realm. He will be called the Mahdi. Following him, the anti-Christ will appear, together with all the subsequent signs of the Hour (the Day of Judgment)... After (the Mahdi), Isa (Jesus) will descend and kill the anti-Christ. Or, Jesus will descend together with the Mahdi, and help him kill (the anti-Christ)... An eschatological messiah, the Mahdi was sent from God to redeem the world. Like many such millenarian figures (Jewish, Christian, and Zoroastrian), his appearance was both a warning and a promise: the old order was about to collapse and a new world of justice and prosperity was soon to appear. Although the exact day of his coming was unknown, it would not remain a secret. Its signs were either chronological or astronomical: the turn of a century or a millennium or the appearance of a comet, an eclipse, or a conjunction.

The other millenarian figure was the Mujaddid (Renewer). According to one tradition Muhammad said: "...at the beginning of each century, God will send a man, a descendant of his family, who will explain [or renew] the matters of religion..." Unlike the Mahdi, the Mujaddid was primarily a religious figure, called to reform or renew the corrupted tradition. Over the centuries various claimants to the title appeared—rulers, teachers, scholars, and sheikhs. While the turn of both the eighth (800 AH/1397 CE) and the ninth Islamic centuries (900 AH/1494 CE) offered opportunities to many self-styled critics and reformers, the arrival

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2 Rizvi, Muslim Revivalist Movements, 69-70.
3 Ibid., 68.
4 Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2d. ed., s.v. "Mujaddid."
of the millennium (1000AH/1591-2 CE) was an event of a different order, calling for a Mujaddid of more than ordinary charisma and authority.

**Safavid Empire**

In Iran several millenarian prophets and movements rose to prominence in the century before the Safavids (1501-1722). And Shah Ismail (1501-24), the founder of the empire, proclaimed himself the Mahdi (Guided One) and a reincarnation of Imam Ali. At the end of the sixteenth century Shah Abbas I (1587-1629) was drawn to Darvish Khusrau, a charismatic leader of the millenarian Nuqtavi Sufi Order, who preached a program of radical renewal and regeneration and identified Abbas as the Mahdi.

Sheikh Safi al-Din, Ardabili (1252-1334) was a millenarian prophet of fourteenth and fifteenth century Iran. A pious ascetic and, according to his followers, a miracle worker and a world conqueror, he founded the Safaviyya Sufi Order. While he attracted a large party of followers, Sheikh Safi al-Din did not appear to harbor any military or political ambitions. Not until the time of Sheikh Junaid (1447-60), Shah Ismail’s grandfather, did the identity of the order begin to change—from an organization of pious mystics into a millenarian movement with political ambitions. From this point onward the Safaviyyah sheikhs were worshipped as saviors and incarnations of god. Junaid gave his Turkish tribesmen military training and a new ghazi (religious warrior) ethos.

It was Shah Ismail (1501-24), the last sheikh of the Sufi order and the first ruler of the Safavid dynasty, who finally fused the two roles—religious leader, on the one hand, and military and political ruler, on the other. Shah Ismail seemed to have adopted more fully (or at least to have articulated more clearly) the messianic identity of his predecessors. In his poetry he claimed to be the Mahdi or Sahib-i Zaman, a reincarnation of Ali, and a manifestation of God.

At the end of the sixteenth century a new charismatic leader of an older movement appeared on the scene. The Nuqtavi Sufi Order had been founded by Mahmud Pasikhani (d. 1428). Born in the Caspian province of Gilan, Mahmud lived a life of piety and asceticism—making several pilgrimages to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina and never marrying. In 80 AH/ 1397 CE he declared himself the Mahdi, the Mujaddid (Renewer) of the new century, and the Padshah-i Hazarat (King of the Millennia). He claimed to be a reincarnation on a higher plane of both Ali and Muhammad, and his disciples called him the Sheikh-i Wahid (Unique One) and the Insan-i Kamil (Perfect Man).

Pasikhani’s doctrines were a queer mixture of the philosophical and the religious: There would not be a day of judgment, creation was eternal, and the Quran was the work of Muhammad. He and his followers sketched out a world year of 64,000 years divided into four cycles of 16,000 years each. Each of the four was further divided into an 8000-year Arab (lunar) epoch and an 8000-year Persian (solar) epoch. At one thousand year intervals the epochs switched and the guidance of humanity reverted from a “perfected Arab messenger” to a “perfected Persian preacher.” The emergence of Pasikhani foretold the end of the 1000-year Arab epoch of Islam, and the beginning of the 1000-year Persian, Nuqtaviyya epoch.

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7 Babayan, Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs, xiii-xliii, 3-4, 10-35, 19-20, 67; *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2d ed., s.v. “Hurufi.”
Pasikhani was also influenced by Abu Mashar, predicting that a great revolutionary leader would emerge in 990 AH/1582-83 CE, ushering in a new Iranian millennium.

While Pasikhani and the Nuqtavis do not seem to have been very popular during the fifteenth century, by the reign of Shah Ismail they had begun to reappear. They are first mentioned among the disciples of Shah Tahir, an Ismaili Imam who had gathered a large following in the village of Anjudan near Kashan. Opposing the heterodox belief of the Ismailis and the Nuqtavis, Ismail dispatched a troop of cavalry to Anjudan. Many of Tahir’s followers were killed, and he himself fled to India (1521-22).

Despite this early persecution, the Nuqtavi movement was not extinguished. It recovered its footing under Ismail’s successor, Shah Tahmasp (1524-76), and gained adherents in Qazvin, Shiraz, and Isfahan. Like the Safavids, the Nuqtavis were Sufis, but they were not organized into brotherhoods, with rules, robes, and a hierarchy. Rather, the Nuqtavi leaders of the sixteenth century were qalandars, independent wandering ascetics who attracted disciples wherever they went. Dervish Khusrau, son of a well-digger and the Nuqtavi leader who reigned the movement in the mid-sixteenth century, had studied Nuqtavi beliefs and practices in Kashan. Moving to Qazvin, the Safavid capital, in the late 1550s or early 1560s, he took up residence in a neighborhood mosque and quickly attracted a large and devoted following. His success alarmed the Imam religious leaders, and Tahmasp summoned him to court. Khusrau gave evasive answers to questions about his religious beliefs but he abandoned the mosque and, for the remainder of Tahmasp’s reign, was a model believer—studying jurisprudence with the ulama and regularly attending Friday prayers.8

Between Khusrau’s interrogation in the mid-1560s and the coronation of Shah Abbas I (1587-1629), the sect became increasingly popular. By 1587 the Nuqtavi group in Qazvin had outgrown its meeting hall and Khusrau was forced to build a much larger meeting hall near the mosque. His kitchen was soon feeding more than 200 people a day.9

During the first three years of his reign (1587-90), the young Shah Abbas seemed captivated by the Nuqtavi leader. While he is said to have been initiated into the order as an amin, the historian Iskandar Munshi, perhaps feeling the need to disguise the emperor’s fascination with such a controversial figure, stated that Abbas was simply trying to ferret out Khusrau’s true beliefs. However, since the Nuqtavis had already hailed Tahmasp as the Mahdi, similar claims about Abbas may have tempted the young, insecure, and embattled ruler. After the Shah’s visits, his high-ranking soldiers and officials began to frequent Khusrau’s quarters—giving him inlaid daggers and other valuable gifts.10 While Khusrau was circumspect, remembering his interrogation by Tahmasp twenty years earlier, his chief lieutenants, Ustad Yusufi the Quiver Maker and Dervish Kucheck Qalandar, were not apparently trumpeting the group’s claim that Khusrau was a semidivine reincarnation of the Mahdi. On hearing this Abbas was spurred to action.11

8 Ibid.; Munshi, Tarikh-e Alamara 2: 646-47; Babayan, Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs, 91ff.
9 Munshi, Tarikh-e Alamara 2: 647-48; Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2d. ed., s.v. “Nuqtawiyah”; Babayan, Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs, 100-03.
10 Babayan, 103.
11 Ibid., 103-05; Munshi, Tarikh-e Alamara 2: 646.
By 1590 the young ruler had begun his program of political, economic, and religious reorganization. In this new dispensation the millenarian, extremist claims of the Nuqtavi leaders (Dervish Khusrau, Dervish Kucheck, and Ustad Yusufi) had no place. While Khusrau had elevated both Tahmasp and Abbas to an exalted status in the Nuqtavi pantheon, in the new Safavid state religious legitimacy depended on the emperor’s support of Imami Shiism. In 1591, at the turn of the millennium, a Nuqtavi uprising surfaced in Fars and the poet Abdul Qasim Shirazi, 25 years after his blinding in Qazvin, was arrested and, at the demand of the ulama, torn to pieces. In 1592 Mir Sayyid Ahmad Kashi (or Kashani), a prominent Nuqtavi leader, was captured and personally beheaded by Abbas. A firman (royal decree or order) from the Mughal Emperor Akbar, found among his papers and offering support to Kashi, Dervish Khusrau, and the beleaguered Nuqtavi community, may have added to Abbas’s paranoia. The very next year, just before embarking on a military campaign in Luristan, the emperor was warned by Dervish Khusrau that if he didn’t return to the capital by the lunar New Year (1 Muharram 1002, 27 September 1593) a Nuqtavi might seize the throne. Soon after Dervish Kucheck issued a similar warning, and, in response, Abbas ordered a detachment of cavalry back to the capital. The horsemen, led by a certain Inayat Kal-i Isfahani, surrounded Nuqtavi headquarters, capturing Dervish Khusrau, Dervish Kucheck, and Ustad Yusufi. Kuchek committed suicide and Khusrau was tortured by the ulama for three days, his dead body left exposed in the streets for an entire week.

While the Nuqtavis represented the largest and most successful millenarian movement of sixteenth century Iran, Abbas’s extermination of the group did not mean the elimination of eschatological speculation. For example, the historian Qazi Ahmad, writing at the turn of the millennium, described Sheikh Safi al-Din as the Mujaddid of the seventh Islamic century (700AH/1300-01 CE). And Abbas himself had dedicated the magnificent congregational mosque (the Masjid-i Shah) in his new capital of Isfahan, to the Mahdi. Thomas Herbert visited Iran at the end of Abbas’s reign and commented on "...[the] books they read, namely Hippocrates, Galen, Avicenna, and Albu-Mazar [Abu Mashar]." And in the 1660s Jean Chardin described a stable in the imperial palace which "... they call the Tavila-i Sahib-i Zaman... the stable of the king of the age... and they maintain perpetually... the horses... one for him [the Mahdi] and one for Jesus.”

Mughal India

In India during Mughal rule (1526-1739) the sixteenth century was also marked by apocalyptic leaders and movements. The emperor Akbar (1555-1605), like Abbas the creator of
the mature state, benefited from the support of Sharif Amuli, a Nuqtavi refugee from Safavid Iran, who proclaimed Akbar the Mahdi and the Mujaddid (Renewer) of the new millennium.

During the sixteenth century early modern India witnessed the appearance of several millenarian prophets. One of the most important was Sayyid Muhammad of Jaunpur (1443-1505). In early life a pious and charismatic disciple of the eminent Chishti master, Sheikh Daniyal, Sayyid Muhammad won a large and devoted following. In 1489 he left Jaunpur for Mecca. After circumambulating the Kaba, he declared himself the Mahdi. In Ahmadabad, after his return, he said he had received a message from God: "You are the promised Mahdi; proclaim the manifestation of your Mahdiship and do not fear the people." His movement, called the Mahdawiyya, grew quickly, antagonizing both the ulama and the authorities, and he was forced to leave Gujarat. He travelled through northwest India and Afghanistan to Khurasan, where he died in 1505.

After Sayyid Muhammad's death, his Gujarati followers reorganized themselves into small self-contained, Sufi-like communities called dairas (circles). Governed by a rigid interpretation of Islamic law, these early Mahdawis spent their lives in prayer and meditation. A series of deputies succeeded Sayyid Muhammad but, by the middle of the sixteenth century, persecuted by the religious and political elite, the Mahdawi leaders began to preach opposition to the Gujarati Sultan. The second deputy wrote: "It has now become a general religious duty... for all—men, women, slaves, and freemen—to unite and defeat the oppressors so that the faithful might be victorious.”

Given the eclectic atmosphere at Akbar's court, it is not surprising to find that the Mahdawis played an important role in the Ibadat Khana discussions. Sheikh Mubarak, the father of Abu al-Fazl, knew the leading Mahdawi scholar of Gujarat, Sheikh Abd al-Malik Sa'anjwandi (d. 1574) and had attended the lectures of Sheikh Alai. It was, however, the conquest of Gujarat in 1572-73 that brought the movement and its leaders to Akbar's attention. The Mughals captured Sheikh Mustafa Gujarati (1525-76), the leading Mahdawi of Gujarat, and decimated his dairah. Sheikh Mustafa's father, Sheikh Miyan Abdur Rashid, who had been converted by Muharram Jaunpuri himself, was killed along with seven others. Sheikh Mustafa was tortured and sent to Fathpur Sikri, where he resided for nearly two years (1574-76). In the Ibadat Khana sessions he defended Jaunpuri's claim to be the Mahdi and Mujaddid of the ninth Hijra century (1 Muharram 990 AH/ 2 October 1494 CE).

Mahdawi influence peaked in the last quarter of the sixteenth century. After the defeat of the Gujarati sultan and the incorporation of his state into the Mughal Empire, their military importance declined. And after the turn of the millennium their missionary zeal waned.

20 For an interesting discussion of some of these issues see Ahmed Aıfar Moin, "The Islamic Millennium in Mughal India: An Historiographical Analysis," (M.A. Thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 2005).
22 Maclean, "Real Men and False Men," 201. See also Rizvi, Religious and Intellectual, 57; Rizvi, Muslim Revivalist Movements, Chaps. 2-3.
None of the Mahdawi predictions—the return of the Mahdi or the Day of Judgment—came to pass.23

Although Sayyid Muhammad and his followers were partly responsible for the apocalyptic anxiety among the populace at large, a careful look at the Fathpur Sikri debates reveals that the most eloquent and influential preacher of eschatological extremism was a Nuqtavi from Safavid Iran. Like many other Iranian artists, merchants, soldiers, and administrators, Sharif Amuli came to Mughal India seeking refuge and fortune. Because, however, he was so divisive and controversial (in both Iran and India), an accurate picture of the man and his ideas is hard to develop. In the Safavid sources he is mentioned only once. Iskandar Munshi, writing about Abbas’ campaign against Dervish Khusrau, described the shah’s beheading in 1592 of Mir Sayyid Ahmad Kashi. Among Kashi’s papers was the firman from the Mughal emperor Akbar, and this led Munshi to recall “Sharif Amuli, who was one of the leading intellectuals of the Nuqtavi sect, [who] fled to India to escape retribution at the hands of the judges. He was honored by the Mogul emperor, emirs, and nobles, who treated him as their spiritual adviser.”24

The Mughal sources on Sharif Amuli are richer but also uneven. Although several authors mention him in passing, the most complete account was by Akbar’s chief critic, Abd al-Qadir Badauni. Badauni’s complaint was not so much that Amuli made apocalyptic claims for both Pasikhani and himself but that he was a Shiite, even worse an Ismaili Shiite. According to Badauni, Sharif Amuli fled Iran for Balkh and the compound of the Sufi master Mir Muhammad Zaid.25 Although Iskandar Munshi revealed nothing about Amuli’s earlier life, he was probably caught in Shah Tahmasp’s roundup of Nuqtavi leaders in the mid-1560s—when Dervish Khusrau was questioned and the two brothers (the poet Abdul Qasim and the calligrapher Abdul Turab) were blinded. Forced out of Balkh (because his heretical views made him unwelcome), he arrived in the Deccan, probably in the early 1570s. In 1577 (the first solid date available) he turned up at the camp of the emperor Akbar.26

Sharif Amuli had a long and successful career in Mughal India, spanning nearly thirty years. During the Fathpur Sikri period (1572-85), he was an intimate of Akbar. Contributing to the wide-ranging discussions in the Ibadat Khana, he joined Akbar’s new imperial order (Tauhid-i Ilahi) and supported the principle of “lasting reconciliation.” After the emperor left Fathpur Sikri in 1585, Amuli shifted his focus from court to career. In 1586 he was appointed chief religious official of Kabul, in 1587 he was made revenue administrator and distributor of charities for Kashmir, and in 1591 he was raised to the rank of 1000 zat and given three posts in the rich province of Bengal: chief judge and head of both the revenue and religious departments. In 1598 the revenues from the province of Ajmir were assigned to him. In 1605, after Akbar’s death, Jahangir promoted him first to the rank of 2500 zat and then several years later to his final rank of 3000 zat.27

23 Ibid., 134.
24 TAAA 2: 650.
26 Ibid. 2: 252-55.
27 Rizvi, Socio-Intellectual History 2: 192-96.
Amuli’s opinions, as reported by Badauni, leave little doubt as to his Nuqtavi sympathies. In 1577 the loud cries of the Iranian’s disciples, proclaiming him the Mujaddid of the Millennium, reached Akbar’s ears, and he invited him over. Rather like Dervish Khusrau’s first meeting with Shah Abbas (about ten years later), Amuli immediately won over the young emperor—with a similar combination of charisma and doctrine. Taken into the emperor’s retinue, he returned to Fathpur Sikri where he remained for the next eight years.28

In the last part of 1580 Amuli and his followers began to publicize the astrological predictions of Abu Mashar.

In this year [November or December 1580] low and mean fellows, who pretended to be learned, but were in reality fools, collected evidence that his Majesty was the Sahib-i-Zaman [Lord of the Age]... Sharif [Amuli] brought proofs from the writings of Mahmud of Basakhwan [Pasikhani] that he had said that in the year 990 [1582] a certain person would abolish lies... And Khwajah Maulana of Shiraz,... came with a pamphlet by some of the Sharifs of Makkah, in which a tradition was quoted to the effect that the earth would exist for 7000 years, and as that time was now over the promised appearance of the Mahdi would immediately take place... The Shi'ahs mentioned similar nonsense connected with Ali, and quoted the following Ruba’i, which is said to have been composed by Nasir-i Khusrau...

In 989 [1581-82], according to the decree of fate,  
The stars from all sides shall meet together  
In the year of Leo, the month of Leo, the day of Leo  
The Lion of God will stand forth from behind the veil.

And this made the Emperor more inclined to claim the dignity of a prophet, perhaps I should say the dignity of something else.29

This passage nicely illustrates the several strains of millenarian expectation in late sixteenth-century India. Amuli’s reference to Akbar as Sahib-i Zaman (Lord of the Age) recalls the specifically Ismaili epithet for the Mahdi. And the reference to Pasikhani and 990 (1582), of course, refers back to the Nuqtavi founder’s appropriation of Abu Mashar. Khwajah Maulana, the Iranian Shi'ite and perhaps a Nuqtavi as well, has slightly rewritten Pasikhani’s teaching about alternative 8000-year Arab and Persian epochs and the arrival of a Mahdi at the end of each one. The passage is tied together by the quatrain from Nasir-i Khusrau, referring to Abu Mashar’s Grand Conjunction, and the final sentence hints at Akbar’s interest in assuming the millenarian mantle of the Mahdi—standing “forth from behind the veil.”

Sharif Amuli’s predictions—of the conjunction and the coming of the Mahdi—were not easily forgotten. Several months later (February or March 1581) Akbar had a conversation with Father Antonio Monserrate, a Portuguese Jesuit. The emperor wondered about...

...the last Judgment, ... [whether] Christ would be the Judge, and when it would occur... the Priest said “God knows the time... Yet signs shall precede the day which will enable men to conclude with confidence that it is at hand... The king asked what these signs should be. The Priest replied, “Christ mentioned especially wars and rebellions, the fall of kingdoms

28 Badauni, Muntakhab 2: 252-55.  
29 ibid., 2: 295.
and nations, the invasion, devastation and conquest of nation by nation and kingdom by kingdom; and these things we see happening very frequently in our time. 30

Some eighteen months later, in the latter part of 1582 (990), Sharif Amuli created another stir. Badauni wrote:

Some shameless and ill-starred wretches also asked His Majesty why, since a thousand years from the Hijrah were passed, he did not bring forward, like Shah Ismail the First some convincing proof. ...The following quatrain of Nasir-i Khusrau was often quoted at court:

I see in 992 [1584-85] two conjunctions
I see the sign of the Mahdi and that of [the] Antichrist;
Either politics or religion must change,
I clearly see the hidden secret. 31

Since the translator omitted the line introducing Nasir-i Khusrau and changed the date from 992 to 990, the importance of this passage has not been fully appreciated. And, while Badauni did not identify the “shameless and ill-starred wretches” there is little doubt—given the insults, the conjunction and Mahdi themes, and the identity of the poet—that they were Amuli and his followers.

Amuli’s oft-repeated theme—Akbar as divinely-appointed leader (Mahdi, Sahib-i Zaman, or Mujaddid) of the new millennium—must have found a sympathetic hearing.

That Amuli’s millenarian, apocalyptic characterization of Akbar had become widely accepted can be seen in the first pages of the Akbar Nama. After devoting several chapters to the infant Akbar’s “nativities” (birth horoscopes), Abu al-Fazl quoted the Persian poet Khāqānī (d. 1185):

They say that every thousand years
There comes into existence a true man...
Every now and then, the world is saturated with wretches
Then a shining saul comes down out of the sky 32

The last millenarian Sufi of early modern India was Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi (1564-1624). He was one of the leaders of the Naqshbandi Sufi order in the first quarter of the seventeenth century and claimed to be an eschatological revolutionary—the Mujaddid-i Alf-i Sani or Re­newer of the Second Millennium. In a letter to Mir Muhammad Numan, he wrote:

Be it known that a Mujaddid has appeared at the head of every century but the Mujaddid of a century is different from that of a Millennium. Just as there is a world of difference between one hundred and one thousand, so does the Mujaddid of a century differ from that of a Millennium. 33

While the Naqshbandi order flourished under Sirhindi’s leadership, its growth spurred by his disciples’ insistence that he was the apocalyptic prophet of the second Islamic millen­nium, among the religious and political elite there was a good deal of skepticism. Just as the enthusiasm for Akbar as Mahdi waned after the turn of the millennium so the criticism of

30 Commentary of Father Monserrate, 129.
32 Abu al-Fazl, Akbar Nama 1: 142.
33 Rizvi, Muslim Revivalist Movements, 264.
Sirhindī grew increasingly strident as the seventeenth century advanced. Sheikh Abd al-Haqq Dīhlawī, a friend and an eminent Naqshbandī leader himself, reminded the sheikh that a true Sufī exhibits “self-mortification, humility, courtesy, and politeness” rather than pride and self-promotion. And Jahangīr, after questioning Sirhindī and finding him “proud and self-satisfied with all his ignorance,” threw him in prison for a year.

After the sheikh’s death in 1624 a hagiographical literature sprang up, describing the signs and miracles that validated his claim to be Mujaddīd-i Alī Sānī. In 1679, however, there was another reaction. Aurangzēb ordered the Sheikh al-Islām to prohibit Sirhindī’s disciples from spreading false doctrine. And in 1682, probably because Aurangzēb’s ban had not been effective, the Indian ulama appealed to the Sharīf of Mecca. After examining Sirhindī’s writings, the Sharīf declared him an infidel. While the twentieth-century image of Sirhindī as conservative champion of true religion is certainly false, the popular success of his movement suggests that millenarian fervor was wide spread in late sixteenth and early seventeenth century India..

**Ottoman Empire**

In the Ottoman Empire (ca. 1300-1923) Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-66), like Abbas and Akbar the architect of the classical state, also drew on the apocalyptic extremism of the late sixteenth century. For Suleiman, however, the crucial apocalyptic identity was Sahīb Kirān (Lord of the Conjunction), referring to the Grand Conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn rather than to the end of the first Islamic millennium.

In the Ottoman Empire, as in the Mughal and Safavid empires, the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were a time of millenarian turmoil. Self-styled prophets claiming divine inspiration, like the Nuqtāvī leaders in Iran or the Mahdawi sheikhs in India, sparked uprisings in Anatolia and the Balkans. An outbreak in Edirne threatened the reign of Mehmed I (1412-21), and the Safavid sheikhs sewed seeds of dissension among the Turkish tribes of eastern Anatolia. In the first half of the sixteenth century there were the millenarian revolts of Shah Kulu, Celal, Tonguz Oglan, and Kalendar. Celal, for example, was a Safavid visionary who, taking the name of Shah Ismail, claimed to be the Mahdī. At the Ottoman court of Sultan Suleiman (1520-66) one outcome of the increasing apocalypticism was the appearance of a (relatively) new eschatological identity, Sahīb Kirān (Lord of the Conjunction). While this epithet had a venerable ancestry, rooted in the conjunction astrology of Abu Mashar, it became in the mid-to-late sixteenth century a characteristically Ottoman imperial title.

36 Friedman, *Sirhindī*, 94.
40 Shaw, *History*, 1:86.
While Sahib Qiran (Persian) or Sahib Kiran (Ottoman Turkish) referred to the conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn, the common translation—Lord of the (Auspicious) Conjunction—suggested a further meaning. When the phrase was applied to a ruler, a prophet, or a charismatic leader, the astronomical event implied was not an ordinary, garden-variety conjunction (one that occurred every twenty years or so), rather this conjunction was understood to be rare and unusual—either one that occurred every 240 years (at the transition from one zodiacal triplicity to the other) or every 960 years (at a Grand Conjunction).

In the Islamic world Sahib Kiran had long been associated with the great Central Asian conqueror Timur (r. 1370–1405).41 As the Mughal emperor Jahangir wrote: “In these memoirs whenever Sahib Kirani is written it refers to Amir Timur Gurgan.” 42

Since Sahib Kiran described an individual born at the time of a rare astronomical event, the astrologer, in order to make such an identification, had to draw up a “nativity,” a birth chart or horoscope at the time of birth. There was, however, no reliable evidence of the year (much less the hour, day, or month) of Timur’s birth.43 In the sources two different explanations were given. In his memoir (Malfuzat-i Timuri) the conqueror wrote:

A celebrated astrologer waited on me and delivered a plan of my horoscope, stating that at the time of my birth the planets were in so favorable and auspicious a conjunction as certainly to predict the stability and duration of my good fortune and sovereignty; that I should be superior to all the monarchs of the age; ... that I should be the protector of religion, the destroyer of idols, the father of my people, that my descendants should reign for many generations... 44

In addition to Timur’s own explanation, a second account had the court astrologers bestowing the epithet because of a rare conjunction early in his reign.45 Finally, apart from the astronomical uncertainty, the meaning of the phrase was also vague. The general interpretation was “blessed by heaven, a favorite of fortune,” but Rashid-i Din (1247–1318), the historian of the Mongols, stated that it also denoted a famous and powerful ruler, the king of a region or an epoch.46

To write about millenarianism in the early modern Ottoman empire is to depend on the work of Cornel Fleisher. In his thorough and insightful study of the historian and courtier Mustafa Ali and in several pathbreaking articles, Fleisher uncovered a hitherto unknown vein of apocalyptic writing, preaching, and rumor, especially during the reign of Sultan Suleiman.

For the Ottomans Sahib Kiran never entirely lost its connection to Timur. Mustafa Ali wrote that Timur, in appropriating the title, had laid claim to universal sovereignty, especially over the Ottomans.47 And though the phrase came to be commonly associated with

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42 Jahangir, Tuzuk 1: 5.
47 Fleisher, Bureaucrat and Intellectual, 278.
Suleiman, it had been sporadically applied to earlier Ottoman sultans. Mehmed II, for example, had been so described, and in 1517, following his defeat of Shah Ismail and his conquest of Syria and Egypt, Selim I (1512-20) was hailed as Muṣṭafid and Sahib Kīrān. But it was during the first half of Suleiman’s reign that the influence of millenarian prophets, portents, and epithets reached their peak. Fleischer identified three important figures (and their texts). The first was Abd al-Rahman Bistiṣmi (ca. 1380-1455). His Miftah al-Jafr al-Jamī (The Key to the Comprehensive Prognosticon) was a foundational work. A compendium of apocalypses from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, it was a major inspiration for the construction of Suleiman’s millenarian identity. Bistiṣmi was an authority on eschatological themes, and he knew the conjunction astrology of Abu Mashar as well as the art of cabalistic interpretation, although his “hursti” writings differed radically from those of Fazallah Astarābādī. For Bistiṣmi, as for Pasikhāni, the world had an age of 7000 years.

The second author, Mevlana Isa, was an obscure judge. His history, Cami Ul-Meknunat (The Compendium of Hidden Things), in three versions between 1529 and 1543, reflected the apocalyptic tenor of the time. In his work he examined the claims of two rulers—Suleiman and the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V—to be the Sahib Kīrān, the divinely guided Last World Emperor. The five points of Mevlana Isa’s argument, overwhelmingly supporting Suleiman, were summarized by Fleischer:

1. The Muṣṭafid is due by the year 960 AH/ 1552-53 CE.
2. In that year will culminate the Grand Conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, the fourth such since the time of the prophet.
3. In this connection, the epithet Sahib Kīrān refers to the universal ruler who will inaugurate the domination of a single religion to coincide with the Grand Conjunction. Other signs point to the nearness of the apocalypse and the identity of Suleiman as Sahib Kīrān.
4. There have been twenty-nine hidden saints who have held spiritual sovereignty over the world. Suleiman is the thirtieth and last.
5. The concatenation of signs—the Grand Conjunction, the arrival of the hidden saint, and the nearness of the millennium (1000 AH/ 1591 CE)—all argue that Suleiman is the millennium leader—either the Mahdi (or Sahib Kīrān) or his forerunner.

While it is not clear how widely Mevlana Isa’s history circulated, his text reflects a pervasive apocalyptic atmosphere during the first half of Suleiman’s reign. Ibrahim Pasha, Grand Vizier from 1523-36, routinely referred to Suleiman as “Sahib Kīrān-i Alem-Penah (Lord of the Auspicious Conjunction and Refuge of the World)” and “Sahib-Kīrān-i Rub-i Meskun (Lord of the Auspicious Conjunction and of the Inhabited World).” In the Ottoman archives, petitions, poems, and reports employed Sahib Kīrān or Hazret-i Sahib Kīrān rather than Padshah to designate Suleiman. And, in two contemporary histories—the Chahāname-i Sultan Suleiman of 1529-30 and the Suleimānname of 1540—he was “Sahib Kīrān”

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52 Ibid., 166.
and “Sahib Kiran ve Mehdi-yi Ahir uz-Zaman (Lord of the Auspicious Conjunction and Mahdi of the End of Time).”

Mevlana Isa, however, was a judge and his understanding of historical chronology was flawed. His basic error was a confusion of eras—the Hijra and the Jalali. While historical time in the Ottoman Empire was reckoned according to the lunar era, the astronomical time of the stars and planets was solar. The Hijra Era year began at 1 Muharram and was 354 days long while the Jalali Era year began at the Vernal Equinox and ran for 365 days. The 20-year conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn began at the Vernal Equinox (the first point of Aries) and cycled through the twelve signs of the zodiac, returning after 960 (solar) years to the starting point. The significant conjunctions occurred every 240 and 960 years.

The underlying assumption of Mevlana Isa’s argument (points one-three) was that a Grand Conjunction had occurred at the founding of the Islamic religion in 0 AH/ 622 CE. As a result, a second, equally momentous astronomical event was scheduled to occur nine hundred and sixty years later. A Grand Conjunction in 960 AH, the fourth (the other three at two-hundred and forty year intervals) since the time of the prophet, would herald the arrival of the Sahib Kiran. Since the last version of Mevlana Isa’s history was dated 1543, 960 AH/1552-53 was only a decade away, and it was obvious, to the historian at least, that the heavens were declaring Suleiman rather than Charles V the universal sovereign of the apocalypse. While Mevlana Isa’s eagerness to ground his argument in Abu Mashar’s work suggests that the astrologer’s theory was well known and widely accepted, his misunderstanding of conjunction astrology led him astray. The nine hundred and sixty years between Grand Conjunctions were solar not lunar years, and, because of the eleven day difference between solar and lunar eras, equaled nine hundred and ninety lunar years. Thus, the first Grand Conjunction after the founding of the religion would be in 990 AH/1582-83, not in 960 AH/1552-53.

The third eschatological figure at Suleiman’s court was Haydar Remmal (Geomancer), a refugee from Safavid Iran. In a remarkable piece of historical detective work, Fleischer reconstructed the career of this Iranian agent of apocalypticism. Born sometime in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century, Haydar’s early training was as a munajjim, probably in his native Tabriz. Soon after, however, he began to specialize in the arts of prognostication—the cabalistic interpretation of letters and names, dream interpretation, and other random methods of predicting the future. From his success at the Ottoman court, one can guess that Haydar was a skillful and charismatic individual. He had probably been a favorite of Shah Ismail also, since he was chosen to tutor Tahmasp, Ismail’s son and successor. In 1522 Haydar and the young Tahmasp (eight years old) traveled from the Safavid capital of Tabriz to Herat. The geomancer remained in the young ruler’s entourage as an advisor for the first four years of his reign—1524-28. His duties were probably those of a court munajjim—casting horoscopes, putting together the annual almanac (takvim), and giving advice about when

53 Ibid., 168.
and where to initiate important activities. In 1528, however, he was dislodged from favor. The fanatical Qizilbash tribesmen of the Safaviyya order, intent on converting Iran to Imami Shiism, drove the Sunni Haydar from court.

While the first evidence of Haydar in Istanbul was an almanac dated 1535, he probably arrived several years earlier—around 1530 perhaps—and remained a trusted advisor to Suleiman for the next 30 years—dying sometime between 1559 and 1565. The almanac (takvim), a common production of the working munajjim, was assembled for the year beginning at the Vernal Equinox (21 March 1535). While it is impossible to know exactly when Haydar reached Istanbul or what he did in the years before 1535, it is tempting to imagine the charming young munajjim specializing in prognostication and building a reputation. The early 1530s were a time of apocalyptic speculation in the Ottoman capital. In 1533, for example, the Hungarian ambassador became aware of two widely-circulated rumors. A massive marble lion on the shore of the Bosporus had turned around, formerly eyeing Asia it now faced Europe. The lion had reversed itself two times before: in 1453 from Europe to Asia, foretelling the fall of Constantinople; and in 1526 from Asia to Europe, predicting Suleiman’s victory over the Habsburgs. This last reversal, however, was ominous, prophesying a disastrous defeat for the Ottoman forces. The second rumor concerned the vision of a prominent Ottoman official. Two warriors, one Othman and one European, appeared in the night sky, proclaiming in unison a victory for the Europeans. In such a fearful, unsettled atmosphere, word of Haydar’s prowess may have prompted Suleiman to invite him to court.

In any event, in the compositions that survived—the 1535 almanac, a Persian work of 1536, and a 1538 report—Haydar added additional apocalyptic elements to the Sahib Kiran identity found in the court petitions and documents and in Mevlana Isa’s history. Educated in Safavid Iran and steeped in the eschatological imagery of Ismail’s court, Haydar maintained that in every age there were two divinely designated sovereigns, one temporal (Sahib Kiran) and one spiritual (Sahib Zaman). Muhammad had combined the two identities, and Suleiman, as the Qutb of the present age, had also united the two. He is the Ruler of the Last Age and will reign until 990 AH/1582-83 CE or until 1000 AH/1591-92 CE. Haydar’s addition of Sahib Zaman (the Ismaili epithet for the Mahdi) to Suleiman’s millenarian identity suggests a Safavid influence, and the two dates recall Abu Mashar. In Haydar’s Persian text of 1536 he referred several times to the Kitab al-Qiranat (Book of Conjunctions) as did Bistami in his Key. This is, we have seen, the work in which Abu Mashar gave the fullest account of his conjunction theory, linking weighty events of the past (the Flood and the founding of Islam, for example) to Jupiter-Saturn conjunctions while also providing important dates for the future. As a munajjim, a remnal, and a student of Abu Mashar, Haydar understood conjunction mathematics and was easily able to translate dates from one era to the other. Unlike Mevlana Isa, he had the right date (both lunar and solar) for the first Grand Conjunction after the founding of Islam: Suleiman, as the eschatological Lord of the Last Age, would rule either until the first Grand Conjunction after Islam—in 990 AH/1582-83, not in 960 AH/1552-53—or until the turn of the millennium in 1000 AH/1591 CE.

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54 Fleischer, Ancient Wisdom, 243.
Fleischer’s analysis of Ottoman apocalypticism focused on the reign of Suleiman. According to him, the sultan’s imperial image underwent a major change over the nearly fifty years of his rule. During the first quarter century the identity encapsulated in the epithet Şahîb Kiran held sway. Over the second twenty-five years, however, Suleiman was transformed into the Magnificent, the creator of the classical empire. No longer the eschatological lord of the last days, he became the lawgiver, the all-conquering general, the munificent patron of the arts.

While Suleiman’s reign was certainly the high point of the sixteenth century, one must not overlook the millenarian developments at the end of the period. The reign of Murad III (1574-95) encompassed both chronological milestones (1582 or 1583 and 1591), and while there does not appear to have been any widespread effort to transform him into an eschatological messiah, the millenarian significance of his reign was widely recognized. Murad himself was preoccupied with dream interpretation, numerology, and other occult methods of prognostication. He commissioned an Arabic edition of Bistami’s Key, and he ordered a rare and beautifully illustrated astrological work—The Book of Felicity by Muhammad ibn Amir Hasan al-Suudi—translated from Arabic into Ottoman Turkish. This manuscript, a detailed account of the twelve signs of the zodiac, was a loose rendering of Abu Mashar’s Kitab al-Mawalid or Treatise on Nativities. In addition, at the urging of Taqi al-Din, the chief astronomer/astrologer of the Ottoman court, Murad became the only Ottoman sultan to build an observatory. Given the sultan’s interests and Taqi al-Din’s expertise, it was certainly no accident that the greatest imperial festival of the early modern period (the circumcision festival of Murad’s son Mehmed) was scheduled for the Grand Conjunction of 1582. At one point during the festivities the sultan presented two illustrated copies of The Book of Felicity to his daughters, Ayse and Fatima.

In his writings, the historian Mustafa Ali reflected the millennial hopes and fears of Murad’s reign. In 1587 he composed Feraid ul-Viade (Unique Pearls on the Birth), demonstrating the astrological significance of the year of Murad’s birth. Later, as the millennium drew nearer, he wrote Miraat al-Aqalîn (Mirrors of the World), a work highlighting the astrological signs of the impending apocalypse. During this period his poetry reflected the millenarian themes of disease, want, and revolution, and in the last volume of his universal history, Ali referred to Mevlana Isa’s Compendium, citing the dire predictions in Bistami’s Key and the apocalyptic significance of 990/1582-3 and 999/1591-92. The historian also redefined the meaning of Şahîb Kiran. According to him it could be properly attributed to only three world conquerors: Alexander, Genghis Khan, and Timur. For Suleiman the correct appellation was Müeyed Min Allah (Succored by God). This title denoted a sovereign never defeated in battle and included Mehmed I, Selim I, and Suleiman.

60 Fleischer, Bureaucrat and Intellectual, 151-52; Ancient Wisdom,” 243.
61 Fleischer, Bureaucrat and Intellectual, 279-80.
Interest in the esoteric did not end with the sixteenth century. Under Mehmed III (1595-1602), Murad’s successor, Bistam’s Key was translated into Ottoman Turkish, and in 1683 Cezmi Efendi (d. 1692), Kadi of Belgrade, wrote:

“At this time the conjunction of the planets of Jupiter and Saturn, which according to the calculators of the calendrists, would take place in 1094 [1682-83], was reckoned to take place on the last day of Jumada II of the same year in the calendar prepared on the basis of Ulugh Beg’s Zij. 62

Conclusion

Because of the congruence of the two millenarian events—the Grand Conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn and the end of the first millennium—an apocalyptic atmosphere pervaded the three early modern Islamic empires. While each empire responded to these events in its own way, Safavid Iran provided a common repository of theories and prophets. Abu Mashar was an Iranian, and the Isma’ilis who popularized and passed on his theories—the author of the Rasail and Nasir-i Khusrau—were both from Iran. Haydar Remmal fled the Safavid state during the early years of Tahmasp’s reign, and Mir Fathullah Shirazi left his homeland during the shah’s last decade. The largely underappreciated figure linking these two experts in Iranian millenarianism was Mir Ghiyath al-Din Mansur Dashtaki.

Both men were astrologers and students (informal or formal) of Dashtaki—Haydar Remmal during his eight years (1520-28) at the courts of Isma’il and Tahmasp and Mir Fathullah during his five-seven years at the Mansurriyah (ca. 1535-42). While Haydar Remmal was in Tabriz—as Tahmasp’s tutor (1520-24) and as his advisor (1524-28)—Mir Ghiyath al-Din was the chief intellectual presence at court: the principal religious official of the empire and its preeminent philosopher as well. Given Dashtaki’s reputation, Remmal’s apocalypticism, and their time together (nearly a decade as fellow courtiers), it is tempting to identify the Mansurriyah scholar and teacher as the source for many of the esoteric themes and ideas in Haydar’s Istanbul compositions. Mir Fathullah’s encounter with Dashtaki, on the other hand, was more formal. After Mir Ghiyath al-Din lost his post as Sadr in 1531, he returned to Shiraz and resumed headship of the Madrasa. And it was there during the later decades of his life that Dashtaki ignited Mir Fathullah’s passion for the rational sciences. Unlike Haydar, however, Mir Fathullah remained in Iran and, over the next thirty years of writing and teaching, transformed himself into the leading authority in the rational sciences—Dashtaki’s successor. In India Mir Fathullah’s career was shorter than Remmal’s but more public. His mastery of the several sciences gained him widespread renown, and he was chosen by Akbar to reorganize the Mughal madrasa curriculum. Amidst all of his other activity, however, he remained an esoteric visionary—a Shi’ite astrologer heavily influenced by Isma’il’s self-claims, the Zoroastrian ideas of the Azaris, and the conjunction astrology of Abu Mashar.

In addition to Mir Ghiyath al-Din, another feature common to the millenarian culture of the three empires was the use of the epithet Sahib Kiran. Based on the conjunction astrology of Abu Mashar, Lord of the (Auspicious) Conjunction was a title for Safavid and Mughal

rulers as well as for Ottoman. In the Safavid histories, documents, and coins the epithet was relatively rare. It had been used in histories of Ismail,63 and his astrologer, Muhuyi al-Din ibn-i Badr al-Din Anari, had written several conjunction studies (*jami al-qiramat*) in which the 1582 event was highlighted.64 The epithet was also found on the coins of Shah Abbas II (1642-66) and his successor Shah Suleiman (1666-94).65 And, after the fall of the Safavid dynasty the epithet was used for Nadir Shah Afshar (1736-47).66

However, it was the Indian rulers who made the more extensive use of the phrase. Since the Mughals were directly descended from Timur, Lord of the (Auspicious) Conjunction was widely used, employed by nine emperors of the dynasty—Jahangir through Akbar II.67 For the Mughals, though, a slight variant became increasingly popular. Maktub Khan’s chronogram, commemorating the accession of Jahangir, read:

King of kings Jahangir, a second Timur, Sat in justice on the victorious throne. Success, fortune, victory, pomp and triumph are wrapped around him to serve with joy. This is the day of his accession, when fortune puts its head at the feet of the Sahib-i Qiran-i Sani (Second Lord of the [Auspicious] Conjunction). 68

It was to Shahjahan, however, that the epithet Second Lord of the Auspicious Conjunction was routinely applied. The contemporary historian wrote:

“... it was settled that the auspicious surname [of Shahjahan] was to be Sahib Qiran the Second, because the infidel-destroying sword of that Solomon-like Padishah had driven away the demons of strife and disorder from the face of the earth and there was not only a likeness and a resemblance between his praiseworthy qualities and ways, and those of His Majesty the Great Sahib Quran, but the [numerical value] of the word Sahib Qiran... was found to be exactly equal to the numerical value of the letters of Shah Jahan.69

Since there were at least twelve different ways of calculating the numerical value of Persian words and phrases, it is no surprise to find the two historians (Jahangir’s and Shahjahan’s) arriving at different totals. These explanations, it is interesting to note, recall the cabalistic interpretations of the Hurufis, the Nuqtavis, Abd al-Rahman Bistani, and Haydar Remmal.

In each empire a conservative backlash followed the millenarian outbursts of the late sixteenth century. In Iran Shah Abbas’ attacks against the Nuqtavis—putting to death Ahmad Kashfi, Dervish Khusrau, Dervish Kuchek, Ustar Yusufi, and many others—was the early phase in a wide-ranging campaign to establish Imami Shi‘ism as the official confession of the Safavid state. In India the religious and cultural eclecticism of Akbar’s court—seen in

66 Ibid.
the influence of Sheikh Mustafa Gujarati, Sharif Amuli, and later Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindī—was followed in the mid-seventeenth century by a general repudiation of their doctrines and self-claims. And in the Ottoman Empire the messianic claims for Sultan Suleiman (by Mevlana Isa, Haydar Remmal, and others) in the mid-sixteenth century and the eschatological fervor under Murad III at the end of the century gave way to the traditionalist reaction of the Kadızadelis in the middle of the seventeenth century.70