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The Sun, the Moon and the Mughal Emperors

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Abstract

This paper aims collecting some excerpts from literature to evaluate the importance that the sun and the moon had for the Mughal emperors, and consequently for arts and architecture of the Mughal period. This is a preliminary survey for a future more extensive work on the subject.

Keywords: **Mughal Empire, Arts, Architecture.**

Introduction

In some previous papers, we have discussed the Mughal gardens and the alignments observed in some of them, along the sunrise and sunset azimuths on solstices [1-3]. These gardens, beautiful forms of landscape architecture of the Mughal Dynasty, had been heavily influenced by the Persian gardens of charbagh structure, which had a rectilinear layout within walled enclosures [4-6]. Rich of flowers, plants and waters, they became the representation of an earthly paradise. And in fact, it is a word of an Iranian language, 'pairidaeza', meaning 'walled garden', that passed into the Ancient Greek 'paradeisos', and then rendered into the Latin 'paradisus'. In this manner, the "Garden of Eden" became the "Paradise on Earth".

By using satellite images and software for ephemeris, we can easily see that the Mughal gardens, which have their main axes oriented to the cardinal directions, can have alignments along sunrise and sunset azimuths on solstices. The Gardens of Taj Mahal are an example of a garden having such alignments [1,3]. In this manner, these green enclosures become a symbolic horizon representing the world, where their north-south axis is representing the 'axis mundi' (the axis of the world) and the alignments along sunrise and sunset on solstice are rendering the apparent motion of the sun in the sky. For the Taj Mahal complex, let us note also that the pavilions of the platform of the mausoleum are displaying an orientation along moonrise and moonset azimuth on minor lunar standstill, and the gardens some alignments to major lunar standstill [7].

In this article we show that, besides these analysis of the astronomical alignments in architectures, based on satellite images and ephemeris, strong evidences of the role of sun and moon in the life of Mughal emperors exist and that we can find them in the literature about arts and architecture of Mughal period. Here a collection of excerpts from literature.

About the Akbar's tomb

Of the Akbar's tomb, we discussed in [3]. Akbar the Great (1542-1605), was a Mughal Emperor from 1556 until his death. Akbar succeeded his father, Humayun. His tomb is an important Mughal architectural masterpiece, built from 1605 to 1613, in Sikandra, a suburb of Agra, Uttar Pradesh, India. As we can see in [3], the garden that is containing the tomb has the layout possessing the solar alignments observed for the gardens of Taj-Mahal and for the Dilkusha. The Dilkusha Charbagh, near Shahdara Bagh in Lahore, Pakistan, is the garden that contains the mausoleum of Jahangir (1569-1627), the

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Conqueror of the World. The empress Nur Jahan (1577-1645), the Light of the World, laid out this garden [2].

Beside the solar alignments that we find in the garden, the Akbar's tomb has clear astronomical elements too. As told in [8], the "tomb's upper story remains open to the sky. In the center is a magnificent carved white marble cenotaph; at its north end is a lamp stand, also rendered in finely carved white marble. ... an uncovered cenotaph is the grave-type that meets orthodox approval and many have been the reasons for the open top story of Akbar's tomb. But this is only a partial explanation. Considering the Mughal fascination with light and light symbolism, the placement of this cenotaph directly under the sun and moon follows especially the interests of Akbar and Jahangir. Underscoring this interpretation is the final verse of the Persian inscription on the tomb's entrance gate that reads: "May his [Akbar's] soul shine like the rays of the sun and the moon in the light of God".

An inscription of the North facade of the gate of Akbar's complex confirms that "the visual metaphors on the Mughal tombs are indeed references to paradise" [8]. "Hail, blessed space happier than the garden of Paradise / Hail lofty buildings higher than the divine throne / A paradise, the garden of which has thousands of Rizwans as servants / A garden of which has thousands of paradises for its land / The pen of the mason of the Divine Decree has written on its court / These are the gardens of Eden, enter them and live forever. (Smith, Akbar's Tomb, pp.31-35 [9]).

In fact, it is clear from the inscription that it is the charbagh, that is the garden, not the tomb, a metaphor of paradise.

Akbar' syncretic religion

The Din-i Ilahi, the Religion of God, was a syncretic religion propounded by Akbar in 1582 AD. Akbar had the intent of merging elements of the religions of his empire, aiming to a reconciliation among the creeds. The elements were primarily drawn from Islam and Hinduism, but some others were also taken from Christianity, Jainism and Zoroastrianism. In fact, Akbar promoted tolerance of other faiths [10]. As told in [11], of the initiation to the Din-i Ilahi which was a secret rite, not many details are known. It seems that it had been usually performed on Sundays, because of the Zoroastrian and Hindu reverence to the Sun. Abul Fazl (1551 - 1602), vizier of Akbar, told that "At the time of initiations some words of advice were given to the disciple: he must not ... [indulge in] sectarian quarrels, but must follow the rule of universal peace with regard to religions; he must not kill any living creature with his own hand and must not flay anything. the only exceptions are in battle and the chase ... Honour the luminaries (the Sun, Moon, etc.) which are manifesters of God's light, according to the degree of each, and recognize the power and the existence of Almighty God at all times and seasons. Be careful indeed that whether in private or in public you never for a moment, forget Him ". The honoring of luminaries is important, and this reinforcing the fact that the Mughal planning of landscape, which we find in the Mughal gardens is also including alignments to sun and moon.

The Mughal emperors like the sun

For the Mughals, their emperors were like the sun. Let us discuss this fact using a very interesting paper, which is explaining the symbolism of the Mughal thrones. The reference [12] is providing a general analysis of the form, decoration and surroundings of the Mughal thrones as the seats of the emperors, regarded to be the "Embodied Suns". Reference 12 is showing, in great detail, how the decoration of the Mughal thrones with solar motives and images of those animals, traditionally believed to be heavenly and solar, was creating the celestial space for the Emperor, as if he were the sun in the universe. As told in [12], the solar symbolism was a leitmotiv of the Mughal Empire, so that the ruler was regarded as the sun. In fact, the Great Mughals traced back their lineage to the "shining" sons of Princess Alanquwa and subsequently back to the sun [12].

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Figure 1: Nur-ud-din Mohammad Salim, known by his imperial name Jahangir "conqueror of the world", was the fourth Mughal Emperor. Note the aura radiating from his head.

From the Hindu tradition were derived the practices of the Mughal sun worship, which included the ceremony of the darshan, when the emperors appeared in the jharokha [13] at the moment of the sunrise [12]. Another source of the Mughal solar symbolism was an ancient Persian concept of the divine glory. Abul Fazl, vizier and chronicler of Akbar's reign, tells: "Kingship is a light emanating from God, a ray from the sun, the illuminator of the universe, it is the argument of the book of perfection, the receptacle of all virtues". The divine light was visible as an "aura" radiating from "the blessed face of the ruler"; this aura was represented as haloes encircling heads of the monarchs in the Mughal art [12] (see examples Figures 1-3). On the halo surrounding the head of emperors see also [14].
As a consequence, we have that Akbar was "His Majesty the Sun", "The Sun of Mighty Power", "Lamp of the Court of Dominion of Taimur's Dynasty", "Visible God". And the favored wife of Jahangir was "Nur-e-Jahan", which means "The Light of the World". Mumtaz Mahal, the beloved spouse of Shah Jahan, was "The Sun of Modesty" and the Princess Jahanara "The Light of the Imperial Chamber" [12].

Figure 2: Portrait of Humayun. Note the aura, the divine effulgence, surrounding the head of the emperor (Image Courtesy Wikipedia)

As told in [12], "The solar symbolism gained a particular importance during accessions and enthronements of the Mughal emperors. Humayun was obsessed by cosmic symbolism and occult sciences, was enthroned in pavilions and tents that were adorned with the zodiac signs and that obviously

imitated heavens for the solar emperor. Undoubtedly celestial connotations were also included in Humayun's famous "Mystic House". It was a building with an octagonal room which housed the imperial jeweled throne". It is possible, as told in [12], that the octagonal form of this throne room echoed the concept of an octagonal alignment of the cosmic space, which was already known to the Turkish ancestors of the Mughals, linked to the eight directions of the world, the four corners of the earth and the four intermediate directions. "The emperor was thus enthroned at the crossing of these cosmic directions, in the center of the universe" [12].

The Reference 12 continues discussing the symbols of sun used in the Mughal Thrones, the sunburst, the parasol, and the peacock. "A peacock was the most important of all solar creatures that feature among the decorative motives on Mughal thrones. … Peacocks, just as ducks, were associated with paradise, and some Muslim poets, like for example Shams-i-Tabasi, spoke of tavus-e-sidrat al-muntaha which was the peacock of the uppermost level of paradise. … Because of these paradisiac and solar connotations, the peacock was depicted as the custodian of the tree of life and of the solar disc. … The most famous of all Mughal thrones symbolizing the glory of the dynasty and commonly described as the "heavenly like", that is Shah Jahan's Peacock Throne was also adorned with two jewelled figurines of peacocks" [12]. For more details, the reader is invited to see the paper [12].

Inscription on a dagger

An important dagger with the blade inscribed to the Emperor Shah Jahan (reg. 1628-1657) is described in [15]. It is interesting for the inscription, because it contains reference to sun and moon, and for the emblem of the parasol depicted on it. Not only on the thrones then, but also on small objects the Mughals were using symbols connected to the sky. The inscription read 'The dagger of the king of kings, the defender of religion and conqueror of the world. The conqueror king, the second Lord of happy conjunction, Shah Jahan, is like the new moon, but out of its shining triumphs, it makes the world shine eternally like the rays of the Sun. Oh God! O the Ever-opener (of all gates)! O the Aider! O the Helper!' [15]. This dagger is ~~a personal~~ a Shah Jahan's personal object~~s~~. It contains the Emperor's name, his title, and the place and date of the dagger's manufacture.

Let us note in this inscription how the emperor is like the crescent moon, but, due to his triumphs, he is shining like the sun.

The blade is also depicting the parasol, an emblem found on blades from the imperial army and princes. The parasol signified the "dome of heaven", ~~and which~~ when carried above the head of a ruler, showing that he had an exalted state and his role between God and more ordinary mortals [15].

Figure 3: The Jahangir's dream. Mughal emperor Jahangir, on the right, and Shah Abbas, the Safavid ruler of the Persian empire. Note the iconography. They stand on top of the world, on a lion and a lamb, respectively, in peace and harmony. Note the angels holding up the crescent moon and the sun.

(Image Courtesy: Jungpionier, Wikipedia).

Divine effulgence

In the Figure 3 we can see a Mughal emperor, Jahangir, and the Safavid ruler of the Persian empire in peace and harmony, in the sun and crescent. Of these two elements, sun and crescent together, we will write in the next paragraph. In the Figure, we can see the head of Jahangir radiating energy. This radiation was the "divine effulgence", possessed by Mughal emperors (see the Figure 2 for Humayun) .

We find it in a letter of a Persian ruler [16]. Here a part of a letter from the Safavid ruler of Iran, Shah Tahmasb (r. 1524-1576), to his Ottoman rival, Sultan Sulayman (r. 1520-1566) [16].

"Humayun, one of the greatest kings of the world, had five lac [100,000] troops and 12,000 elephants. Then … he became so vain as claim divine powers. His occasional appearance to the people was described as divine effulgence. In his entire dominion and in his army, the Shari'at was abrogated and heresy and evil prevailed. One day he called a meeting of his notables, soothsayers and astrologers and said he had seen in a dream that the moon, the sun and the stars had come down to the foot of his throne. The soothsayers and astrologers said that the position of the heavenly bodies confirmed the purport of the dream and that the Sultan of Turkey, the Shah of Iran, the rulers of Turan and other kings would soon have to present themselves at his (Humayun's) and accept his service, and their tenure of sovereignty will depend on his will" [16].

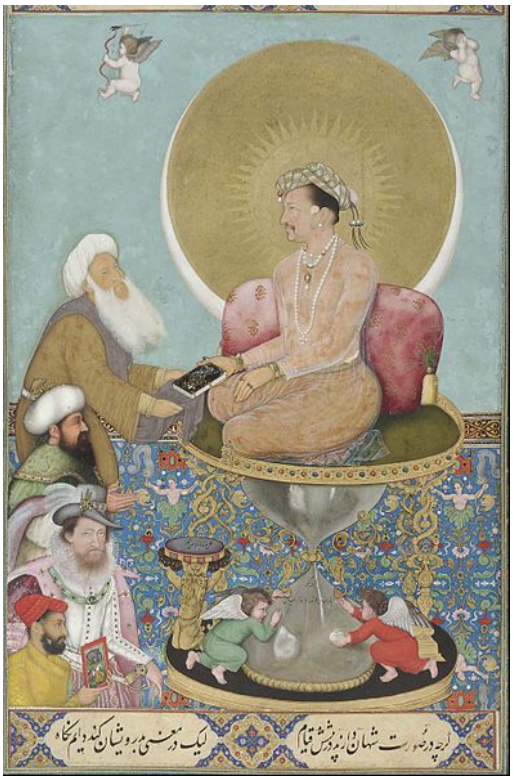

Figure 4: Jahangir receiving a mullah. 1620 ca. The artist was Bichitr, an Indian painter during the Mughal period, patronized by the emperors Jahangir and Shah Jahan.

Sun and crescent moon

Here in the following a very interesting discussion is proposed, discussion which is given in [17]. "In India, after the Moghul conquest, some new iconographic elements were introduced and some styles changed. In particular, Islamic Persian influences are visible. The configuration of sociopolitical symbols underwent a slight modification in that the crescent as a symbol of state was introduced".

In fact, in the Figure 3, we have noted the sun and the crescent together. Ref.17 is analyzing the image here reproduced in the Figure 4; [17] tells "In this picture the Mughal configuration of the empire, the state and the ruler is depicted, the empire symbolized by a sun radiant, the state by a crescent and the ruler by his image". According to [17], the sun-and-crescent has its origins in ancient Mesopotamia and was the imperial state emblem of the Seleucid Empire (312-64 BC). Then, for the Mughals, the "symbol of the Empire was a sun. The Indian sun is of variable design. The oldest form, from the first years of the Mughal Empire shows a sun radiant, the rays thin and long. This form is for example on the imperial robes of Humayun ... As a symbol of state we meet the moon, like in many other cultures. The Indian moon is always depicted as a full moon and as a white or silver disc. … The first Mughal emperors used the crescent as a symbol of State, thereby following the Hellenistic tradition" [17]. The full moon was used as emblem of Mughal governors. "It was displayed on a black circular screen borne behind the ruler. Sometimes it has a corona or is surrounded by stars. The full moon continues a Hindu tradition and was used by Hindu rulers".

On the Figure 4, let us continue using Ref.18. The artist of the image was Bichitr an Indian painter during the Mughal period, patronized by the emperors Jahangir and Shah Jahan. In [18] it is told that Jahangir was fascinated by Renaissance art. The cupids depicted combine the Western world with the Eastern world. As in Jahangir's Dream (Figure 3), we once again see that Jahangir's head is in the center of the sun and the moon; he is the center of the universe and the giver of light. The rulers represented in this miniature are painted in order of importance: Jahangir is obviously the most important.

The sun and the crescent moon together could seem an iconography which is far from the European arts. However, we have them too. In the Figure 5, we can see the woman of the Apocalypse in an illustration of the Hortus deliciarum (c.1180). Another interesting example is Our Lady of Victory (1654), a statue which is showing a crescent moon and solar rays, on the portal of Schlägl monastery church.

Figure 5: The woman of Apocalypse. Note the crescent moon (Image Courtesy Testus, Wikipedia).

In general, the iconography of Middle Ages in Europe used the crescent moon, which was a symbol already used by the late Hellenistic and early Roman period. We can find it on Byzantine coins, and in the Roman coinage, such as on this Hadrian coin.

Persian Flags

The Mughal Empire had a number of imperial flags and standards. The principal imperial standard of the Mughals displayed a lion and sun. The Mughals traced their use of this flag back to Timur [19]. About the historical Persian flags, it can help us the Encyclopaedia Iranica website [20]. Both the Sun and Golden Lion are symbols of kingship and royalty.

Figure 6: An engraving from Edward Terry's A Voyage to East-India (1655) titled Imperial Standard of the Great Mogul.

"The sun (imagined as a male) had always been associated with Persian royalty". It is interesting, in [20], a salutation of a letter from the "Persian king, the Sun of the East," to the "Roman Caesar, the Moon of the West" and a quote of a hero-king saying: "I have heard from wise men that when the Moon of the Turks rises up it will be harmed by the Sun of the Iranians". The references continues telling that the "Lion was also a very common symbol of royalty in the ancient and medieval world. Lion hunting scenes are somewhat common in Assyrian reliefs, showing the power of the Assyrian kings over nature. Persia was no different, and neither were the neighboring areas: Islamic, Turkish, and Mongol traditions also stressed the symbolic association of the lion and royalty. … They likewise reaffirmed the charismatic power of the sun, and the Mongols re-introduced the veneration of the sun especially in its rising phase. As a result of these developments the heraldic use of the lion and sun symbol gained popularity and was extended, appearing on banners as well as on coins and textiles, metalwork, and luster tiles … Clavijo (pp. 207 f.) describes a palace which Timur had seized from the former Chaghatay khans of Samarqand, and states that the lion and sun symbol ornamented the gate-way of the main building and the arches around the courtyard."

On the moon

As we have seen, references on the role of the sun in the Mughal culture can be easily found. For what concerns the moon, we have seen its role as symbol in the crescent form. Further work is requires to find other references to the moon, to be more specific. In any case, let us consider the words we find in the Ref.21, which is discussing the thought in Islamic India.

The author of [21] is invoking the "Saussure's basic notion that meaning is created not simply as a re-sult of a sign signifying something, but also through a play of differences and mediations between and among various signs, so that a sign can signify other signs .... For example 'It might be said that the

moon shows man his true human condition; that in a sense man looks at himself, and finds himself anew in the life of the moon. That is why the symbolism and mythology of the moon have an element of pathos and at the same time consolation, for the moon governs both death and fertility, both drama and initiation. Though the modality of the moon is supremely one of change, of rhythm, it is equally one of periodic returning; and this pattern of existence is disturbing and consolating at the same time – for though the manifestations of life are so frail that they can suddenly disappear altogether, they are restores in the "eternal returning" regulated by the moon'." Hence the significance of the new moon, and the Eid moon, the idea of the eternal renewal is shared by Muslim and Christian alike [21].

The moon and the ghosts

For the moon and Mughal emperors, let me conclude with this story that we can find in a fiction book [22], about the Humayun's Tomb. "The tomb was in a huge garden, with waterways and fountains all round, enclosed by high walls. Hardly anyone visited the tomb at that time of the evening. A couple of caretakers were supposed to be on guard but they used to go home, locking the main gate, afraid of the ghosts of Humayun and other Mughal kings who were known to freely roam the place as soon as the sun went down. It was rumoured that on every full moon night, Babur held a durbar, with all the Mughal kings who had ruled this vast empire for 400 years standing respectfully before him. It was said that they didn't want outsiders to be present there after dusk" [22]. It is interesting this story, where the ghosts of kings, that during their life were like the sun, are meeting today on full moon.

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