Telling the story of the decorative arts involves at least two major dimensions: the dictates of fashion and the individual idiosyncrasies of style. Fashion tends to overtake all manufacturers of a given type of object within a limited range of time. Some ateliers will produce superbly crafted and designed objects on the dominant theme, while others are less successful. Nevertheless, the theme is still apparent and allows us to juxtapose the various expressions chronologically. For example, in the early seventeenth century one of the more popular themes was the fabulous beast (dragon, qilin, winged horse) depicted against a dense ground of fiery clouds or foliage in the centre of blue-and-white dishes (Fig. 2.1; ROM.54/ Cat. no. 8).

This theme was superbly executed by the potters of both Kirman and Mashhad (ROM.81/ Cat. no. 11) such that to the untrained eye the products of these two major production centres were not distinguishable. Yet Kirman in south-central Iran was separated by some 800 largely desert, kilometres from Mashhad in the country’s northeast corner. There were also many lesser-quality renderings of this theme from the same period. The closeness in style of the elite ateliers (at Kirman and Mashhad) probably had something to do with their commitment to faithful copying of Chinese models, whereas the lesser renditions may be understood as inferior copies, or even copies of the Safavid copies. The intent of ateliers producing superior wares diverged from the others, as quality was determined by the market targeted. Different ateliers, or craftsmen within an atelier, catered to different levels of society. While the main objective of this chapter is to establish a chronology and provenance for as many different types of Safavid pottery as the data permits, another is to tease from this information a sense of the relative social status (quality) of the different wares.

**China at the Door: The Sixteenth Century**

The ascent of a new dynasty rarely serves as the opening of a new chapter in the history of style. Not until the dynasty consolidates its hold and puts into place its own mode of operation can the changes, if any, be sensed. Certainly, this is the case with the downfall of the Turkman dynasty, overcome by the Safavids in the first decade of the sixteenth century. The Safavid dynasty, established by Isma’il, the charismatic leader of the Sufi order founded in the fourteenth century at Ardabil and now linked with Shi'ite messianism, conquered most of the lands controlled by the Turkman and Timurid dynasties. In the first part of this chapter, one of our chief concerns is to assess the extent to

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**Fig. 2.1.** ROM.54/ Cat. no. 8, dish, face.