

Symbols of Authority in Medieval Islam: History, Religion, and Muslim Legitimacy in the Delhi Sultanate

Blain H. Auer

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This insightful book, useful to scholars and students of Islamic and South Asian history, illuminates the place of Islamic thought and institutions in the political regimes of the Delhi Sultanate (1206-1526). Finding late approaches to the historiography of the period unduly focused on “fact” and “fiction,” rather than “meaning,” the author unravels the more complex relationship between history and historiography in six pertinent chapters (p. xix). These are complemented by maps, illustrations, thorough endnotes, and a useful bibliography. As a whole, the cohort of Persian histories read lead to the convincing conclusion that “historians played a major role in producing and sustaining ideas about power, justice and Islamic rule of the premodern empire” (p. 160).

Chapter 1 lays the foundations of the discussion by considering how the discourses of modern historicism produce a “misunderstanding of the relationship between religion and politics,” one that fails “to capture the pervasive interpretative dimension” of the period’s historiography (p. 8). Also finding traces of that misunderstanding in the late “historical-critical method” pioneered by Marilyn Waldman, Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, and others, Auer calls for a “reevaluation” of previous approaches (p. 5). The work of reinterpretation is begun here by drawing attention to the “rhetorical and didactic” aspects of, in particular, the writings of Minhaj Siraj Juzjani, Ziya al-Din Barani, and Shams al-Din Afif (pp. 9, 18-24). This “literary triptych,” as Auer ably demonstrates in the following chapters, reflects a “unifying theme and mode of representation” whose political and cultural influence endures for centuries to come, beginning with the establishment of Delhi as the seat of Islamic authority in South Asia (p. 19).

Pre-Islamic prophetic paradigms, including Qur’anic themes, constitute the attention of chapter 2. Auer excavates the manner in which Islamic/Qur’anic conceptions of Abraham, Noah, Moses, and Joseph feature prominently in historical writing. Models of just rulership connected with these prophets, for example, are outlined and interpreted in light of the ideologies of the early Delhi sultans. “Quranic themes and tales of the prophets,” Auer explains, “were the measure by which the crafters of history understood their time and place and the means by which historians attempted to convey their values of leadership” (p. 46). Of course, the example of Muhammad represents

the most persistent prophetic paradigm and is dealt with exclusively in chapter three. The motif of “sultans as bearers of Muhammad’s virtues” is reflected in such notions as Afif’s usage of the title “seal of sultans” and Barani’s reference to Muhammad as “sultan of the prophets” (pp. 50, 51, 56). Hadith literature is also considered part of the overall discussion of how Delhi’s sultans are cast as “caretakers of the Islamic heritage” (p. 76).

The important role of Sufism as a legitimating discipline is explored in the fourth chapter. The place of *walāyah*, or the conception of Sufi shaykhs/pirs as “friends of God,” is discovered through a variety of writings and its significance brought to bear in the literary triptych under scrutiny. The encounters between Sufis and sultans described by Delhi’s historians, as well as sultanic pilgrimages to Sufi shrines, are positioned to illustrate legitimating functions. But most notably, Auer’s conclusion that the sultan was transformed in the process from the “seeker and recipient” of mystical blessings into “a producer of his own charismatic religious authority” opens the door to reconceiving the institution of sultanate (p. 99).

As the author implicitly concedes in the fifth chapter, however, Sufi-inspired sultanic religious authority was always constrained by the place provided to the caliphate in the Islamic legal literature of the period. The practice of “caliphal investiture,” in particular, proved to be “a reliable source of legitimacy” for sultans, but “restricted their power” to that set by a “normative Sunni ideology” defined by law (p. 134). It is therefore fitting that the book’s sixth and final chapter deals exclusively with “Shari‘ah and Justice” (p. 135). Auer begins by outlining the theoretical bifurcation of legal authority inherent in the concepts of shari‘ah (the jurisdiction of the ‘ulama’) and *siyasa/davabit* (the legislative realm of the sultan). Using capital punishment as a measure, Barani’s and Afif’s works are scoured to confirm the deployment of *shari‘* provisions when limitations of sultanic authority are sought, while representations of the sultan’s impartiality and clemency are emphasized to reconcile sultanic action with the shari‘ah. The author therefore concludes that the “sultans of Delhi appropriated both the shari‘ah and *siyasa* judicial systems for their own political purposes.” When this use of law is added to the other Islamic themes and institutions discussed in previous chapters, Auer ends with justifiable criticism of earlier scholarship that seeks to frame the Delhi Sultanate as “either a theocratic or secular form of governance.” This approach is shown to be “clearly a distorting anachronism” (p. 155).

A short concluding chapter acknowledges the “major frame of reference” provided later regimes and their historians – the Mughals, the British, and communal nationalists – by the Delhi sultans’ literary triptych (p. 159). In these historical writings, Auer surmises, each later regime and author “found

arguments to support their version of history.” What separates this book from the distortions inherent in earlier studies is the recognition that “early Persian historiography is as much an enterprise in representation and identity construction as it is a record of dynastic action” (p. 160).

Every work leaves some loose ends, and this book is no exception. Although attempts to square shari‘ah and *siyasa* are amply discussed, the manner in which sultans attempted to reconcile claims to Sufi-inspired religious authority and the constraint of legal thought remains unanswered. This shortcoming arises from a thinner presentation of law than exegesis and other disciplines, including little consideration of the varying place of the law in Sufism. By describing shari‘ah as “codified in a restricted body of legal rules,” for example, the author not only skirts a large contingent of specialized studies on Islamic law that disagrees, but falls into the very assumptions about Islamic law held by previous approaches otherwise critiqued (p. 135). Nevertheless, Auer’s reconsideration of approaches and reevaluation of key historiographical sources successfully conveys many of the broader shortcomings of earlier readings. The book presents a far richer yet concise alternative, making it a valuable addition to the scholarly understanding of the Delhi Sultanate in particular and of Islamic modes of political legitimation more generally.

M. Reza Pirbhai
Associate Professor, Department of History
Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA