

Court Cultures in the Muslim World

Courts and the complex phenomenon of the courtly society have received intensified interest in academic research over recent decades; however, the field of Islamic court culture has so far been overlooked. This book provides a comparative perspective on the history of courtly culture in Muslim societies from the earliest times to the nineteenth century, and presents an extensive collection of images of courtly life and architecture within the Muslim realm.

The thematic methodology employed by the contributors underlines their interdisciplinary and comprehensive approach to issues of politics and patronage from across the Islamic world stretching from Cordoba to India. Themes range from the religious legitimacy of Muslim rulers, terminologies for court culture in Oriental languages, Muslim concepts of space for royal representation, accessibility of rulers, and the role of royal patronage for Muslim scholars and artists, to the growing influence of European courts as role models from the eighteenth century onwards. Discussing specific terminologies for courts in Oriental languages and explaining them to the non-specialist, chapters describe the specific features of Muslim courts and point towards future research areas. As such, it fills this important gap in the existing literature in the areas of Islamic history, religion, and Islam in particular.

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Seventh to nineteenth centuries

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Introduction

Albrecht Fuess and Jan-Peter Hartung

Court and court culture

“In the court I exist and of the court I speak, but what the court is, God knows, I know not”,¹ wrote Walter Map (d. c. 1209 CE), writer and clergyman at the twelfth century court of Henry II of England, in his *Courtiers’ Trifles*. One might easily assume that this puzzle, posed by a member of a medieval European court society had long since been solved. Surprisingly, that is not the case. The above quotation also describes the difficulty of defining the phenomenon of the “court”,² which characterizes contemporary research. Despite numerous historical studies of the “great men”³ and their entourage, not much has changed since the times of Walter Map.

This grim outlook is, of course, exaggerated. Since the second half of the twentieth century academic research has repeatedly attempted to grasp the concept of the court, primarily by trying to understand its underlying structures rather than in a narrative manner. The phenomenon has been approached from multiple angles, which have produced a number of interesting insights. The study of the renowned sociologist Norbert Elias, first published in 1969, using the French absolutist court of Louis XIV as an illustration, can be classified in many respects as groundbreaking. One of Elias’ main accomplishments lies in the fact that he perceived the court in a typological way, namely as “specific figurations of people that are no less in need for elucidation than cities or factories”.⁴ This description has had a lasting impact on most of the studies on the matter since.⁵

Elias’ decision to describe the phenomenon of the court typologically has led to certain methodical consequences. Neither the tools of the historian nor of the social scientist are sufficient on their own to ensure a structural and functional classification of court and “court society”. Therefore, a transdisciplinary approach is needed that combines historical and sociological tools. The phenomenon, according to Elias, can only be understood by creating a transculturally applicable ideal type in a Weberian sense; something to help us understand the underlying structural commonalities and connections beyond the “unrepeatable and unique aspects”⁶ of single historical case studies. This, in turn, is significant, because it is exactly such a universalistic approach of unravelling the structures of the phenomenon of courts that serves to deepen the understanding of specific historical cases in culturally different contexts, and, subsequently, leads to a greater analytical depth.

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Departing from the work of Elias, numerous new questions related to the issue under investigation have been raised by the scientific community. Could, for instance, a court society perhaps be perceived as a catalyst for elite-building? What are the functions of a ruler's position for the constitution of a court? Moreover, the analysis of personal networks in and around court and the numerous patron–client relationships created at various levels have received increasing attention.⁷ So has the examination of political functions of ritualized procedures during court ceremonials⁸ and artistic representations of various provenances.⁹ Finally, and perhaps most closely related to the ideas of Norbert Elias, are the constant attempts to define court that overarch all the previously asked questions. Such attempts range from an understanding of court based upon the palace and other architectural components and all their related actors,¹⁰ to explanations that draw on Elias' research by defining court as a “series of occasions”¹¹ combined with a permanent court society that congregates around a regent. For contemporary European historians like Ronald G. Asch and Jeroen Duindam, who came forth with useful and refined ideas of what a court may be, the work of Elias still remains the main reference point.¹²

As can be seen from this struggle for a truly comprehensive definition of court and court society, and despite the numerous and detailed case studies ever since the publication of Elias' *Court Society*, many questions remain unanswered even regarding “European court culture” and demand the development of an analytical framework distinct from Elias'.¹³ However, the situation regarding research on “Muslim court culture” is even more problematic.

Muslim court culture

Measured against the state of research on European court culture, the study of Muslim court culture falls far behind and has so far not moved beyond the—indisputably valuable—stage of case studies.¹⁴ As opposed to the European context, scholarship remains at the stage of basic research, that is, the localization and first scrutiny of manuscripts and edited texts relevant to the respective cases. However desirable and productive a comparative approach of structural elements of court and court society, along the lines suggested by Norbert Elias, might be, it has to be acknowledged that the global community of Islamicists and scholars of the history of Muslim societies has so far not contributed significantly to this wider undertaking.¹⁵

However, before the disciplines of Islamic studies and Near and Middle Eastern history are able to contribute some of their expertise to this larger research project, comparative approaches within these disciplines have to be established, which recognize the specificity of the Muslim context. This would force a re-evaluation of the analytical categories in the light of indigenous terms and concepts before looking elsewhere and causing the danger of creating rather distorted images by forcing a terminology to fit even when inappropriate. Categories like “nobility” and “feudalism” are just two cases in point where terminology designed for European contexts is transplanted to the Muslim context without any critical

reflection. This situation and the necessity for a revised attitude to the terms and concepts used has been summarized by Nadia El Cheikh:

Court studies are almost non-existent for various periods of Islamic history. The terminology itself, namely the term “court” needs to be investigated and defined in the ways in which it may be used in connection to [...] Islamic societies.¹⁶

Besides sharpening awareness of the terminology used, a comparative approach to the complex of Muslim court culture within the field of Islamic studies is also needed to identify core analytical questions particular to the Muslim context.

Towards a joint discussion

Starting out from this rather bleak picture, as editors of the present volume, we felt the urge to ignite or fuel the debate on this issue among Islamicists and historians working on the region. We felt there was no better way to achieve this than by bringing together a selection of accomplished scholars from Islamic studies and Near and Middle Eastern history and, thus to inaugurate a first comparative approach to the issue of Muslim court culture within these academic disciplines. It was this idea that became the spark for organizing an international conference on the topic, that was held on 2–5 July 2007 in Gotha, Germany, and that led to the present publication of the proceedings.

Hardly any other venue in Germany seemed better suited to host a conference on “Court culture in the Muslim World” than the baroque Schloss Friedenstein at Gotha in the heart of the federal state of Thuringia. The research library situated in the castle hosts the third largest collection of oriental manuscripts in Germany and is frequently used by international scholars. Moreover, the impressive collection of Islamic manuscripts in Gotha might in itself be seen as an indicator of European court culture, as the manuscripts were collected by the German scholar Ulrich Jasper Seetzen (d. 1811) at the turn of the nineteenth century under a commission from Duke Ernest II of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg (r. 1772–1804). Seetzen undertook a research expedition to the Middle East from where he dispatched, among other things, more than 2,500 oriental manuscripts to Gotha, which he had collected in Istanbul, Aleppo, Damascus, Jerusalem and Cairo, before finally disappearing under unclear circumstances in Yemen in 1811.¹⁷ It was therefore only natural to choose Gotha as the appropriate venue for our conference. Moreover, the wide and positive response we received to our invitation from leading scholars in the field worldwide testified to the importance of our aim, namely to provide the first structural overview of the state of the research on different aspects of courts and courtly life in the Muslim World from the earliest times to the nineteenth century.

Modifying leading questions

As the long-term objective of both the conference and the present volume was to contribute to a wider comparative research on courts and court societies in a

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transcultural perspective, it seemed appropriate to tackle some of the above-mentioned analytical core questions raised by researchers on European court cultures in the wake of Elias. The first core question is what should be understood by court? Does this term refer to some spatial entity, as the Latin word *cohors*—“enclosure”, from which the English word is derived, or should it rather be understood as a structured conglomeration of people, a second definition of the Latin *cohors* meaning “entourage” of a Roman provincial governor?¹⁸ Or is it, as Ronald G. Asch suggests, a series of periodical events?¹⁹ If opting for one of the latter two definitions, what would be the relationship between court and “palace”, especially in contexts where there is no exact term for court?²⁰ If one opts for the first definition of court as a spatial entity, would there be a hierarchy of spaces?

The fundamental problem of defining court raises a host of subordinate questions that have already been posed by scholars of European court culture, following the methodological suggestions made by Norbert Elias. These would now have to be utilized for the investigation of Muslim court culture.

However, even though the questions that dominated the comparative study of Muslim court culture during the Gotha conference were strongly influenced by those analytically very valuable ones developed by the research on European court culture, the focus was on a field that is culturally distinct. The question about whether something can be specifically termed “Islamic” in the context of Muslim court culture had to be placed at the core of the discussion. In this context the term Muslim court culture had to be thoroughly scrutinized. Does the term hint only at the religious creed of those who rule, or is this rule itself subject to religious legitimacy, drawing from the authoritative texts of Islam?

With this, the overall theme of the Gotha conference and, therefore, of the present volume, was identified as the tension between ideal and reality, or, in other words, between a normative expectation, that is of temporal and spatial invariance that is suggested by the text of the Qur’ānic revelation itself, and of a variety of distinct historical situations in diverse local contexts. Into this larger framework the other three themes that shaped the discussions during the conference and the contributions to the present volume fit neatly: the legitimization of actual and potential political rule; the strategies of adaptation to prevailing political, social, and cultural contexts; and, finally, the strategies for the elaboration of splendid court culture. Most of the contributions touch upon more than one of these themes.

a) Legitimization of political rule

With the question of the legitimization of actual political rule we are already entering a field that, although some inspiration from research on European court culture may be drawn, has a specific and distinct Islamic connotation. Although one might find indications in the authoritative texts of Islam that could be interpreted as Muslim rule being legitimized by God,²¹ an Islamic equivalent to the concept of “Kingship by the Grace of God” in medieval and early modern Europe seems to be absent. After all, the God of the Qur’ān appears to be far more transcendent

and, therefore, unapproachable to man than the incarnated God of the Gospel. Therefore, legitimization of political rule must draw its inspirations from elsewhere. It is precisely a Qur'ānic verse like 2:30, which refers to the deputyship of God on earth (*khilāfat allāh fi 'l-ard*), which points to the direction in which we may have to look. God entrusted deputyship on earth to his prophets, those who stood as guarantors for the correct implementation of God's will on earth. Thus, although in a historical salvation context it has been used to try and legitimize a succession of mundane rule that proceeds from God's appointment of Adam as *khilāfat allāh*,²² from our perspective it seems more appropriate to start with the Prophet Muḥammad as a benchmark.

After all, the question of the religious legitimacy of rulers gained special importance for Muslim societies after his death. With this, however, we are stepping onto the hotly debated field of determining the "nature" of the Prophet. Was Muḥammad only the propagator of the conclusive version of the monotheistic revelation, or was he also a worldly ruler,²³ and as such keeping court around his house in Medina? Clearly, the person of the Prophet combines the ideal of political with spiritual leadership (*imāra wa-imāma*)²⁴ and thus serves as the ultimate standard of Muslim governance. But is this sufficient to categorize the political practices of Muḥammad as court culture? As Michael Cook points out in his contribution to this volume, from the standard biographies describing Muḥammad's eighth century rule in Medina it appears egalitarian and free from social hierarchy and courtly protocol. Muḥammad's rule, Cook concludes, could therefore perhaps be better described as "anti-court".

After all, there are numerous elements that seem significant at least for later Muslim court culture, which do not appear in the political and administrative practices of the Prophet. Muḥammad, it seems, was easily accessible to those who wanted to speak to him, at least according to later hagiographical sources. Later Muslim rulers were much more distant from their subjects and, as is the case with the Mughals, their contact with commoners and officers of lower rank was highly ritualized, or they were, as with the Ottoman sultans, hardly ever seen in public. Another issue is the humbleness the Prophet displayed even as a statesman that clashes with the flaunting of a splendid court culture in later periods.

Whether Muḥammad's rule can be seen as paradigmatic, Muslim court culture therefore remains a worthwhile issue for further research. At least for the moment, however, scholarship on Muslim court culture in general seems to be correct in assuming that, even though it cannot be denied that the Prophet served as a role model for "good governance", it is not really legitimate to speak of Muslim court culture prior to the mid-seventh century CE, when, with the dispute over leadership, the political centres of the young Muslim Empire shifted from Medina to Syrian Damascus and Iraqi Kufa. It was in this context that a dynastic principle became established in the Muslim context of governance. Both issues, the shift of the Muslim political centres to the Fertile Crescent and Iraq and the establishment of the dynastic principle within the Muslim context, had far-reaching consequences.

As the new dynasties developed in areas with long established courtly traditions they needed to integrate into the prevalent practices while gradually developing a

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distinct Islamic pattern of governance and, following on from this, an unmistakable Muslim court culture. If what has been said above about the Prophetic practice as a paradigm for Muslim rule holds true, then the deviation from his practice, including Muḥammad's reluctance to designate a successor for the leadership of the Muslim community, has to be reconciled. The new Muslim monarchs had to establish criteria to depict their rule as good governance. Here, terms like the "common good" (*maṣlaḥa*), "charity" (*ṣadaqa*), and "justice" (*ʿadāla*) played an important role in the constitution of what became "royal conduct" (*adab al-mulūk*). The contributions of Jan-Peter Hartung, Lucian Reinfandt, Christian Müller, and to some extent, of Albrecht Fuess, deal with one or more of the above categories in various historical contexts. Another important point that contributed strongly to the definition of royal conduct in the field of tension between normative expectations and actual realities is the role of a ruler's patronage of the arts and sciences. This is exemplified by the articles of Sonja Brentjes on the patronage of physicians, mathematicians and philosophers at Ayyubid courts between the late twelfth and mid-thirteenth century CE; Abbas Amanat on the painter Ṣanīʿ al-Mulḳ (d. 1283/1866–7) at the court of the nineteenth century Iranian Qajars, and, again, of Jan-Peter Hartung. All the above-mentioned points that contributed over time to various formulations of royal conduct have found their embodiment in the so-called "mirrors for princes" (*naṣīḥāt al-mulūk*), a genre of courtly literature about the interface of philosophical ethics and the practice of rule. The mirrors for princes literature, prominently beginning with the works of Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ (executed c. 139/756), was meant to provide useful guidance for rulers. The virtues of patronage are frequently highlighted in this kind of text as evidenced by the chapter of Syrinx von Hees on Ibn Nubāta al-Miṣrī (d. 742/1342), a panegyrist of the Ayyubid prince Abū ʿl-Fidāʾ of Ḥamāh (d. 732/1331) and his successor. Stefan Leder focuses in his contribution to this volume on the ways in which the descriptions of culinary taste were used in *naṣīḥāt al-mulūk* to indicate the literary taste of a ruler that was frequently displayed in the patronage of poets and other literati.

With regard to the issue of the legitimization of political rule there is one additional point that inevitably needs to be addressed for a better understanding of the historical development of Muslim court culture within a wider temporal and spatial framework. A number of contributions to this volume shed light on the patterns of dynastic succession. Sunil Kumar, for instance elaborates on the shift in residential space with each new ruling lineage during the Sultanate of Delhi between 1206 and 1526 CE, while Felix Konrad focuses on alterations in courtly rituals made by the nineteenth century khedives, originally the Ottoman governors of Egypt but, at least after their recognition by the Ottoman sultan ʿAbdülʿazīz in 1867, a sovereign dynasty of their own. From these two papers it appears that the nucleus for a new dynasty is established in manifold dissociations from its predecessor. In this, they seem to follow the practice of earlier Muslim dynasties which, too, had, as stated earlier, to integrate into the existing non-Muslim courtly traditions while gradually developing a distinct Muslim court culture. This issue, although closely related to the question of legitimization of political power, is at the core of the second theme that pervades a number of papers in the present volume.

b) Strategies of adaptation and emancipation

In order to establish dynastic rule, based on a set of entirely new values, in an environment that possesses long traditions of governance, leaders must first develop means of adapting to the prevailing political, social and cultural context. After all, the administrative experience of the leaders of the young Muslim community was no match at all for the Byzantine and the Sasanian empires that first bordered on the Muslim lands and were subsequently absorbed into the “House of Islam” (*dār al-islām*), that is the territory where Islamic jurisdiction applied. It was thus only natural that in the beginning hybrid forms of administration developed, which became gradually Islamized in the following periods.²⁵

This process of transition is well illustrated by the contribution of Stefan Heidemann. He shows how the early adaptation of Byzantine and Sasanian coinage by the Umayyad caliphs was justified in Islamic terms, but, owing to the development of a distinct identity by the Muslim rulers, it increasingly gave way to the minting of new coins which corresponded to a new Islamic symbolism. The contribution of Hugh Kennedy falls into this theme, too. He shows convincingly how the early Muslim elites of the Fertile Crescent derived much of their income and prestige from the ownership of large landed estates, a situation that was, he argues, derived from the culture of the pre- and early Islamic Hijaz as well as from the Byzantine and Sasanian empires. Only over time, when Islamic principles permeated the administrative practices of the early Muslim empires, was the ownership of land replaced by the control of taxation as the main form of elite resources.

The shift towards a more discernible Islamic character in early Muslim dynastic rule during the process of the self-affirmation of the rulers is clearly visible on the architecture of this formative period of Muslim court culture. It is therefore little wonder that among the main achievements of the Umayyads were landmark buildings of the new religion including the Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqṣā Mosque in Jerusalem built at the end of the seventh century CE²⁶ and, the Umayyad mosque in Damascus built at the beginning of the eighth century CE, on the foundations of an earlier Jupiter temple²⁷ as two prominent cases in point. It is primarily these explicitly religious buildings that have survived from this period and thus provide some evidence for the fact that the architectural representation of a Muslim court culture proper was in the making in this formative period. However, all that remains are some minor castles in the Jordanian desert, which Hugh Kennedy has to rely upon for evidence of his theory, since traces of proper caliphal palaces such as the so-called “Green Palace” (*al-khaḍrāʾ*) of the Umayyad caliphs in Damascus have disappeared.²⁸ It appears that the elaborate courtly architecture still visible in Cairo, Istanbul, Isfahan, Samarqand, Agra and Lahore, is thus a later development in the history of Muslim court cultures.

While the rule of the Umayyads seems to have been primarily characterized by processes of acculturation, the Abbasids, who superseded them in the middle of the eighth century CE, benefited from the fact that the religion of Islam had developed further and Islamic principles had begun to permeate society to a much higher degree. Although in the beginning the Abbasids, too, drew quite strongly from the

imperial Byzantine and Sasanian heritage in the extent of their rule, they appeared much more able to reformulate in Islamic terms those elements that they had integrated into impressive courtly practices and rituals. In her important contribution to this volume, Nadia Maria El Cheikh focuses on the Abbasid courtly nomenclature and protocol. From what she argues in her paper, as well as from the fact that the new form of courtly representation—ritual and protocol as well as architecture—is said to have reached its almost mythically glorified heyday under the Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 786–809 CE), it is clear that from that time on the Abbasid court became the central reference point for the formulation of Muslim court culture.

Representation of Abbasid rule had come a long way from the Prophet's practice of government. While in theory still based on the Prophetic example of Medina,²⁹ the Muslim court culture of the Abbasids was actually closer to Byzantine and Persian practices—albeit still clothed in distinctly Islamic garb. This example was to a large extent copied by the courts of Muslim local rulers who either broke away from, or loosened the ties to, the Abbasid caliphate from the beginning of the ninth century onwards.

It is quite understandable that an investigation into the adaptation strategies to the respective prevailing political, social and cultural contexts clearly emphasizes the formative period of Muslim court culture. However, at least one example in the present volume provides evidence for the fact that such acculturation processes did not cease after the establishment of the Abbasid benchmark for Muslim court culture, but continued, although under different circumstances. Hend Gilli-Elewy shows that, in order to legitimize their government, the newly converted Ilkhanid rulers of thirteenth century Baghdad tried to adapt to the courtly practices of the former Abbasid caliphate. To this end they employed local administrative elites and thus adjusted their non-Islamic Turco-Mongol visions of rule in the Muslim context to the medieval paradigm of an elaborated Muslim court culture, that is, the Abbasids.

Thus adaptation, as it is presented in the contributions to this volume, took place in two directions, both of which served the legitimization of rule. First, the adaptation of non-Islamic elements during the formative phase of Muslim court culture introduced means for the legitimization of political rule prevalent and acknowledged in the Byzantine and Sasanian realm. Secondly, in later periods it was the adaptation to Islamic elements that helped originally non-Muslim rulers to legitimize their rule and elaborate their court culture within an Islamic framework.

c) Elaboration of Splendid Court Culture

An investigation into the third theme that traversed the discussion on Muslim court culture, namely the development of an increasingly sumptuous court culture in the aftermath of the Abbasids, may be conducted in a twofold way. In fact, each approach can be traced to the different definitions of court that historians and other social scientists have developed by critically building upon the structuralist work that Norbert Elias began in the 1960s. If court is understood in spatial terms, then research should be directed towards localizing the place where court culture

actually happens. This is significant because to follow this thread means to determine the boundaries of court culture in dissociation from the mere administration of a realm. Only if we are able to localize court culture in spatial terms, can we test the second definition of a court as human figuration or a series of specific events in a Muslim context.

Various essays in this volume deal with the elaboration of a splendid court culture in spatial terms. First and foremost there is the issue of the palace. Is a stable architectural structure a precondition for the development of court culture? The earlier examples of the Umayyads and the Abbasids seem to affirm such an assumption. The mobility of a number of later courts, however, or the difficulty of confining the court to one or more buildings seriously challenges this image. Indeed, as clearly shown by the contributions of Albrecht Fuess on the court of the Mamluk sultans in thirteenth–fourteenth century Egypt, of Eva Orthmann on the Mughal ruler Humāyūn (d. 963/1556), and of Christoph Werner on the “small, baroque-style, princely court”³⁰ of Karīm Khān Zand in eighteenth century Shiraz, Muslim court culture could well be located in tents.

The prominence of the tent, or the encampment, can be seen as reminiscent of the nomadic origins of the early Muslim community and of the constant tension between a nomadic and an urban Muslim culture, which was at the centre of the theoretical considerations of the late medieval Muslim thinker Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406).³¹ In the light of his early social theory one may, with regard to Muslim court culture, even risk the bold hypothesis that the tent served at times as a nomadic substitute for the palace, until “nomadic court culture” became increasingly “domesticated” in major urban places and, thus, became a sedentary urban phenomenon. However, the “travelling courts” of later Muslim dynasties can perhaps be seen as reminiscent of their mainly Central Asian nomadic legacy; hence the fact that the tent remains as a key element in the public display of an urbanized Muslim court culture.

After having more or less satisfactorily localized the court within the inherent tensions between palace and tent the elaboration of a splendid Muslim court culture can be developed from a social perspective. If the court is perceived as a human figuration, then investigation is needed into the question of its composition, including an analysis of the various recruitment strategies that were utilized in the temporally and spatially varying contexts. It is again Christoph Werner who has investigated the composition of a regional court that is not confined to a solid architectural structure, but stretches in fact throughout the city of Shiraz, including the circles of poets and scholars as well as the red-light district. Andrew Newman, focusing on predecessors of the Zands, the Safavids of late seventeenth century Iran, shows how the shahs attempted to mediate between the popularity of Sufism within the wider society and the staunch anti-Sufi and anti-philosophical sentiments among the increasingly powerful ‘*ulamā*’ by carefully balancing their recruitments. Thus, the composition of the court became an expression of an adjusting religio–political strategy in a period of economic hardship that could guarantee the rulers maximum support. Jan-Peter Hartung investigates the mutual dependence of ruler and ‘*ulamā*’ by using various examples from pre- and early

modern times. He thus demonstrates the importance of Muslim religious scholars, be they jurists, philosophers, or poets, for the religious legitimization of rulers, while the '*ulamā*' were often dependent on stipends they received from a ruler, and the diverse signs of prestige with the bestowal of which a ruler was able to ensure the compliance of the '*ulamā*'. Usually, this relationship was kept balanced although under certain circumstances the scales tipped clearly in favour of the learned clients of a ruler. As Sonja Brentjes shows, medical doctors were highly sought after in Ayyubid times and thus enjoyed a certain degree of independence from the ruler as their services were indispensable for sick princes.

Public displays of Muslim court culture also took place to a considerable extent in arts and architecture. The contribution of Lorenz Korn on the Artuqids of twelfth century Northern Mesopotamia shows how their artistic and architectural production, a refined merger of various regional traditions, was not least used as a public representation of their rule in a relatively small dominion.

However, if court is alternatively perceived as a series of temporal events, that is, if court is synonymous with "keeping court", then the elaboration of splendid Muslim court culture should be investigated by focusing on its public display. This can take a variety of forms, often, however, clearly determined by spatial confines. Albrecht Fuess analyzes different but intermingled scenarios of public exposition of Mamluk court culture and shows that it was often security concerns that determined the highly standardized rituals of public accessibility of the sultans during the regular holding of a court of appeal (*mazālim*) and the processions (*mawākib*) from the citadel of Cairo to the public space where those sessions were held. Although not viewed from a security perspective and within a different context, Christian Müller, too, discusses the importance of presiding over *mazālim* sessions for the public recognition of a Muslim ruler as one who would rule in accordance with *sharī'a*.

As these contributions show, court, if understood not exclusively as a more or less static entity tied to an architectural structure—the court society—, but by emphasizing its basically dynamic character of holding court—be this understood as a social event or legal procedure—is an important expression of legitimate Muslim rule. As such, the court cannot be defined solely as one or the other. This fact is perhaps best illustrated by the essay of Paul E. Walker on the Fatimid court in Cairo between the tenth and late thirteenth centuries CE. Although here we are provided with a detailed picture of the highly standardized processions as an expression of the dynasty's religio-political claims, it cannot be confined to a description of public display only. From his descriptions of such ostentation, Walker moreover extracts valuable information regarding the composition of the courtly elite, and thus perceives the court not solely as a series of occasions, but as human figuration, too.

Based on the example of the rulers of eighteenth and nineteenth century North Indian Awadh, Hussein Keshani provides evidence that the public staging of Muslim rule gains special importance in situations of dissociation from either previous or from superordinate rule. The rulers of Awadh, although formally maintaining a nomenclature of subordination as deputies (*nawwāb-vazīr*) of the

Mughal *pādishāh* in Delhi, used their Twelver Shiite creed as a cornerstone for shaping their residential towns of Fayzābād and, later, Lucknow as large and complex spaces for the public display of piety and royal splendour, and thus established themselves as factual sovereigns in dissociation from their Sunnite Mughal overlord.

In his contribution on the court of the khedives in nineteenth century Egypt, Felix Konrad is the contributor to the current volume, who builds most significantly on the scholarship of Ronald G. Asch and his notion of the court as a series of occasions in which the princely household is opened for members who do not belong to this household. By elaborating on the khedival state ceremonies and what he terms “court spectacles”, on occasions such as the ruler’s birthday or the anniversary of his accession to the throne, Konrad shows how these were influenced by both Ottoman court culture of the *tanzīmāt* period under the sultans ‘Abdūlmecid I (d. 1277/1861) and ‘Abdūl‘azīz I (d. 1293/1876), and the court culture of the French *Second Empire* under Napoléon III (d. 1873). The result of these influences was the rise of hybrid forms of courtly representation, the consequences of which for the subject of Muslim court culture in general will have to be further investigated by future research. However a brief overview indicates that the distance to locally grown Muslim institutions of court culture seems to have increased over time, meaning that by the nineteenth century a successful ruler would adopt the style of London, Paris or St Petersburg. When in 1878 the Egyptian Khedive Ismā‘īl (d. 1312/1895) is reported to have depicted his country as part of contemporary Europe instead of Africa (“Mon pays n’est plus en Afrique, nous faisons partie de l’Europe actuellement”³²), he appears to have captured a symbolic element in the development of the perception of Muslim court culture at that point in time. It also turned out that he was correct, although Egypt was brought to Europe in a different manner than he predicted. Only four years later Britain occupied Egypt and transformed it into a European colony. Based on the Egyptian example alone, one could thus hypothesize that the nineteenth century Muslim World’s encounter with European forms of political representation led inevitably to an end of a distinct Muslim court culture.

The contribution of Abbas Amanat however shows that this is not necessarily the case. Although the Iranian Qajars did not shut themselves off from European influences, as the example of Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh (d. 1313/1896) alone provides vivid evidence, they managed to remain at least formally independent from the competing European imperialist powers.³³ Amanat illustrates through the example of the court painter Ṣanī‘ al-Mulk how, in his artistic works, he merged European artistic influences with narratives from Islamic heritage and Qajar courtly life. As impressively shown by Ṣanī‘ al-Mulk’s commissioned illustrations of a then-contemporary Persian translation of *One Thousand and One Nights*, they are not only examples of a process of hybridization from classical Islamic literary topics and Western, mainly Italian, artistic styles. In addition to the illustrations of the royal codex are fine examples of both an indigenization and contemporization that moved a masterpiece of classical Arabic literature into the world of the nineteenth century Qajar court of Tehran.

Those contributions that lay more stress on the court as events in analyzing the elaboration of sumptuous Muslim court culture also focus on yet another issue that emerged from the joint discussions during the 2007 Gotha conference: the question of the accessibility of the ruler. The question of who gains access to the ruler, and how such access is achieved, ultimately links the spatial to the social dimension in the investigation of Abbasid and post-Abbasid elaborations of Muslim court culture and leads to a number of subordinate issues. First, the accessibility of the ruler seems to depend on a hierarchy of spaces. Secondly, access to each space seems to depend on the personnel in charge of those respective spaces. In this regard, the contribution of Henning Sievert on the role of the chief eunuch as favourite of the Ottoman Sultans Ahmed III (d. 1149/1736) and Mahmūd I (d. 1168/1754) is most enlightening. While the essays of Walker, Müller, Fuess, Konrad and Keshani focus on a variety of situations of public access to the ruler, Sievert shows the powerful position of the eunuch, at the threshold of the sultan's private chambers, the harem, for the mediation of access to the ruler. In his function as what Sievert calls "the king's patronage manager", the eunuch "used to serve the ruler and also served a demand from below by conferring his patronage upon the clients."³⁴ In this context again, the question arises as to what extent, if at all, the political and administrative practice of the Prophet served later Muslim courts as an example. Michael Cook in his preliminary inquiry into this matter seems to give a negative answer to this question. From the account of Ibn Hishām (d. 218/833) on the life of the Prophet it appears that Muḥammad emphatically did not want to stand out in the early Muslim community of Medina, nor did he want access to him regulated or even restricted. In conclusion, Cook shows that styling Muḥammad as a king with a court, sitting separate from others in an elevated place, is the product of later times, owing to the increasing impact of pre-Islamic Persian patterns of kingship.

What remains to be said

After having provided a structured overview of the contents of the present volume, one may ask whether and, if so, to what extent the current contributions enhance our understanding of Muslim court culture. While conclusive answers can neither be expected, nor provided, our aim is rather to indicate the rich potential that a comparative perspective contains for a possible advancement of our understanding of Muslim court culture in particular, and court culture in general. In open and fruitful discussions among the international participants of the conference at Schloss Friedenstein in Gotha in July 2007 questions were raised and issues identified which appeared relevant for the study of court cultures throughout time and space and, particularly, in the Muslim context.

However, not all issues that were touched upon in this introduction could be dealt with extensively in the present volume and therefore require further investigation. Moreover, we have to acknowledge that, although we have attempted to cover as many periods and regions as possible, there are large chunks of the map that are missing including Transoxiana, Muslim South East Asia, and Muslim North and sub-Saharan Africa. Further research needs to take these areas into consideration.

Apart from the acknowledgement of these obvious shortcomings in the present volume, we hope nonetheless that it will contribute to an intensified discussion within our disciplines across particular regions and times, as well as with experts from outside Islamic studies and Near and Middle Eastern history. Therefore, we hope that the description of thematically and temporally comprehensive subjects is either a first step towards defining typologies that will help us to understand the peculiarities of an ideal-type Muslim court culture, along the lines that Norbert Elias and those following him have proposed, or towards finally acknowledging that there is no such thing as a distinct Muslim court culture at all, which might still be considered a worthwhile achievement. Hopefully more is to come. This is just a beginning, there shall be no end.

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A note on formal issues

The romanization of terms in Arabic, Persian and Ottoman Turkish follows the ALA-LC standards for each language. In contributions where more than one of these languages are used the transliteration follows nonetheless the ALA-LC standard for each. An exception to these standards is the romanization of Hindustani which, for the sake of better readability, generally follows the ALA-LC romanization of Persian; the transliteration of retroflex consonants follows the convention of the *Encyclopedia of Islam. New Edition* (Leiden: Brill, 1960–2004).

Where two dates are given without any further indication, the first one refers to the Islamic Lunar Calendar and the second to the Gregorian one. Where a “sh” is added to the first date it refers to the Iranian Islamic Solar Calendar. In cases where only the Hijrī year is given a “h” has been added as indicator.

Notes

- 1 Map (1983), 3.
- 2 Throughout this volume, conceptual terms such as “court” or “court culture” only appear in quotation marks the first time they are mentioned in each individual contribution, to indicate the awareness of all authors that these are complex conceptual rather than empirical terms.
- 3 The idea of history as one of only “Great Men” goes back to the Victorian historian Thomas Carlyle (d. 1881). He argued that it was only exceptional individuals who shaped history by a combination of extraordinary personalities and divine inspiration.
- 4 Elias (2002), 8 (Idem (1983), 2).
- 5 For more recent examples, see Pečar (2003); Butz/Hirschbiegel/Willoweit (2004); Carreras/García (2005); Gunn/Janse (2006).
- 6 Elias (2002), 40 (Idem (1983), 18).
- 7 Of outmost importance, especially for the problem of patron-client networks, are the works of the historian Wolfgang Reinhard concerning the system of governance of Pope Paul V (d. 1621). See idem (1979). Reinhard’s considerations have recently inspired scholars who work on Muslim court culture as well. For an exemplary work on this matter, see Sievert (2003). Generally on the complex of patronage, see Mączak (1988).
- 8 See Duindam (2005), 95f.
- 9 For example, see Jarrard (2003).
- 10 See Elton (1976), 217.
- 11 Asch (1991), 9; Idem (1993), 13.
- 12 See Asch (1991); idem (1993); Duindam (2005).
- 13 Elias’ work has recently become the subject of a critical re-evaluation. The criticism is aimed especially at the small number of original sources with which Elias described the court and court society of Louis XIV. Moreover, it is problematic to use the court of

7 Courts, capitals and kingship

Delhi and its sultans in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries CE

Sunil Kumar

The Arab intellectual Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406) had remarked on the close connection between the fortunes of a dynasty and the city. The scholar had linked the civilizational glory of a city, the political compulsion to endow it with great architectural marvels, and the gradual ebb in its fortunes to his cyclical theory of the rise and decline of states and the waxing and waning of the *‘aṣabiyya*, the group solidarity of the ruling classes. In his interpretation, as political incumbents were replaced by parvenu adventurers with greater political cohesion, they scripted their seizure of power with great monumental constructions honouring their achievements.¹

Although few intellectuals of his time were able to theorize on the political conditions of their age with equal facility, some of Ibn Khaldūn’s more narrow observations regarding the extreme temporality of political authority were also present in the writings of the courtier of the Delhi sultans, Z̤iyā’ al-Dīn Baranī (d. c. 761/1360), himself a victim of regime-change. Unlike Ibn Khaldūn’s sociology, Baranī’s reading of statecraft was conceptualized within a juridical vocabulary and articulated as a didactic text on political conduct.² Not surprisingly, therefore, he gave a scathing review of the vanity of Sultanate rulers in their search for self-glorification and absolutist rule.³ But equally, the pragmatism of the courtier was also on display: Baranī grudgingly acknowledged the need to accommodate administrative *non-sharī‘atī* laws and courtly behaviour for the security and prosperity of the Muslim community.⁴ Absolutist rule and its accoutrements, the display of authority through monumental architecture and the pomp of courtly ceremony were evils that Muslims had to therefore accept in an imperfect world.⁵ This was a double-edged sword: in Baranī’s reasoning the traditions of absolutist governance followed by Delhi sultans were derived from Iran, a land that also produced many positive principles of social ordering and urbane conduct. These were, however, disassociated in his mind from its traditions of governance: the conduct of its rulers, the *Khusrovan*, should be emulated only in their pursuit of justice, not in their practice of despotic power.⁶

If we read Ibn Khaldūn and Z̤iyā’ al-Dīn Baranī together, it is possible to isolate three characteristics of Sultanate governance: an insecure political environment marked by the cyclical rise and fall of dynasties; a Persianate model of absolute kingship with its attendant rituals that were de rigueur for the practice

of monarchical rule; and an Islamic paradigm that recognized the sovereignty of God and was hence critical of kings and their pretensions of absolute temporal authority. The problem with this characterization, of course, is its extreme generalization—it could apply equally well to nearly all Sultanate regimes located in the Persianate milieu without developing any one of their salient characteristics. In this paper I use this general template as a point of analytical departure for a more inflected study of the political traditions and courtly practices of the Delhi sultans.

The first three sections of my paper focus on the turbulent political history of the Delhi sultans and their massive architectural constructions in Delhi. Most historians have followed colonial historiography in reading Sultanate construction of capitals, palaces and mosques as a statement of power and authority (by wasteful despots) over vanquished foes.⁷ Additionally, this huge amount of construction activity was also interpreted as striking evidence of the material resources available to the Delhi sultans—a visible testament of their ability to hire skilled craftsmen, mobilize slaves and forced labour, employ new technologies to expedite construction and use their military might to seize raw materials.⁸ Shortage of water, an increase in population and a search for security were also reasons provided for the frequent shifts in royal residences.⁹

Although this historiography is perfectly correct in pointing out that thirteenth century Sultanate Delhi was hardly an “organic” city, my analysis shifts the ground to relate the hectic construction and transferring of capitals not just to the inspiration of the sultans of Delhi but as a response to the challenges posed by the political conditions of their age. As newly enthroned monarchs sought to consolidate their authority through the recruitment and deployment of military personnel, there was an urgent need to “house” the new political dispensation as well. In other words, in the competitive politics of the thirteenth and fourteenth century, any effort at consolidating authority implied both, the deployment of a military cadre loyal to the new monarch and an ambitious building programme where the newly constituted court could assemble. By correlating construction activity with the turbulent politics of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, I argue that it is possible to notice how the reproduction of new capitals and courts in the Delhi region was not just a part of the period’s cultural expectations; it was a necessity dictated by the ways in which society and politics were structured at this time. Since it would be impossible for me to cover the two centuries within the confines of this paper I have restricted my study to specific examples until the beginning of the fourteenth century CE and the dynastic change that brought the Tughluqs to power.

The last section of my paper revisits the turbulent politics of the Delhi Sultanate in a slightly different way. It focuses on the transitions in the composition of Sultanate elites and the impact this might have had on political culture and courtly rituals. Conventionally, change in the Delhi Sultanate is not a subject studied by many historians, past or present. Delhi sultans were either good and strong or bad and weak monarchs. Their personal qualities were further grafted onto larger civilizational templates to ascertain how Muslim (or not) they were. In an attempt to break out of this subjective evaluation of individual monarchs and

an inherently synchronic reading of Islam and Sultanate history, I focus on a period of dynastic change and the establishment of the Khalajī and Tughluq regimes. Although we know that the founders of these regimes had their origins as political adventurers in the marches of Afghanistan, we actually have very little information about their social backgrounds. Other than the political stress caused by regime-change, I try to identify whether the arrival of new military personnel from the frontier marches brought any cultural or social change in the life of the court and the capital. To elaborate on this point, I study an unusual accession episode from the Khalajī dynasty and a political ritual from the Tughluqs. Although the events and ceremonies that I discuss were obviously a part of public discussion and the rituals were integral in the making of monarchical charisma, the significance of these traditions were completely elided in the homogenizing impulse present in the Persian chronicles.

It is hardly surprising that this homogenization led many scholars to unreflectively describe the Delhi Sultanate as a Muslim state. The monolithic character ascribed to it by Persian chroniclers was uncritically accepted and a linear history of “Persianization” extended to incorporate the diffusion of Islam in the sub-continent.¹⁰ As I try to bring out in this paper however, the turbulent politics of migrations, dynastic changes and rebellions, which were an intrinsic part of the political history of the thirteenth and fourteenth century Sultanate, need to be read back into the social processes of constituting and reconstituting Muslim identities and structures of governance. Through a study of the politics involved in the construction of the capitals of the Delhi sultans and the traditions of accession and royal pageantry I have tried to recreate the fragile political world of the early Delhi Sultanate when a slave or a humble frontier commander could become king. I am also interested in assessing the narratives of the urbane litterateurs in Delhi for their descriptions of a world that was so distant from their ideal—a world fraught with violence and instability where “royalty” was not the creation of a patrician, aristocratic class, but was seized by humble warriors of plebeian origin.

In my attempt to access this world, I begin my paper by introducing readers to the various courts and capitals constructed in Delhi in the thirteenth and fourteenth century CE, and correlating the spatial dispersal of these capitals with the changes in the political dispensations of the various sultans.

Sultanate capitals in the Plain of Delhi

We have few details about the nature of the pre-Sultanate city of Delhi or its political, cultural and economic life. Delhi was the capital of the Tomara Rajputs in the eleventh century CE and a frontier outpost of the Chauhāns in the twelfth. At this time, Delhi’s commercial importance certainly enhanced its significance in the region. It housed an indeterminate number of Jain merchants, wealthy enough to construct several small stone temples in the neighbourhood.¹¹ The commercial importance of the city is also suggested by the presence of a mint and the base billon coin, the *dihlīvāl*, which had a very wide circulatory ambit and was eponymously known after the city.¹²

At the turn of the twelfth century CE, the army of sultan Mu‘izz al-Dīn Ghawrī (r. 1173–1206 CE) of the Shansabanid dynasty of Ghūr captured Delhi, but it was not until the mid-1220s that Shams al-Dīn Iltutmish (r. 1210–36 CE) established the paramount authority of the city over distant areas of north India. Through the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, successive sultans constructed their capitals on a triangular-shaped riverine plain, bounded on the east by the River Yamuna and on the North-West, West and South by the outlying spurs of the Aravalli hills. The table below lists the Sultanate capitals constructed on the riverine plain during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

The first Sultanate capital was constructed around the old Tomara-Chauhān fort on the south-west edge of this plain and referred to as “Dihlī” in the Persian chronicles of the thirteenth century. Later sultans also constructed their capitals on the riverine plain and these settlements included Kīlōkhrī, Sīrī, Tughluqābād, ‘Ādilābād, Jahānpanāh and Fīrūzābād. Medieval chronicles sometimes used “Dihlī”, the name of the first city, quite generically for any or all of the later Sultanate capitals.¹³ To distinguish the first Sultanate capital from the subsequent settlements, I have always referred to it as “Dihlī-yi kuhnah”, literally “Old Delhi”, a term coined for the first city in the beginning of the fifteenth century by the Timurid chronicler Sharaf al-Dīn ‘Alī Yazdī (d. 858/1454).¹⁴

The table provides sufficient information to correlate the frequent shifting of the Sultanate capital to moments of great political stress and conflict among the

THE CAPITALS OF THE DELHI SULTANS, circa 1206–1388 CE

<i>Regnal years</i>	<i>Name of monarch</i>	<i>Name of capital</i>
1206–10	Quṭb al-Dīn Ay-Beg	Lahore*
1210	Ārām Shāh	Lahore*
1210–36	Iltutmish	Dihlī-yi kuhnah (“Old [city of] Delhi”)
1236	Rukn al-Dīn Fīrūz	Kīlōkhrī
1236–40	Rāziyyat al-Dīn	Dihlī-yi kuhnah
1240–2	Bahrām Shāh	Dihlī-yi kuhnah
1242–6	‘Alā’ al-Dīn Mas‘ūd Shāh	Dihlī-yi kuhnah
1246–66	Nāṣir al-Dīn Maḥmūd	Dihlī-yi kuhnah
1266–87	Ghiyāṣ al-Dīn Balban	Dihlī-yi kuhnah
1287–90	Mu‘izz al-Dīn Kayqubād	Dihlī-yi kuhnah ? > Kīlōkhrī
1290–96	Fīrūz Shāh Khalajī	Kīlōkhrī
1296–1316	‘Alā’ al-Dīn Khalajī	Dihlī-yi kuhnah > Sīrī
1316–20	Quṭb al-Dīn Mubārak	Sīrī
1320	Khusraw Khān Barwārī	Sīrī
1320–24	Ghiyāṣ al-Dīn Tughluq	Sīrī > Tughluqābād
1324–51	Muḥammad Tughluq	Tughluqābād ? > ‘Ādilābād ? > Dihlī-yi kuhnah ? > Jahānpanāh ?
1351–88	Fīrūz Shāh Tughluq	Jahānpanāh ? > Fīrūzābād

(*) denotes capitals outside the riverine plain of Delhi;

(>) denotes multiple capitals or transition from one capital to another;

(?) denotes insufficient information to confirm capital or date of transition

political elites especially in the context of regnal change. But it also highlights the fact that the establishment of a new capital did not have a mechanical correlation with the monarch's ability to impose his/her authority or mobilize material resources. Both Ghiyās al-Dīn Balban (r. 1266–87 CE) and 'Alā' al-Dīn Khalajī (r. 1296–1316 CE) were among the most powerful and authoritarian of the Delhi sultans; yet neither constructed "new" capitals for themselves, choosing instead to reside in Dihlī-yi kuhnah, the old city. In the following two sections I study the history of Dihlī-yi kuhnah and that of Kīlōkhrī and Sīrī. I have tried to underline how the history of these capitals was shaped by the structure of political relationships and networks in which they were located. In the following two sections I elaborate how the capitals of the Delhi sultans were splendid signs of royal power, pomp and majesty, as well as vital arenas of conflict that could, in differing contexts, incarcerate or empower their resident monarchs. Even as they provide an insight into the construction of authority, the capitals of the sultans in Delhi also provide an unusual insight into the forces that challenged their power.

Dihlī-yi kuhnah, Kīlōkhrī and the dispensations of the sultans

It is sometimes forgotten that at the moment of sultan Iltutmish's accession in 1210 CE, the capital of the "Delhi" sultans was Lahore, not Delhi. Lahore was the old capital of the Ghaznavids and carried with it the prestige of past association with one of the most powerful empires of the eastern Iranian world. The old Rajput heritage of Delhi was hardly a marketable attribute by comparison.

Through the duration of his reign Iltutmish piloted the city towards a new Sultanate identity. By the time of his death in 1236 CE, he had constructed a formidable political enterprise through the deployment of a cadre of carefully trained and trusted military slaves (*bandagān*) and used them to cohere the distant provinces of north India around Delhi. He had also gained considerable stature as a pious Muslim sovereign who befriended the learned at a time when the Chingisid invasions were destroying the cultural and religious centres of Islam. The Sultanate of Delhi and the world of Islam had altered during the duration of the monarch's rule and "Minhāj-i Sirāj" Jūzjānī (d. 657/1259), the sultan's chronicler, tried to communicate its new character when he referred to the city as *Qubbat al-Islām*, or the sanctuary/axis of Islam.¹⁵ From one of the garrison camps of sultan Mu'izz al-Dīn Ghawrī, Iltutmish turned Dihlī-yi kuhnah into a city without a rival in north India. In 1260 CE Jūzjānī was already referring to it as the "sacred" city, *ḥazrat-i Dihlī*, an appellation that would be its *leitmotif* into the nineteenth century.

These accolades notwithstanding, Iltutmish's successor, sultan Rukn al-Dīn (r. 1236 CE), was quite emphatic about not wanting his father's political arrangements to continue into his reign.¹⁶ Rukn al-Dīn was an ambitious young sovereign and before his accession had served several years as a governor in his father's dispensation. His household included a large military retinue and secretarial help and these stayed with him when he became sultan. The introduction of new

personnel in the court meant challenging the entrenched might of his father's slave commanders who would resist any effort at marginalization. In short, if Rukn al-Dīn had to function with any degree of independence, the old dispensation of power had to give way to the new.

The future of Dihlī-yi kuhnah was deeply tied up with the conflicts among the city's political elite. In his effort to neutralize his father's commanders, the young monarch's response was to shift his capital out of Dihlī-yi kuhnah to Kīlokhṛī, the first of several occasions when the sultan's court would leave the Old City. The new capital, Kīlokhṛī, was located on a low hillock by the banks of the River Yamuna, a day's march to the north-east of the Old City. Sultan Rukn al-Dīn augmented his troops here and started a long-distance interference in the politics of the Old City: siblings were executed and attempts made to attract junior Shamsī commanders to join the Ruknī dispensation. The Shamsī *bandagān* responded quickly to the challenge: they seized and executed Rukn al-Dīn, placed his sister Razīyyah on the throne and consolidated their grip over Dihlī-yi kuhnah.

Although the crisis was over within the year, in placing a woman on the throne, the Shamsī slaves merely reinforced their rather conventional search for pliable puppet rulers within their master's household.¹⁷ Razīyyah was deposed when she displayed signs of rebelling against her protectors and was followed in quick succession by three more Shamsī descendents. These Shamsī princes made periodic but unsuccessful attempts to establish their independence but their slowly diminishing influence was effectively parodied by a court chronicler:

He [Nāṣir al-Dīn, r. 1246–66 CE] sought the goodwill of the army chiefs and cordially wished each one of them well. He did not take any decision [*rā'y 'zādī*] without their knowledge [*bī- 'ilm-i īshān*], or moved a foot without their orders [*nah bī-ḥukm-i īshān dast va pā' 'zādī*]. He did not drink a drop of water, nor sleep a moment without their knowledge. . . .¹⁸

While Iltutmish's descendents were unsuccessful in gaining the political initiative over the Shamsī *bandagān* we should not miss the fact that they were also unable to shift the capital of the Sultanate out of Dihlī-yi kuhnah (see table above). It is also important to notice that these rulers did not stay in their ancestor's Shamsī capital out of choice; they were more appropriately incarcerated in the city by the Shamsī *bandagān*.

The reign of the Shamsī lineage came to an end with the accession of sultan Ghiyās al-Dīn Balban in 1266 CE whose rise to influence in the Delhi court had a much longer history. In the early years of his career he was a falconer in Sultan Iltutmish's retinue of military slaves and struggled with the political anonymity that came with the humble position.¹⁹ Balban's first significant political appointment occurred in 1244–5 CE when he was made court chamberlain (*amīr-ḥājib*). Although this was during the early years of the political conflict between the Shamsī *bandagān* (1242–54 CE), the instability helped rather than deterred Balban's rise to political stardom.²⁰ By 1249 CE he had consolidated his position in the court sufficiently to be appointed the deputy (*nā'ib*) of the state, a political

elevation that had social repercussions when his daughter was married to sultan Nāṣir al-Dīn (r. 1246–66 CE).²¹ A brief hiatus in political exile in 1253 CE notwithstanding, Balban's stature in Dihlī-yi kuhnah was effectively unchallenged for 21 years (1244–53 and 1254–66 CE) before he became monarch. During this time he successfully raised a large military retinue that included Turkish slaves and humble *déraciné* migrants, described derogatively by Jūzjānī, Baranī and Amīr-i Khusrāw (d. 725/1325) as homogenous ethnic groups—Afghans, Sistanis and Mongols.²²

The fourteenth century chronicler Zīyā' al-Dīn Baranī mentioned how Balban's old compatriots feared visiting Delhi because they were convinced that their old mate was conspiring to have them all killed. Baranī's account was exaggerated: Balban's dispensation did include some of his old peers, but this was an exclusive group that included only those who had exchanged their original Shamsī affiliation for a new Ghiyāsī one. Or, looked at from a slightly different perspective, with the shift in the political affiliation of Dihlī-yi kuhnah's political elites, the old (Shamsī) city now housed the Ghiyāsī political dispensation. Through his long career in politics Balban had transformed Dihlī-yi kuhnah into a capital that reflected and constituted his authority.

Balban's successor, Sultan Mu'izz al-Dīn Kayqubād (r. 1287–90 CE), however, chafed under his grandfather's legacy in ways that were very reminiscent of Rukn al-Dīn's experience with the Shamsī dispensation earlier in the century. But there were important differences between the two as well. Although Kayqubād was appointed to the throne by Ghiyāsī commanders he moved quickly to insulate himself from their influence. He shifted his capital to Kīlōkhrī and supported his *protégé*, Nizām al-Dīn, in a purge of the old Ghiyāsī commanders.

Mu'izz al-Dīn Kayqubād's choice of Kīlōkhrī was also interesting—it had already been a Sultanate capital and had not atrophied in the 50 years since Rukn al-Dīn's reign. In the context of celebrations held in the royal court in Dihlī-yi kuhnah in 1258 CE, some years before Balban's accession, Jūzjānī described Kīlōkhrī as the "New City" (*shahr-i naw*). In the preparations to receive Mongol ambassadors in the Old City, the New City had functioned as one of its outlying suburbs.²³ But the real transitions in Kīlōkhrī only occurred in the 1280s, under Sultan Kayqubād's patronage. At that time Baranī and Ḥamīd Qalandar (d. 641/1244) describe how Kīlōkhrī came to possess the bazaars, the congregational mosque, the complex of neighbourhoods and leisure activities that historians today associate with an urban milieu. Over a half century later, in the middle of the fourteenth century, Baranī reminisced about his joyous youth spent in the New City.²⁴

Sultan Kayqubād's own fortune did not prosper in the same measure as his capital. In dealing with Nizām al-Dīn and a succession of overbearing military commanders Kayqubād looked for subordinates outside the entrenched circle of Delhi's elites. He seized upon Jalāl al-Dīn Khalajī, the military commander of the frontier districts of Sāmāna, a great candidate because together with his abilities as a general he was a virtual foreigner in Delhi. Although the Khalajīs had long served in Sultanate armies, their presence in the higher echelons of power was still a rarity; even as late as Balban's reign pointed allusions were made towards a Khalajī ambassador's rusticity by Delhi courtiers.²⁵ Even if raising a frontiersman to a

position of political eminence was a source of some consternation in politically conservative circles in Sultanate politics, it was completely in line with the consistent patronage offered to social menials and *déraciné* marginals by Delhi sultans.²⁶ Sultan Kayqubād's effort at establishing his independence was challenged by members of the old Ghiyāsī dispensation, led by the slave commanders Aytemür Kachchan and Surkha and they moved to replace the monarch with his infant nephew. This was an immediate threat to the balance of power in the court and it forced Jalāl al-Dīn Khalajī into precipitous intervention to protect his interests.

Jalāl al-Dīn was actually well settled by this time to counter the Ghiyāsī challenge. He had rallied his family members and other Khalajī groups around himself, gradually insinuating his family members and allies in Delhi politics until he had negated the denatalized condition that had originally made him an attractive subordinate to Sultan Kayqubād. The frontiersman had struck roots in the capital quickly enough to challenge its power brokers. By the time the dust settled from the ensuing conflict, Kayqubād had been murdered; the infant prince, Kayūmars and his promoters, Aytemür Kachchan and Surkha, were also dead. The intra-dispensational conflict of 1290 CE left Jalāl al-Dīn Khalajī as the new master of Kīlokhri, but some members of Balban's family and retinue were still alive and present in Dihlī-yi kuhnah.²⁷

According to Baranī, because of the hostility of the city-residents (*shahriyān*) to the new rulers, Jalāl al-Dīn Khalajī felt it prudent to stay away from the Old City and reside instead at Kīlokhri. Baranī's narrative explained that since the residents of the Dihlī-yi kuhnah included high officers of the deposed dynasty, they had reason to be unhappy about how kingship had passed from the lineage of the Turks to another (*az aṣl-i turkān dar aṣl-i dīgar*).²⁸ Baranī's reportage is particularly valuable for the way in which it inserts a spatial dimension to a conflict between rival dispensations. This conflict was between the "old" Balbanid coterie of commanders located in Dihlī-yi kuhnah and the "new" Khalajī dispensation of power based in the *shahr-i naw*: two cities in the riverine plain of Delhi hosting rival dispensations of power. Baranī explained that Jalāl al-Dīn Khalajī visited Dihlī-yi kuhnah but did not feel welcome enough to situate his court and capital in that city.

We should, however, not misinterpret Baranī's narrative of these events as the mark of an exceptional moment in the history of the Sultanate. In 1290 CE sultans of Turkish, slave descent were removed from the throne of Delhi but these changes did not alter the structure of Sultanate governance or the contexts in which these monarchs shifted or stayed in their new and old capitals in the riverine plain of Delhi. In an effort to underline this point, the next section focuses on the turn of the thirteenth century CE and a renovated Dihlī-yi kuhnah and its relationship with the new sultanate capital of Sīrī.

Dihlī-yi kuhnah, Sīrī and the dispensations of the sultans

Jalāl al-Dīn Khalajī's rule (1290–6 CE) was abruptly terminated when the monarch was assassinated by his nephew, 'Alā' al-Dīn Khalajī who became the next sultan of Delhi (r. 1296–1316 CE). At 'Alā' al-Dīn's accession Kīlokhri was inhabited by

the sons, other relatives and followers of the late monarch. Although Dihlī-yi kuhnah was still ambivalent about Khalajī rule, it might have welcomed ‘Alā’ al-Dīn as the slayer of the disliked Jalāl al-Dīn Khalajī. According to Baranī the new ruler lavished largesse on the residents of the city. On his arrival in the region of Delhi, ‘Alā’ al-Dīn defeated Jalāl al-Dīn’s younger son, Qadr Khān and then made a ceremonious entry into Dihlī-yi kuhnah, finally terminating the relationship between the Delhi sultans and the New City.²⁹

During ‘Alā’ al-Dīn’s reign it was the Old City that witnessed large-scale building activity, considerable renovation and repair, a huge increase in population and the construction of a new suburb, Sīrī. Baranī does mention that ‘Alā’ al-Dīn Khalajī altered the composition of his political dispensation thrice during the course of his reign.³⁰ Correlating these transitions with the more general developments in ‘Alā’ al-Dīn’s reign illuminates the significance of his development activity in and around Dihlī-yi kuhnah.

According to Baranī’s narrative, the first phase of ‘Alā’ al-Dīn’s reign, just after Jalāl al-Dīn Khalajī’s assassination, was clearly accommodative and inclusive, a period when the regicide was trying to win over supporters, including a large number of Jalālī servants. The effort made to recruit followers is also communicated by Baranī’s description of the indiscriminate distribution of largesse by the monarch during his march and on his entry into Dihlī-yi kuhnah.³¹ And yet, the fissures created by the inter-dispensational conflict that had displaced the collateral lineage of Jalāl al-Dīn and bought ‘Alā’ al-Dīn to power were dramatically underlined when Dihlī-yi kuhnah was chosen as capital: just as Sultan Jalāl al-Dīn lacked support in the Old City and made his capital in Kīlōkhīrī, ‘Alā’ al-Dīn could not countenance living in the New City and made his capital in Dihlī-yi kuhnah.

According to Baranī, this brief moment of accommodation (c. 1296–7 CE) was followed by a systematic purge of Jalālī commanders, a moment of exclusion which introduced the second phase in the construction of the ‘Alā’ī dispensation.³² The military commanders who were particularly important during this period were family members like Ulugh Khān, old military elites like Nuṣrat Khān and administrators like Malik Hamīd al-Dīn. The sifting of subordinates that occurred during this phase altered the composition of the ‘Alā’ī servants; it coincided with military campaigns into Gujarat and large-scale construction activity in the city that altered the face of Dihlī-yi kuhnah. This was the time when Delhi’s first congregational mosque was expanded until it was double in size to the Shamsī mosque;³³ the fortifications of the city were repaired; the old “sultan’s reservoir” (*hawẓ-i sulṭānī*) was dredged, a new and larger one built (*hawẓ-i khāṣṣ*), new markets and price regulations were instituted and an army cantonment—Sīrī—constructed just outside the Old City.³⁴

By the time ‘Alā’ al-Dīn started appointing slaves and social menials to high positions in his dispensation, the monarch had also moved towards scripting his authorship over the face of the Old City.³⁵ As in the case of Balban a generation ago, this Delhi monarch did not change his capital; he purged old personnel and deployed new servants in a bid to establish his control over the Old City. Here he was far less successful than his esteemed predecessor. ‘Alā’ al-Dīn’s rise to power

was far faster than Balban's and despite his energetic interventions he was unable to marginalize elite households in the Old City or silence opposition to his authoritarian rule. It is important to note that despite his investments in Dihlī-yi kuhnah, Baranī mentioned that 'Alā' al-Dīn Khalajī did not like living in the Old City. He was fed up with the resistance that he faced from its old households and chose to live outside the city in the vicinity of Sīrī which he eventually developed as a cantonment (*lashkargāh*) and alternate residence.³⁶ Sīrī was critical in preserving 'Alā' al-Dīn's authority: it allowed him the chance to escape from Dihlī-yi kuhnah; it became the cantonment where his huge standing army could be garrisoned to counter the threat of Mongol invasions; and it was the site from where the sultan could monitor politics in the Old City.

The historical antecedents of Sīrī, like Kīlōkhrī, are not very clear. The first references in sultanate literature to Sīrī appears in the context of sultan Jalāl al-Dīn Khalajī's campaigns in 1290–1 CE, during the first year of his reign. Amīr-i Khusraw mentions Sīrī as a site that existed between Dihlī-yi kuhnah and Kīlōkhrī.³⁷ Apparently the Khalajī sultan used Sīrī as a mustering point, an encampment outside the Old City. 'Alā' al-Dīn used the site in a similar fashion: he camped there after assassinating Jalāl al-Dīn Khalajī and provided this encampment with fortifications sometime during 1300 and 1303 CE in response to the invasions of the Mongol commanders Qutlugh Qocha and Taraghay.³⁸ Effectively, 'Alā' al-Dīn's court and political base oscillated between Dihlī-yi kuhnah and Sīrī. The latter was of great strategic importance to him and he spent a considerable amount of time there with his army. It may not have been his formal residence or "capital" but it was an important adjunct to Dihlī-yi kuhnah and significant to the construction of the monarch's authority.

Towards the end of his reign 'Alā' al-Dīn had become increasingly reliant upon his military slave Malik Kāfūr "Hazārdīnārī" (killed 715/1316), the general who had led Khalajī expeditions into South India.³⁹ The 'Alā'ī slave exploited his position of trust with the sultan and consolidated his position in the court. When the sultan fell sick in 1316 CE Malik Kāfūr came into conflict with other important 'Alā'ī commanders, especially Alp Khān, and in the intra-dispensational conflict Khalajī princes like Khiz̄r Khān and Shihāb al-Dīn 'Umar were "fronted" by rival camps.

Qutb al-Dīn Mubārak Shāh Khalajī, a third candidate, triumphed in the succession conflict and the death of the major combatants in the year of intra-dispensational strife gave him the opportunity to consolidate his position. He proceeded to do so by deploying senior 'Alā'ī commanders as provincial governors and creating a cadre of loyal military slaves to dominate the Delhi region. Concurrently Mubārak Shāh Khalajī (r. 1316–20 CE), developed Sīrī as his capital and the home of his dispensation while quite deliberately diminishing the influence of Dihlī-yi kuhnah.⁴⁰

At this time the relationship between Sīrī and the Old City was somewhat similar to the one that had existed between Kīlōkhrī and Dihlī-yi kuhnah, although Mubārak Shāh Khalajī's political independence and initiative far exceeded Kayqubād's.⁴¹ Mubārak Shāh seems to have expended considerable effort at giving Sīrī an urban character: like Kīlōkhrī, it was fitted with a new congregational

mosque and its fortifications were refurbished. In keeping with the grandiloquent title of *khalīfah* assumed by Mubārak Shāh, Sīrī was also ceremoniously referred to as the “residence of the caliph” (*dār al-khilāfat*), even though its more non-descript identity as “army camp” (*lashkargāh*) continued to linger.

Mubārak Shāh Khalajī was murdered in Sīrī in 1320 CE by his slave Khusraw Khān Barwārī/Parwārī who had gained the sultan’s intimacy and trust.⁴² In constructing his own dispensation of power Mubārak Shāh had allowed Khusraw Khān to bring his kinsmen and other Barwārīds/Parwārīds to Delhi. Much like Kayqubād’s recruitment of the *déraciné* frontier commander Jalāl al-Dīn Khalajī, Mubārak Shāh relied upon the denatalized slave Khusraw Khān to construct his authority. The efforts of both sultans were negated when their subordinates brought their associates to the capital and used their support to gain the throne.

Despite Baranī and Amīr-i Khusraw’s vitriolic attack on the apostate character of Khusraw Khān, the newly enthroned slave actually won considerable support in Delhi.⁴³ It is important to keep in mind that Khusraw Khān was not challenged by any member of the Khalajī dispensation in the Delhi region; it was Ghiyās al-Dīn Tughluq, the frontier commander of Dīōpālpūr who was apparently most aggrieved by events in Sīrī. Ghiyās al-Dīn’s attempts to rally support from Khalajī commanders in Delhi were spurned and he led a motley crew of frontiersmen to Delhi. In the *Tughluqnāmah*, Amīr-i Khusraw’s eulogy to the future monarch, the author noted:

[Ghiyās al-Dīn’s] troopers were mainly from the upper-lands [*iqīm-i bālā*; i.e. an euphemism for Khurasan and Transoxiana] and not Hindustanis or local chieftains. They included Ghuzz, Turks and Mongols from Rūm and Rūs and some Khurasani Persians [*tāzik*] of pure stock [*pāk aṣl*].⁴⁴

To this motley crowd, Abū ’l-Malik ‘Iṣāmī (d. 761/1360) added the Khokars, a body of frontier pastoralists, forever in conflict with Sultanate armies and at least one Afghan commander.⁴⁵

Ghiyās al-Dīn Tughluq (r. 1320–4 CE) won the battle for Delhi and, like Jalāl al-Dīn and ‘Alā’ al-Dīn Khalajī, commenced his rule on an accommodative note, reinstalling a large number of the old Khalajī commanders to office. He kept his capital at Sīrī because he wanted to emphasize continuity with the Khalajī regime and gain support from a political elite who greeted the new frontiersman-turned-sultan with some ambivalence. While accommodating a large element of the old Khalajī elite, Ghiyās al-Dīn’s political dispensation included members of his frontier entourage. Baranī commented:

The maliks, emirs and other officers of his predecessors, he confirmed in their possessions and appointments. When he attained the throne, his nobleness and generosity of character made him distinguish and reward all those he had known and been connected with, and all those who in former days had shown him kindness or rendered him a service. No act of kindness was passed over. . . .⁴⁶

For a frontier commander new to Delhi politics, Ghiyāṣ al-Dīn Tughluq moved with remarkable assurance in his early search for political stability. Quite significantly this phase of his reign coincided with the duration of his residence at Sīrī. By 1323 CE construction in his new capital of Tughluqābād had progressed sufficiently for Ghiyāṣ al-Dīn to shift his court there. Apparently, the great ‘Alā’ī commanders were aware of the changes that were occurring in the power equations in his realm. While campaigning in south India they were ready to believe a rumour that the Sultan had ordered their execution. They rebelled, were captured and executed.⁴⁷ The episode is significant for a variety of related factors: that the nature of developments in Ghiyāṣ al-Dīn’s reign could warn ‘Alā’ī commanders and sway them into rebellion; that their execution marked the final dissolution of the old Khalajī dispensation; and finally that the news of the suppression of the Khalajī revolt was sent to Ghiyāṣ al-Dīn’s new court at Tughluqābād. By 1323 CE the new dispensation of power in Delhi had a residence all to its own.

Like Dihlī-yī kuhnah and Kīlōkhrī, Sīrī would never again be used as a capital by a Delhi monarch. The following sultans of the Tughluq dynasty started another round of construction activity in the riverine plain: Tughluqābād was followed by ‘Ādilābād and Jahānpanāh when Muḥammad Tughluq became monarch (r. 1324–51 CE) and Fīrūz Shāh Tughluq (r. 1351–88 CE) constructed the new capital of Fīrūzābād, all in the fourteenth century CE.

When medieval chroniclers narrated the coming and going of Delhi sultans with such rapidity they found in it lessons about fate and destiny, the transitory nature of material success and a reminder of God’s sovereignty in the affairs of mortals. ‘Iṣāmī constructed his whole versified epic on the Delhi sultans, *Futūḥ al-salāṭīn*, as a reminder of God’s sovereign will embodied in Qur’ān 3:26: “O Allāh! Possessor of the kingdom, You give the kingdom to whom You will, and You take the kingdom from whom You will. . . .” The theme had wide currency and it infiltrated an anecdote reported by Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (d. 779/1377), the Moroccan traveller to the court of Muḥammad Shāh Tughluq, explaining the construction of the capital of Tughluqābād. The story concerned a conversation between Sultan Mubārak Shāh Khalajī and his military commander Ghiyāṣ al-Dīn Tughluq which occurred during a hunting expedition near the Aravalli hills at the south-eastern edge of the Delhi plain. The Sultan’s servant, Ghiyāṣ al-Dīn Tughluq, initiated the conversation by remarking on the excellent qualities of the escarped land where they had stopped to rest. He suggested that it was an appropriate site for Mubārak Shāh Khalajī to construct his capital. With a touch of prescience, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s story had Mubārak Shāh Khalajī reply: “When you are sultan, build it!” Ibn Baṭṭūṭa concluded the anecdote thus: “It came to pass by the decree of God that [Ghiyāṣ al-Dīn] became sultan, so he built [his capital there] . . . and called it by his name.”⁴⁸ Just as destiny had decreed that Ghiyāṣ al-Dīn Tughluq would be sultan, so too had God identified Tughluqābād as a site for a Sultanate capital.

The insertion of divine agency took the historical element out of the prosaic temporal world of mortals and added to the prestige of a monarch and, indeed, his capital. This was necessary, of course, because as we have noticed, the frequent transitions in kingship and capitals through the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries

made it really difficult for litterateurs to graft any semblance of royalty on the careers of their protagonists. Only a particularly gifted litterateur—someone like Amīr-i Khusraw—could prosper as a eulogist in this world over the long duration. Since the construction of power, kingship and capitals were not associated with birthright they had to be assembled afresh in each generation. A monarch that failed to recruit his (and as it happened in one case, her) retinue ran the certainty of losing political independence, a fate that often left them incarcerated within the boundaries of their predecessor's capital.

Implicit in the study of the constant shifting of capitals in the Delhi plain is the recognition that the seizure of political power by parvenu military commanders of various social and cultural backgrounds also periodically reconstituted Sultanate society at the highest levels. Even as historians underline the great political flux and discontinuities of the Sultanate period, they do not research the social and cultural consequences that this constant shuffling created in making and reproducing Muslim society through the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The next section studies this subject from the perspective of political traditions and customs brought to Delhi by new ruling groups and the response of the Persian litterateurs to the political cultures of their masters.

Persianate Literati, Parvenu Lords and courtly culture

Through the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries CE the population of Dihlī-yi kuhnah increased substantially. Sometime around 1287 CE and the end of Balban's reign, the young Nizām al-Dīn Awliyā' (d. 725/1325) arrived in the Old City. He did not yet possess the stature of a great teacher and mystic; in the late 1280s Nizām al-Dīn was only an impoverished student, reliant upon his friends for a room in Dihlī-yi kuhnah where he stayed briefly. The Old City had expanded over the last century until a visitor to the city, someone like Nizām al-Dīn, found its crowded, dirty environs distasteful. Nizām al-Dīn spent much of his waking hours outside the city in the environs of the nearby reservoir, the *hawz-i rānī*, before leaving the precincts altogether and setting up his hospice some distance away, near Kīlokhri, in the relatively remote area of Ghiyāspūr.⁴⁹ This discomfort with the Old City had a lot to do with Nizām al-Dīn Awliyā's ideological ambivalence towards material life and comfort, elements that were quite unambiguously associated with the court of the Delhi sultans.

As we have already noticed the imprint of Delhi's rulers was strongly felt on the city and there was unanimity in thirteenth and fourteenth century sources that Delhi's prosperity was a consequence of the incumbent ruler's patronage. But this might have only been a half-truth. Whereas the munificence of the Delhi sultan and his/her courtiers "pulled" people to the capital, Mongol depredations in eastern Iran, Transoxiana, Afghanistan and in the Punjab and Sind provinces "pushed" a large number of émigrés to Delhi as well. Its impact was most evident in the sheer diversity of the migrants who reached Delhi. Beyond the large numbers it is the change in the social profile of migrants through the thirteenth century CE that is most interesting. In the 1220s and 1230s, as the centres of

Muslim urban civilization in Kh'arazm, Transoxiana, Khurasan, Sistan and Afghanistan suffered devastation, a large number of litterateurs, secretaries, landed elites and aristocrats sought sanctuary in Delhi. Their numbers gradually tapered off in the 1240s and 1250s and Baranī who speaks of the social profile of the émigré nobles present in Ilutmish's court with the greatest degree of respect displays no such sentiment for immigrants intruding into Delhi politics from the second half of the thirteenth century. At that time different types of frontier elements—Mongol groups and their auxiliaries—migrated to the Sultanate in search of patronage and fortune. For a Persian scholar such as Zīyā' al-Dīn Baranī, a fourth generation descendent of family of secretaries whose ancestors had served the Sultanate regimes in high administrative positions, these Mongol migrants were regarded as *naw-musalmān*, new Muslims of indiscriminate social origins. But it was not just the Mongols who were derided by the Persephone literati. Baranī and other sultanate chroniclers also looked askance more generally at people of pastoral backgrounds, trading professions, local converts and manumitted slaves who aspired to high positions in Sultanate administration and society.⁵⁰ These individuals and groups were described as “base born” (*bad aṣlī va na-kas*); people who were base and impure (*na-jinsan va khabīṣan*); or those who belonged to the class of the “lowest and basest of the low and base-born” (*siflah'tarīn va rizālah'tarīn-i siflah'gān va rizālah'gān*).⁵¹ According to the Persian authors, sultanate rulers would do well to respect birth and cultural accomplishments when they chose their servants and administrators.

The context in which the Persian *litterateurs* tendered their advice should not be forgotten. Quite contrary to the aristocratic normative systems recommended in the Persian courtly literature the sultans of Delhi and the commanders they empowered came from nondescript social backgrounds. Even if the slave lineages of Ilutmish and Balban had acculturated to the Persianate, urbane traditions of Delhi through the thirteenth century CE, this was not the case with recent migrants from the frontier like the Khalajīs or the Tughluqs. Both Jalāl al-Dīn Khalajī and Ghiyāṣ al-Dīn Tughluq lacked a base in Delhi and were strongly opposed by the capital's political elite. These were the courtiers towards whom the Persian literati directed their advice on governance and the need to patronize aristocrats and not the riff-raff, marginal social groups that constituted their political dispensations.

The Persian literati had to show remarkable discretion in their discussion of these themes; they could hardly draw attention to the indifferent social backgrounds of their political masters especially when like the Qarā'ūna Tughluqs or the Khalajīs, at one time allies of the Qarluqs, they had shared ethnic or a past service association with the Mongols, inveterate foes of Islam and the Sultanate.⁵² There was a great deal of dissimulation and a considerable amount of reification in the narratives of the Persian litterateurs as they tried to comprehend and communicate the unfamiliar, frontier-pastoral cultural traditions of their masters into a familiar lexicon of Perso-Islamic traditions of governance. To elaborate the complicated terrain that this process of translation can cover I have studied two examples, one each from the Khalajī and Tughluq regimes.

The first example concerns traditions of succession followed by members of the Khalajī dynasty during the short 30-year duration of their rule (1290–1320 CE). At the outset, these traditions were evident at the time of Jalāl al-Dīn's murder in 667/1296. At his death the Delhi sultan had two sons: the older one, Arkali Khān, who had the monarch's trust, was given considerable authority over armies, territories and in the punishment of rebels.⁵³ Jalāl al-Dīn's younger son, Qadr Khān, was too young to have received any prior political appointment. At Jalāl al-Dīn Khalajī's murder Baranī expected that the competent Arkali Khān would succeed his father and could not restrain his surprise when the Queen mother, Malikah-yi Jahān placed the younger sibling on the throne.⁵⁴

Baranī's inability to comprehend these developments is apparent from his clichéd, gendered remarks about Malikah-yi Jahān. She was somewhat of a shrew, Baranī informs us, a stubborn, willful person who had dominated her husband while he was alive.⁵⁵ The impetuous act of placing the young Qadr Khān on the throne and assuming the regency herself was in keeping with her naïve, foolish character. She did not consult anyone and as her experiment led the dynasty into disaster, Baranī had Malikah-yi Jahān confess the folly of her actions. According to Baranī the queen admitted: "I am a woman and women are deficient in judgement [*naqīṣat-i 'aql*]"'.⁵⁶ Tenuous as the gendered explanations provided by the author may be, they are rendered even more fragile at Baranī's recounting of the older son's reactions at the loss of the throne. The energetic, valiant Arkali Khān who had once had the Sufi saint Sīdī Muwallih crushed by an elephant, accepted his exclusion from the throne as a fait accompli. Instead of disputing the succession, he retreated to his appanage in Multān. There he remained despite Baranī's account that the queen apologized repeatedly for her actions and entreated the older son to return to Delhi to oppose the rebel 'Alā' al-Dīn Khalajī.⁵⁷

The Khalajīs ruled for three generations and every succession during their rule of 30 years was disputed. Obviously the assumption of high office was never resolved to the satisfaction of rival claimants. Important to keep in mind is the fact that these claimants were *always* members of the ruling family and in attempting to curtail intra-lineage conflict, the fourth dynast, Mubārak Shāh Khalajī (716–20/1316–20), incarcerated many of his siblings, eventually blinding and executing them.⁵⁸ In this milieu, Malikah-yi Jahān's placing of young Qadr Khān on the throne—Baranī's horror notwithstanding—was one accession that remained unchallenged. The older brother seemed to accept—for the moment anyway—the right of his younger sibling to the throne.

This was in contrast to 'Alā' al-Dīn Khalajī's own experience. After seizing the throne he was generous to many of his relatives and gave them high positions, but as we have already seen, through the duration of his reign he progressively segregated authority in his own person. Sometime around 700/1301 an attempt was made on 'Alā' al-Dīn's life. The perpetrator was Ikit Khān, 'Alā' al-Dīn Khalajī's youngest brother's son.⁵⁹ Baranī attributed base ambition as the motive for Ikit Khān's animosity but it should not escape our scrutiny that in seizing power, 'Alā' al-Dīn Khalajī had reversed the order of succession that had prevailed a generation earlier. If Malikah-yi Jahān had appointed the youngest son to the throne excluding

the older sibling; ‘Alā’ al-Dīn was the oldest sibling and his right to the throne was challenged by the disaffected descendents of his youngest brother.

Baranī’s reportage makes it extremely difficult to comprehend the working of Khalajī customs of inheritance. Certainly one of their traditions seemed to privilege the rights of the youngest son. It is hard to say whether these constituted traditions of ultimogeniture somewhat like the rights of the “hearth-prince” (*ōtčigin*) recognized by some Turkish tribes and the Chingisid family.⁶⁰ Tantalizing as the evidence might be, in its scantiness it remains hardly compelling. More germane for our present discussion, however, is the need to notice Baranī’s complete inability to fathom the customary practices of the regnant sultans of Delhi. While his diatribe against Malikah-yi Jahān reveals the author’s own rather conventionally gendered location, it also underlines the Persian litterateur’s inability to comprehend the cultural world of his protagonists, recent *émigrés* to the Sultanate and now its rulers. Even as they became governors of the Persianate world of the sultanate and masters of Delhi, the “Sanctuary of Islam”, they continued to practice succession rituals whose customary provenance was quite incomprehensible to their court chroniclers.

Equally distant to the cultural traditions of Delhi were the Tughluqs, whose dynastic founder, Ghiyāṣ al-Dīn, was hailed as the “Saviour of Islam” even though his retinue consisted of Khokhars, “Ghuzz, Turks and Mongols from Rūm and Rūs”,⁶¹ all of whom had challenged the authority of the sultanate in the past. No Persian chronicler ever made anything of the disjunction between the past careers and present fortunes of the members of the early Tughluq political dispensation. And yet the travelogue of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa suggests that the Tughluqs placed considerable premium that their notables acculturate rapidly to “Muslim ways”. He noted that in Muḥammad Tughluq’s reign:

all [courtiers] were required to show a knowledge of the obligations of ablution, prayers and the binding articles of Islam. They used to be questioned on these matters; if anyone failed to give correct answers he was punished and they made a practice of studying them with one another in the audience hall and the bazaars and setting them down in writing.⁶²

This was an unusual requirement to demand of practicing Muslims unless, of course, their ritual praxis was regarded as somewhat deficient.

While Persian chronicles gloss over some uncomfortable details about their lords and masters, the amateur ethnography of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa carries interesting details about Tughluq court rituals and ceremonial. He provided the following description of Muḥammad Tughluq’s royal procession on festivals:

On the morning of the feast all the elephants are adorned with silk, gold and precious stones. There are sixteen of these elephants which no one rides, but they are reserved to be ridden by the sultan himself, and over them are carried sixteen parasols of silk embroidered with jewels, each one with a shaft of pure gold. . . . The sultan himself rides on one of these elephants and in front of him

there is carried aloft the *ghāshiya*, that is his saddle-cover, which is adorned with the most precious jewels. In front of him walk his slaves and his Mamluks.⁶³

Ibn Baṭṭūṭa added further details regarding the ritual at the time of the sultan's entry into the capital:

On some of the [sixteen] elephants there were mounted small military catapults and when the sultan came near the city, parcels of gold and silver coins mixed together were thrown from these machines. The men on foot in front of the sultan and the other persons present scrambled for the money, and they kept on scattering it until the procession reached the palace. . . .⁶⁴

While *ghāshiya* has an Arabic etymology, meaning to cover or veil,⁶⁵ the origin of the ceremony lies in the accession and ceremonial rituals of the early Turks where the “Lord of the Horse” would be identified with the newly enthroned leader and the procession would celebrate the conquest of the four quarters by the Universal Emperor.⁶⁶ The tradition was followed in some of the major steppe-descended polities in the central Islamic lands: by the Saljuqs, the Zangids and the Baḥrī Mamluks of Egypt (with a military elite of Qipchaq origin).⁶⁷ At least in Syria and Egypt it was accepted as a ritual associated with royalty and performed by the Kurdish Ayyubids, who learnt of it from their Turkish patrons the Zangids. With the Ayyubids it was integrated as a part of their accession ceremony together with the ritual pledge of allegiance, *bay'a*, and the investiture from the caliph.⁶⁸

Detailed descriptions of the *ghāshiya* ritual exist from the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt where Jamāl al-Dīn ibn Taghrībīrdī (d. 874/1470) clarified that it was a part of the accession ceremonies of the monarch and repeated on major festivals. Its performance in Egypt mirrors Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's description of the ceremony from Muḥammad Tughluq's court and Aḥmad al-Qalqashandī (d. 821/1418) provided the following description:

[The *ghāshiya*] is a saddle cover of leather, decorated with gold so that the observer would take it to be made entirely of gold. It is borne before him [i.e. the Mamluk sultan] when riding in state processions for parades, festivals, etc. The *rikābdāriyya* [grooms, i.e. *ghulāms*] carry it, the one who holds it up in his hands turning it right and left. It is one of the particular insignia of this kingdom.⁶⁹

An important common feature between the Mamluk state in Egypt and the Delhi Sultanate was their common reliance upon Turko-Mongol personnel from the trans-Caucasian steppes, the *dasht-i Qipchaq*. The sultanate's link with the Eurasian steppe already present in İltutmish's reign continued into the reign of Ghiyāṣ al-Dīn Tughluq who was of Negüderid background, and had a retinue of “Turks and Mongols from Rūm and Rūs”.⁷⁰

Just as Baranī had noticed the curious succession traditions of the Khalajīs but unable to understand them had reported it in the gendered terms familiar to his

world, he certainly witnessed Tughluq procession rituals but filtered out those elements that made them unfamiliar to his experience. Curiously enough Baranī's description of 'Alā' al-Dīn's triumphant march to Delhi after Jalāl al-Dīn's murder (695/1296) does possess some of the elements present in Baṭṭūṭa's description although completely different motives to the discharge of gold coins (*panj'mān akhtar*; lit.: five mans of gold stars) among the crowds observing the sultan's march are ascribed by the author.⁷¹ Equally selective was Yahyā ibn Aḥmad Sirhindī's early fifteenth century account of Muḥammad Tughluq's celebratory procession after his accession. The narrative is close enough to Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's description of the *ghāshīya* ritual for us to follow its main features but the elisions are important as well. Sirhindī noted that:

[the lanes were decorated with coloured and embroidered cloth. From the time that the sultan set his foot in the city till he entered the imperial palace, gold and silver coins were rained from the back of the elephants among the populace, and gold was scattered in every street, lane, and house.⁷²

In Baranī and Sirhindī's accounts the sultan's triumphal processions receive due recognition but there is no reference to the *ghāshīya*. Was the omission deliberate or was it an aspect of Turko-Mongol practice quite unfamiliar to Persian secretaries? Were they, in other words, just inadequate historians reifying the practice of their subjects either through ignorance or because of their own class and cultural prejudices?

Baranī was a contemporary of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa and both authors were in Delhi during Muḥammad Tughluq's reign. If the Moroccan visitor could notice and learn about the *ghāshīya* during his visit, so, theoretically speaking, could Baranī. In Baranī's narrative Ghiyās al-Dīn was a "Saviour of Islam", a morally righteous Muslim, renowned for his combat with the infidel Mongols and against the heathen menace that was suddenly threatening Delhi. The challenge to Islam appeared when the usurper Khusraw Khān Barwārī/Parwārī, a recent convert slave, killed his master and his heirs, despoiled his master's harem and apostatized. Just as Ghiyās al-Dīn Tughluq had saved the sultanate from the Mongols, this conflict with Khusraw Khān Barwārī/Parwārī was over the future well-being of the Muslim community. By incorporating details about the Turko-Mongol antecedents of Ghiyās al-Dīn and the composition of his retinue, or noting the practice of (un-Islamic) steppe rituals by the frontier commander, Baranī would have complicated the simple binaries around which he had framed the qualities of his protagonist—the Muslim hero versus the non-Muslim—and his narration of the triumph of rectitude over evil. The author preferred not to tread these waters. Once the social and cultural backgrounds of Ghiyās al-Dīn Tughluq and his frontier retinue were erased what was left was a relatively monochromatic picture of a Muslim Delhi Sultanate valiantly battling a sea of infidels, holding aloft the banner of Islam even as the Mongol deluge swept away the civilization of the *dār al-islām* elsewhere. In this narration the complex connections of the Tughluqs with regions and cultures outside the subcontinent were completely erased.

Conclusion: Writing a history of sultanate courtly traditions

In conventional historiography the Delhi sultanate is characterized as a Muslim state that had by the fourteenth century seized control over much of the material resources of north India and was expanding aggressively into the Deccan. In this historiography, the sultanate was established with its Islamic and Persianate credentials intact, receiving its high traditions from its Ghaznavid, Saljuq and Kh'arazmī neighbours. This was a state that was Mughal-like in its imperial vision even if it remained deficient in comparison to its successor in the administrative execution of its lofty vision. Within the limits of this historiography, the constant shifting of capitals by the Delhi sultans was believed to have served the grandiose, authoritative purpose of validating the rule of powerful monarchs even if they were also wasteful, indulgent displays of their wealth and power. In this instance, modern bourgeois and socialist preferences coalesced with medieval Islamic ones in an ambivalent response to absolutist rule.

In contrast to those who would read the sultanate as a period of absolutist rule, my paper suggests that an abiding characteristic of the Delhi sultanate in the long duration was the extreme fragility of its political associations. Although this political instability allowed for the concentration of extreme authority and material resources in the hands of a monarch, it made its reproduction in succeeding generations extremely difficult. Since structures of political association resided on paternalistic, inter-personal ties they required renewed mobilization under each ruler through a fresh dispensation of favours. One material manifestation of this political process was the construction of capitals to house new political dispensations.

Studying the construction and representation of sultanate authority in Delhi also underlines the great diffusion of authority among a variety of political agents in the realm. Sultans were frequently *forced* to move from Dihlī-yi kuhnah because its entrenched elite were altogether too hostile to new incumbents. Inter and intra-dispensational conflicts were common during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries but what is perhaps unique to the Delhi sultanate is the spatial dimension this conflict could take. If the construction or resettlement of a capital marked a monarch's bid to establish his or her own autonomous political sphere, not all monarchs were able to achieve this end.

The political arena of the Delhi sultanate expanded dramatically through the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries with a large number of new players surfacing with each generation. This was not just an increase in numbers but also in social and ethnic complexity. Afghans appeared on the political terrain in the 1260s and were described with some awe by a Persian chronicler thus:

Their heads are like big sacks of straw, their beards like the combs of the weaver, long-legged as the stork but more ferocious than the eagle, their heads lowered like that of the owl of the wilderness.⁷³

By the 1280s when Turko-Mongol contingents started joining sultanate forces Baranī derided them as *naw-musalmān*. Amīr-i Khusraw communicated his

sentiments about these people when he described his Qarā'ūna captor as follows: "He sat on his horse like a leopard on a hill. His open mouth smelt like an arm-pit, whiskers fell from his chin like pubic hair."⁷⁴ Notably Amīr-i Khusraw penned these sentiments in 1285 CE and 35 years later he was eulogizing Ghiyāṣ al-Dīn Tughluq as the "Rescuer of Islam" in his *Tughluqnāmah*, blithely ignoring the fact that his patron was also a Qarā'ūna Turk who had only lately been a nomad. Ghiyāṣ al-Dīn's ethnicity and social background made it difficult—but not impossible—for him to break into the circles of power in Delhi. Once he had crossed the Rubicon and seized the throne his identity and past were recrafted in terms that the Persian literati felt was commensurate with the status of a great monarch of Islam. Other than frontier commanders, Persian chronicles also grafted enviable genealogies for rulers of slave descent like Iltutmish and Balban. But there was also the notable exception of sultan Khusraw Khān Barwārī/Parwārī, a favourite slave of Mubārak Shāh Khalajī, raised to high political service who went on to usurp the throne in 1320 CE. Khusraw Khān alone had the dubious distinction among slave-rulers of having court chronicles focus on his natal origins, receiving harsh criticism for possessing the temerity to become monarch and ultimately charged with apostasy, foregoing thereby all rights to be the leader and protector of the Muslim community. The bias of the Persian literati against Khusraw Khān is particularly exceptional given the support he apparently received from the elite circles in Delhi—including the Sufi Shaykh Nizām al-Dīn Awliyā'. It is possible that Khusraw Khān's subcontinental origins were remembered *once* the tide had turned against him; Amīr-i Khusraw may well have eulogized him had he continued as sultan. Certainly the selective display of amnesia shown by the Persian literati is telling. A Qarā'ūna ex-nomad made for an acceptable monarch in the opinion of these litterateurs but not a slave from the subcontinent—what other uncomfortable elisions and glosses do these Persian narratives carry and what facets of social life did they chose to elide?

The point is of some relevance in the context of court ritual. As with sultanate regimes elsewhere in the Islamic world, Persian chroniclers suggested that the Delhi sultans also broadcast their authority in fairly traditional ways: they had their name read in the Friday sermon (*khutbah*), they issued coins with their titles on the sigilla, their authority was ceremoniously recognized by elites (*bay'ah*), they sought Caliphal recognition to rule and they followed the grand courtly rituals of Iran requiring petitioners to prostrate (*sijdah*) and kiss the ground or the hem of the royal cloak (*pā'ī būsī/qadam būsī*). But these were by no means the only rituals of authority performed by the Delhi sultans. There were traditions of succession and rituals of pomp and pageantry performed by the Khalajī and Tughluq sultans that were not a part of the Perso-Islamic milieu of the Persian literati. These were a part of the customary traditions followed by the frontier elements that withstood acculturation and became a part of the culture of the Delhi court. The Persian literati grappled to comprehend these and almost always filtered them through cultural lenses that refracted their contents into familiar contours. The records of the Persian literati were thereby extremely successful in transcribing the world of the Delhi sultans in relatively seamless and homogenous

terms. This world did have its aberrations when *naw-musalmāns* were patronized or the apostate Khusraw Khān became sultan. But these were exceptional moments where normalcy and order was restored in Persian narratives through heroic characters such as Ghiyāṣ al-Dīn Tughluq.

The impression of a monolithic, stable Muslim society and state carried in the thirteenth and fourteenth century Persian records should hardly surprise us. We should not expect Persian litterateurs located on Islam's eastern frontier, facing Mongol invasions, to acknowledge the humble social origins of their rulers and their practice of unfamiliar non-*sharī'atī* political traditions and rituals. And yet, it was these turbulent historical processes that shaped the complex character of the Muslim community under the Delhi sultanate, created the conditions for the frequent coming and going of sultans and their many capitals and marked a centre of the world, an axis that gained credibility as *ḥazrat-i Dihlī*.

Notes

- 1 See Ibn Khaldun (1974), 263–73, 279–95.
- 2 See Baranī (1972). This was not the only didactic text written by Zīyā' al-Dīn Baranī. His *Tārīkh-i Fīrūz-shāhī* (see idem (1860–2)), is critical to an appreciation of the author's opinions on ideal governance. The intertextuality between the two works has been usefully detailed by Hardy (1957), 315–21; idem (1966), 20–39.
- 3 See Baranī (1860–2), 179f.
- 4 See idem (1972), 217–31.
- 5 See *ibid.*, 140f.
- 6 See *ibid.*, 184–7, 193–216.
- 7 A good example of colonial historiography in this genre would be Cunningham (1871), I:132–84.
- 8 For the most lucid and forceful exposition of this argument, see Habib (1978), 287–303.
- 9 See Ali (1986), 34–44.
- 10 For the clearest theorisation of this argument see Wink (1997–2004).
- 11 See in particular Cohen (1989), 513–19. According to Goswamy (1986), 137f, Delhi was the centre of Jain manuscript production in the thirteenth century CE. Although the longer history of this tradition has only started to be researched (see Cohen (1989)), it is certain that Jain manuscript production did not start *de novo* in the thirteenth century. Delhi certainly possessed a sizeable Jain population and their patronage of cultural and religious artefacts is visible in the spolia of Jain temples in Delhi's twelfth century congregational mosque.
- 12 An extremely valuable discussion on the *dihlīvāl* and the presence of a mint in Delhi can be found in Deyell (1990), 144–83.
- 13 Baranī (1860–2) is particularly problematic in this context. Note, for example, his narrative on Kīlokhī during Kayqubād's reign (157–65) where the author uses *Dihlī* and Kīlokhī quite randomly. See also the useful discussion in Jackson (1986). Since the various Sultanate settlements in Delhi ranged a great deal in size and complexity describing them as undifferentiated cities can be somewhat confusing. At the time of their inception, many scarcely deserved the epithet of "city" and others declined from flourishing urban centres to mere military camps. Although a study of the processes of urbanization is not the subject of my inquiry I have tried to remain sensitive to these differences while remaining attentive to size, scale and changes in the histories of Sultanate capitals.