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The Empires of the Near East and India. Studies of the Safavid, Ottoman, and Mughal Literate Communities

Hani Khafipour (ed.)

New York 2019: Columbia University Press

672 pages

Hardcover: \$ 150.00, £ 125.00; Paperback: \$ 50.00, £ 42.00; E-book: \$ 49.99, £ 42.00

ISBN 978-0-231-17437-4

Hani Khafipour (University of Southern California) has set himself a monumental task: to make accessible a kaleidoscope of (mainly) textual snippets as translated source materials from literary traditions of three empires, the Ottomans, Safavids and Mughals, to serve as much-needed tools for teaching the political, social, cultural and intellectual histories of early modern empires. Khafipour dedicates an edited volume of source studies to a growing, but still largely unstudied field of comparative imperial history. For example, Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam surveyed the 1990's state of the field in their introduction to the volume on *The Mughal State, 1526-1750*. Francis Robinson (1997) explored changes in "shared knowledge" systems and scholarly connections based on textual traditions. Stephen Dale synthesised mainly top-down views of political, economic and cultural themes in his *The Muslim Empires of the Ottomans, Safavids and Mughals*. A lot more needs to be done in a comparative and a connected history framework and Khafipour's volume is a big step in the right direction. This edited volume is an excellent compendium of sources to teach courses in the history of the three empires, and this is the main background for this review. Khafipour and his large group of thirty contributors mine the empirical treasure trove of all three empires, burnish the often complex and rocky ores and blend them with introductory essays to the respective fields of inquiry. The results are four fields of inquiry covering religion, politics, philosophy and science, as well as literature and the arts. Each field is divided into prevalent topics making up eleven chapters on themes of conversion and apostasy, debates about heresy and polytheism, queries of the transcendental and spiritual, notions of sovereignty, organising royal succession, military invasion and diplomatic negotiation, contemplating life and its ways of being, dealing with the occult and hidden, listening to the poetic, providing subsistence for the studious, literate and educated,

appreciating the visual arts in image, script and sigillography. Each of these chapters introduces a case study for the Safavid, Ottoman and Mughal empires, provides an explanatory context and offers the translation of an extract from a relevant source, heavily annotated and finished off with a list for further reading.

Khafipour assembled a distinguished group of scholars, experts in their fields, to live up to the task. Rudi Matthee shares the trials of an Armenian convert as they emerge from Ali Akbar's "book of confession", who turned his back on his Christian upbringing to embrace Shi'i beliefs in the seventeenth-century Safavid empire. Hüseyin Yılmaz gives us a taste of early sixteenth-century Ottoman theoretical understanding and Sufitic conceptions of political legitimacy. Jane Mikkelsen introduces us to the ideological subtleties of Persian epistolography and poetry in the context of the 1658-59 succession struggle between the victorious Aurangzeb and his brother Dara Shukuh. Maryam Moazzen guides the reader through the thickets of Islamic endowment deeds from early modern Iran and brings to life the social world of the Madrasa-yi Sultani of Isfahan. Keelan Overton and Jake Benson take us on a tour of Indo Persian bookish cultures, making sense of seals from Bijapur, deciphering notations of often anonymous scribes and interpreting connoisseurship of powerful royal collectors in the Deccan.

The volume will be of great use to historians who either teach introductory courses on the three early modern empires or who deal with other early modern empires whose trajectories overlap with the study of the Ottomans, Safavids and Mughals. Students of the Habsburg Empires might find the "letter of victory" from Sultan Suleiman to the Doge of Venice regarding the conquest of Budapest written in 1541 beneficial for inquiries into imperial representations and diplomatic communication. Those coming to grips with the difficulties of Persianate Mughal court culture might find it useful to catch a glimpse of the multilingual dimensions of northern India exemplified in Audrey Truschke's investigations of a short extract on the "ancient king of Manu" from the Persian translation of the epic Mahabharata (*Razmnama*) and of a Jain scholar's Sanskrit praise poem addressed to the Mughal elite. Those interested in interreligious dialogue might find Corinne Lefèvre's selection of "night debates" (*majalis*) at the Mughal Emperor Jahangir's court just as illuminating as Nikolay Antov's pick of Ottoman fatwas ("legal interpretations") dealing with the relationship between Muslims and Non-Muslims.

In the volume's short introduction Khafipour expressed his ambition that "the existence of multiple points of connection between members of these communities living in each empire unveiled throughout the book will help direct the reader to move beyond examining their

perspectives solely through the conventional comparative lens and to engage in studying their ‘connected histories’ and modes of collective action across boundaries” (p. 3). He makes it clear that some topics, such as discussions of sovereignty, lend themselves more easily to the discovery of trans-imperial connections, whereas the complex of conversion differed greatly in the evolving and highly dynamic contexts of the Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal cases. Still, the sometimes very loose juxtaposition of texts from similar genres more often stresses the idiosyncratic aspects of the presented literary traditions. Several contributions are concerned with un-connected historical developments and phenomena which played out in all three empires and shaped their trajectories as well. For novices to these fields, e.g., undergraduate students, the introductory essays could have benefited from some additional signposting beyond similarities to explain those historical trajectories that linked communities, cultural practices, social spaces and intellectual traditions of these empires more clearly, as well as when and how they mattered to contemporaries. “Connected histories” (Sanjay Subrahmanyam 1997) range from the straightforward and obvious to the hidden, distorted and unexplainable.

While this is an excitingly diverse compendium and helpful tool for teaching, it shows that more work needs to be done to explain the levels and forms of connectedness that we are dealing with in the early modern period. Travel narratives and especially pilgrimage accounts would have been an instructive addition to this corpus to elaborate on the culturally commensurable and the disjointed phenomena of this imperial world. Biographical literature from the single individual to the collective could have emphasised the entangled trajectory of a long-standing literary and social historical tradition, elaborated in Arabic and Persian by learned communities in all three empires. To voice some ideas for future inquiries, more energy needs to be invested in the study of the manuscript cultures, their texts, visual cultures and materiality, to consolidate one of our most important empirical pillars for the early modern period. At the same time, material culture (presumably excluded due to the emphasis on “literate communities”) covering all kinds of artefacts delineate connected histories in circulation and the historical contingencies that such movements were often prone to. Nevertheless, this critical point should not diminish the fact that this is a laudable effort in compiling a handy and well-edited volume with expert contributions on a wide range of topics that will be of interest to historians studying and teaching the pasts of these three empires, their global histories and their encounter with other political and social protagonists of the early modern period.