

Introduction

Stories like those found in the prologue – of the charitable donation wending its way to Najaf, of the homeward journey of the *Santa Catharina* – fill the pages of this book. They are stories about people, knowledge and objects, about their movements over large distances and the long silences that followed in their wake, about the individuals whose livelihoods ushered them towards their eventual fates. The telling of such stories reveals a myriad of everyday concerns. These concerns reveal in turn a world – an arena of activities – which in the eighteenth century straddled both of what we today call South Asia and the Middle East. The activities that are at issue here were of a specific kind, pivoting on types of circulation and exchange which helped sustain the ambient polities of the time. In this book, I attempt to recapture the arena resulting from these activities in the period before its unravelling under the press of Europe's modern global empires.

Betwixt and between

That this arena and its world were soon to change out of all recognition is undeniable. But to say that is to view them in retrospect. In the middle of the eighteenth century, one might just as reasonably say that they, and India and the Islamic heartlands more generally, brimmed with unscripted possibilities. After all, the Safavid empire was no more after its sudden collapse, albeit survived for a time by a dynasty still imbued with a potent aura;¹ the Mughal empire had been hollowed out, the emperor a figurehead in a decaying capital, reduced to sanctifying the rule of others;² the Ottoman empire was a fragmented congeries of autonomous districts and provinces, their governing households tending to put their own interests before those of

¹ Rudolph P. Matthee, *Persia in Crisis: Safavid Decline and the Fall of Isfahan* (London, 2012); Laurence Lockhart, *The Fall of the Safavid Dynasty and the Afghan Occupation of Persia* (Cambridge, 1958).

² William Irvine, *Later Mughals*, vol. I: 1707–1720, vol. II: 1719–1739 (Calcutta, 1922); Jadunath Sarkar, *Fall of the Mughal Empire*, 4 vols. (Calcutta, 1932–50).

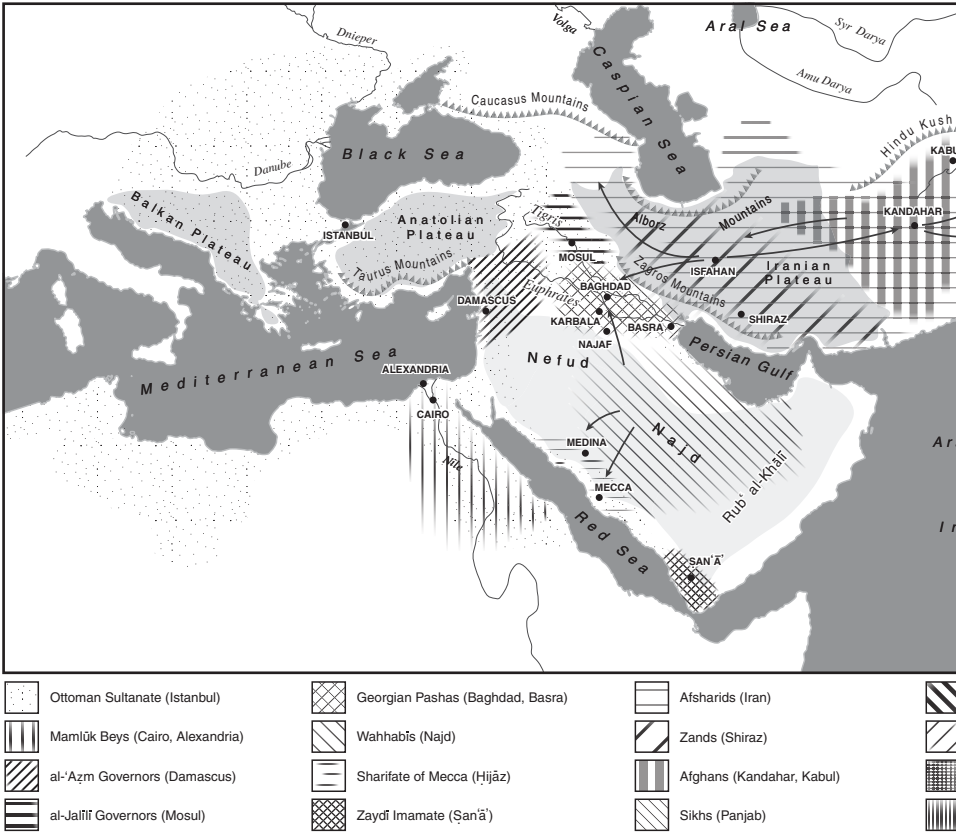
the ruling dynasty.³ Thus, ever since the great conquests of the Mongol warlord Timur more than three centuries before, the region was *bereft* of rulers who sought, and could plausibly aspire towards, universal dominion. If we also bear in mind that European imperialism had yet to be intimidated by contemporaries, then the middle of the eighteenth century reveals itself as a special moment in the region's history, a moment offering a remarkably wide array of prospective futures. Perhaps the clearest testament to this is the new regimes that thronged the territories of its once great Islamicate empires. (See Map 1.)

These successor regimes provide the backdrop to this book. But in describing them, it is all too easy to get lost in their details. For the purposes of this book, I simplify the matter by marshalling them into four groups distinguished by how their rulers related to their subjects and to the old imperial centres.⁴ One group is formed by the regimes that emerged in Awadh and Bengal, together with those based in Hyderabad, Arcot and Baghdad. For each of these regimes, the founders of what would become the ruling families or households in the eighteenth century were products of the old imperial centres. They were high-level officials in the mould either of Murshid Qulī Khān in Bengal – nobles intimate with the court in Delhi – or of Ḥasan Pasha in central and southern Iraq – slave (*mamlūk*) graduates of the palace schools in Istanbul. Appointed by the emperor as governors of their respective provinces early in the century, they were there as the representatives of the imperial elites of Delhi or Istanbul into which they had been fully assimilated. As the years passed, however, they transformed themselves into effectively independent rulers. They amalgamated fiscal, military and judicial powers that had previously been kept separate, and took over direction of the revenue system within their provinces. Even so, they continued to acknowledge the emperor as their suzerain, claiming to govern in his name and more often than not remitting tribute to him. The tribute aside, those who succeeded the regimes' founders maintained their predecessors' general policy towards the old imperial centre. It was maintained even though what now counted in their succession was lineal descent from the founder or membership of the household established by him. They were no longer appointees of Delhi or Istanbul, and their decisions took little or no heed of the emperor.

³ Bruce McGowan, 'The age of the ayans, 1699–1812', in Halil İnalcık and Donald Quataert (eds.), *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, 1300–1914* (Cambridge, 1994), 637–758; Donald Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire, 1700–1922* (2nd edn, Cambridge, 2005).

⁴ What is presented here is in effect a typology of sovereign regimes. Though I consider it best suited to the subject of this book, others are conceivable. For a different typology, see Christopher A. Bayly's in *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780–1830* (London, 1989), 16–61.

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However, they continued to seek his stamp of approval, not least because it conferred legitimacy on their rule.⁵

Rulers who claimed to govern in the emperor's name also presided over a second group of regimes. But these differed in that their rulers were *not* products of the old imperial centres. In the middle of the eighteenth century, those who governed Egypt, Gujarat and Rohilkhand (in northern India) were all outsiders to the households, courts and bureaucracies of Istanbul and Delhi. They had unilaterally wrested control of their regimes, and they switched between bouts of consolidation and campaigns of military adventure or warlordism. These rulers were outsiders in another sense too. By background, they were, respectively, Circassians (or Georgians), Marathas and Rohilla Afghans. So their ethnic roots lay outside the particular regime over which they exercised dominion; in some cases, those roots lay outside even the outer reaches of the Ottoman and Mughal empires at their most expansive in earlier times.⁶

In contrast, the rulers of a third group of regimes had deep roots within their regimes that long preceded their accession. They form a long list, and include: the Maratha Peshwas in western and central India; the Rajput chieftains in northern India; the Sikh khalsa in Panjab and northwestern India; the Zaydī imams in highland Yemen; the

⁵ Bernard S. Cohn, 'Political systems in eighteenth century India: the Banaras region', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 82:3 (1962), 312–20; Richard B. Barnett, *North India between Empires: Awadh, the Mughals and the British, 1720–1801* (Berkeley, CA, 1980); Michael H. Fisher, *A Clash of Culture: Awadh, the British, and the Mughals* (New Delhi, 1987); Muzaffar Alam, *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and the Punjab, 1707–48* (Delhi, 1986); John R. McLane, *Land and Local Kingship in Eighteenth-Century Bengal* (Cambridge, 1993); Sushil Chaudhury, *From Prosperity to Decline: Eighteenth Century Bengal* (New Delhi, 1995); Kumkum Chatterjee, *Merchants, Politics and Society in Early Modern India: Bihar, 1733–1820* (Leiden, 1996); Karen Leonard, 'The Hyderabad political system and its participants', *Journal of Asian Studies* 30:3 (1971), 569–82; Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Exploring the hinterland: trade and politics in the Arcot Nizamate (1700–1732)', in Rudrangshu Mukherjee and Lakshmi Subramanian (eds.), *Politics and Trade in the Indian Ocean World: Essays in Honor of Ashin Das Gupta* (Delhi, 1998), 113–64; 'Abd al-Rahmān ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Suwaydī, *Tārīkh ḥawādith Baghdād wa-al-Baṣra min 1186 ilā 1192 h./1772–1778 m.* (Baghdad: Wizārat al-thaqāfa wa-al-fanūn, 1978); Tom Nieuwenhuis, *Politics and Society in Early Modern Iraq: Mamluk Pashas, Tribal Shaykhs and Local Rule between 1802 and 1831* (The Hague, 1982); Thabit A. J. Abdullah, *Merchants, Mamluks, and Murder: The Political Economy of Trade in Eighteenth-Century Basra* (Albany, NY, 2001).

⁶ Kenneth M. Cuno, *The Pasha's Peasants: Land, Society and Economy in Lower Egypt, 1740–1858* (Cambridge, 1992); Michael Winter, *Egyptian Society under Ottoman Rule, 1517–1798* (London, 1992); Jane Hathaway, *The Politics of Households in Ottoman Egypt: The Rise of the Qazdaglis* (Cambridge, 1997); Jane Hathaway, *A Tale of Two Factions: Myth, Memory and Identity in Ottoman Egypt and Yemen* (Albany, NY, 2003); Ghulam A. Nadri, *Eighteenth-Century Gujarat: the Dynamics of its Political Economy, 1750–1800* (Leiden and Boston, 2009); Stewart Gordon, *Marathas, Marauders and State Formation in Eighteenth-Century India* (Delhi, 1994); Iqbal Husain, *The Ruhela Chieftaincies: the Rise and Fall of Ruhela Power in India in the Eighteenth Century* (Delhi, 1994).

Hashemite Sharifs in the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina; the al-Jalīlī family in northern Iraq; and the al-‘Aẓm family in Syria. All these rulers shared ethnic ties with many, if not most, of their subjects. They also belonged to lineages or communities with a tradition of leadership that often extended to landowning. Some, like the leading figures of the al-‘Aẓm family, were elevated into the imperial nobility and treated as members of the elites in the capital (while never letting go of their provincial roots). Others, like the Marathas, gained fame and notoriety for their wars of conquest and plunder, frequently at the expense of the capital. Though ruling independently in practice, if not in theory, most of these rulers were careful to pay at least lip service to the incumbent Ottoman sultan or Mughal padshah.⁷

A fourth group of regimes may be labelled tribal confederacies. They hailed mostly from the frontier areas of the Islamicate empires into whose administrative systems they had never been properly incorporated. The relationship of the rulers to their subjects was complicated. They were often multiply connected through a variety of kinship ties. With the regimes led by the Afsharids and the Zands, Iran hosted two of the region’s most prominent tribal confederacies in the middle of the eighteenth century. Following Nādir Shāh’s assassination in 1747, the Afghan Abdālī contingent of his army returned to its home territories in what would later become Afghanistan. This contingent formed the kernel of the Durrānī regime that dominated the area for the remainder of the

⁷ Frank Perlin, ‘Of white whale and countrymen in the eighteenth-century Maratha Deccan: extended class relations, rights and the problem of rural autonomy under the Ancien Regime’, *Journal of Peasant Studies* 5:2 (1978), 172–237; André Wink, *Land and Sovereignty in India: Agrarian Society and Politics under the Eighteenth Century Maratha Swarājya* (London, 1986); Dilbagh Singh, *The State, Landlords and Peasants: Eastern Rajasthan in the 18th Century* (Delhi, 1990); Nandita Prasad Sahai, *Politics of Patronage and Protest: the State, Society, and Artisans in Early Modern Rajasthan* (New York, 2006); J. S. Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab* (Cambridge, 1990); Purnima Dhavan, *When Sparrows Became Hawks: the Making of the Sikh Warrior Tradition, 1699–1799* (New York, 2011); Ḥusayn ‘Abd Allāh ‘Amrī, *Mi‘at ‘ām min tārikh al-Yaman al-ḥadīth, 1161–1264 H/1748–1784 M* (Damascus, 1984); Ḥusayn ‘Abd Allāh ‘Amrī, *The Yemen in the 18th and 19th Centuries: a Political and Intellectual History* (London, 1985); İsmail Hakkı Uzunçarşılı, *Mekke-i mükerreme emirleri* (Ankara, 1972); John L. Meloy, *Imperial Power and Maritime Trade: Mecca and Cairo in the Later Middle Ages* (Chicago, 2010); Dina R. Khoury, *State and Provincial Society in the Ottoman Empire: Mosul, 1540–1834* (Cambridge, 1997); Abdul-Karim Rafeq, *The Province of Damascus 1723–1783* (Beirut, 1966); Karl K. Barbir, *Ottoman Rule in Damascus, 1708–1758* (Princeton, NJ, 1980); Abdul-Rahim Abu-Husayn, *Provincial Leaderships in Syria, 1575–1650* (Beirut, 1985); Linda Schilcher, *Families in Politics: Damascene Factions and Estates of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Stuttgart, 1985); Herbert Bodman, *Political Factions in Aleppo, 1760–1826* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1963); Bruce A. Masters, *Origins of Western Economic Dominance in the Middle East: Mercantilism and the Islamic Economy in Aleppo, 1600–1750* (New York, 1988); Abraham Marcus, *Middle East on the Eve of Modernity: Aleppo in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1989).

century. Though the Safavid empire had vanished, the Durrānī rulers tended to avow respect for surviving members of the dynasty, which still had prestige and enjoyed popular veneration. In contrast, the movement known as the Wāhhābiya, which by the middle of the century had established a regime in central Arabia based on tribal solidarity and religious fervour, was aggressively opposed to the Ottoman empire and its dynasty. Such differences notwithstanding, all these regimes were capable of fielding conquest armies that were highly effective in looting settled areas and hauling back vast quantities of plunder from distant places. With varying degrees of success, they also tried to secure regular tribute from the lands that they managed to conquer. The most successful of their campaigns were led by the Afsharid Nādir Shāh and Aḥmad Shāh Durrānī, warlords and military adventurers par excellence.⁸

If nothing else, the foregoing discussion shows that sovereignty over the territories of the Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal empires in 1700 had, half a century later, devolved to an assortment of successor regimes. Accounts of many subjects central to these regimes have found their place in modern scholarship. But not given their due, or simply absent from these accounts, are activities to do with specifically regional-scale circulation and exchange. As a result, the factors accorded an *active* historical role in this scholarship are interpreted either as internal to the region's individual empires or regimes, or as operating on trans-regional or global scales, and so emanating from outside India and the Islamic heartlands. Now, it is widely accepted that the politics of India and the Islamic heartlands experienced developments in the eighteenth century that were remarkably similar in nature. Without doubt, major elements of this story are to be found within the politics of the region and in the relationship of these politics to trans-regional and global concerns. But there were also parallels and linkages on *regional* scales that were of fateful significance for India and the Islamic heartlands in the eighteenth century. There is general consensus in the scholarly literature that much of this region was in an exceptionally disturbed condition in the middle of the century. And yet transactions marked by large distances and long

⁸ Michael Axworthy, *The Sword of Persia: Nader Shah, from Tribal Warrior to Conquering Despot* (London, 2006); Ernest S. Tucker, *Nadir Shah's Quest for Legitimacy in Post-Safavid Iran* (Gainesville, FL, 2006); John R. Perry, *Karim Khan Zand: a History of Iran, 1747–1779* (Chicago, 1979); Jos J. L. Gommans, *The Rise of the Indo-Afghan Empire, c. 1710–1780* (Leiden, 1995); Ḥusayn Khalaf al-Shaykh Khaz'al, *Tārīkh al-Jazīra al-'Arabīya fī 'aṣr al-Shaykh Muḥammad 'Abd al-Wahhāb* (Beirut: Maṭba'a dār al-kutub, 1972); 'Azīz al-'Azma, *Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb* (Beirut: Riyād al-Rayyis lil-kutub wa-al-nashr, 2000).

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silences continued to take place. How is that possible? How can these two facts be reconciled?

I argue that the kernel of the answer is to be found in a coherent, self-regulating arena of activities which spanned much of India and the Islamic heartlands in the period, and which existed mostly, if not entirely, beyond the sovereign purview. By reconstructing the connective tissue of this arena, and thereby recapturing its world, the present book will hopefully serve to rebalance prevailing interpretations of the region at a pivotal moment in its history. This was a moment that brimmed with unscripted possibilities, a moment that in retrospect bridged multiple transitions – between different kinds of imperial governance, between mercantile and industrial capitalism, between older and newer forms of globalisation. By extension, this book is intended as a contribution to the reassessment currently taking place of our general understanding of India and the Islamic heartlands in the period before European dominance.

Framing modern scholarship

The historiographical reassessment presently under way of early modern South Asia and the Middle East is being propelled by work that transcends the bounds of any one polity or regime. Especially salient in this regard is research over the past two decades on religious and scholarly networks, and the diffusion and mixing of ideas from afar; diaspora communities and communal identities; trade, goods and money; languages, communication and intelligence; and travel, exploration, pilgrimage and migration.⁹ In contrast, the interests of earlier generations of scholars working on the period seldom transcended individual polities or regimes, despite notable efforts that sought to draw attention to this lacuna and the importance of filling it.¹⁰ The broadening of interests evidenced by more recent work might suggest that the state of research in the pertinent fields is robust. Relative to the situation in analogous

⁹ Citations to this recent work are found throughout the substantive chapters of this book.

¹⁰ Of particular note were the efforts by Marshall G. S. Hodgson, Joseph F. Fletcher and Frank Perlin. See Edmund Burke III, 'Marshall G. S. Hodgson and the hemispheric interregional approach to world history', *Journal of World History* 6:2 (1995), 237–50; Joseph F. Fletcher, 'Integrative history: parallels and interconnections in the early modern period, 1500–1800', *Journal of Turkish Studies* 9 (1985), 37–57; Frank Perlin, *Invisible City: Monetary, Administrative and Popular Infrastructures in Asia and Europe, 1500–1900* (Aldershot, 1993). For a recent statement from the perspective of an Ottomanist, see Suraiya N. Faroqhi, *The Ottoman Empire and the World around It* (London, 2004).

fields dealing with Europe's or China's past, however, this would be an optimistic view.

These are without doubt exciting times for historians working on India and the Islamic heartlands in precolonial times. On one level, this may be put down to a convergence of perspectives. Never before have so many parts of the globe been studied within the shared framework of the early modern world. This approach, long cultivated by scholars working on European expansion overseas, has since the 1990s been adopted by a growing number of Sinologists, South Asianists, Persianists and Ottomanists. Their contributions, often innovative, certainly challenging, have forced historians to look anew at the world in this period and reconsider the grand narratives that bind it to modern times. The sense of excitement is reinforced by the emergence of 'global history' over the past generation.¹¹ More so than ever before, scholars are aware that regional-scale studies need to be inserted into the consciousness – and publications – of historians and social scientists who are currently engaged in attempts to construct global histories.¹² This awareness is buttressed by the realisation that we have yet to grasp adequately the historical significance of activities which cannot be shoehorned into categories such as state, empire and civilisation.¹³

But if we tune out the aspirational rhetoric and consider the substance of the received scholarly literature on premodern India and the Islamic heartlands, we find that on subjects of unimpeachable importance – subjects like childhood, literacy, peasant life or the environment – there are glaring, even surprising, weaknesses and gaps. This underlies the pioneering nature of the recent work noted above. Hopefully, when we look back upon it in years to come, we will be able to say that it was seminal. But much more progress needs to be made before we reach that point and the challenges in the meantime are manifold. Above all, owing to the small number of specialists currently active in the pertinent fields and the magnitude of the tasks confronting them, the intensity of

¹¹ Landmark studies in this still developing field include Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam, and World History* (Cambridge, 1993); Kenneth Pomeranz, *Great Divergence: Europe, China and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, NJ, 2000); Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800–1830*, vol. I: *Integration on the Mainland* (Cambridge, 2003), vol. II: *Mainland Mirrors: Europe, Japan, China, South Asia, and the Islands* (Cambridge, 2009); Geoffrey Parker, *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven, CT, 2013).

¹² Exemplary in this regard are John Darwin, *After Tamerlane: the Global History of Empire since 1405* (London, 2007) and Bartolomé Yun-Casalilla and Patrick K. O'Brien (eds.), *The Rise of Fiscal States: a Global History, 1500–1914* (Cambridge, 2012).

¹³ The point is well made in Tirthankar Roy's recent article, 'Where is Bengal? Situating an Indian region in the early modern world economy', *Past and Present* 213 (2011), 115–46.

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scholarly engagement is often low. This makes it difficult to foster a joint commitment to the broader debates or engender the necessary collective will to answer the bigger questions. As a result, the most relevant works on the same theme are often at great remove in space and time from one another.

Research on the part of the world addressed in this book therefore continues to be fragmented or narrowly conceived. This is exemplified by the absence to date of sustained deliberation of the geographical and temporal framings within which such research is articulated. Specialists on the whole still work in channels framed primarily by religious and state- or Europe-centred perspectives. This poses a major difficulty because such perspectives are not well suited for making sense of the pioneering scholarship of recent years on individuals, commodities, organisations and livelihoods that embraced multiple polities and regimes. No matter how much empirically grounded research is carried out, if the prior framing is at odds with their provenance, the findings cannot be situated in the context appropriate to them and thus discerning their proper historical significance is rendered impossible. That is perhaps the most persuasive argument in favour of a systematic discussion of our prior framings.

Even though such discussion has yet to occur, scholars over the last half-century have employed a wide range of geographical notions in trying to get to grips with the part of the world over which the Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal empires, and their successor regimes, are commonly said to have exerted some form of dominion.¹⁴ Some of these have been particularly influential for our understanding of periods before the start of the consolidation of Europe's global empires in the nineteenth century. The best known are entities such as Egypt, Iran, Syria, Turkey and India, which are primarily modern and political in character. These have been used alongside more capacious notions within which such states are often subsumed, and over the boundaries or definitions of which, in the case of, say, the Middle East or Asia, there is no consensus. Cross-cutting both these types of entities are civilisational or ethno-cultural complexes to which numerous labels – the Turco-Mongol world, Indo-Persia, Persianate, the Muslim Mediterranean, to name but four – have been attached. Finally, there are clusters of interrelated notions defined by

¹⁴ The scholarly literature on the topic is surveyed in David Ludden, 'Presidential address: maps in the mind and the mobility of Asia', *Journal of Asian Studies* 62:4 (2003), 1057–78. This may be usefully supplemented by Martin W. Lewis and Karen E. Wigen, *Myth of Continents: a Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley, CA, 1997) and Michael E. Bonine, Abbas Amanat and Michael E. Gasper (eds.), *Is There a Middle East? The Evolution of a Geopolitical Concept* (Stanford, CA, 2012).

either political economy (the trading world of maritime Asia being a well-known example) or formal sovereignty (such as the *ṣūbah* of Bengal or the Ottoman *eyalet* of Baghdad). That such geographical notions are useful is evidenced by the work which they have facilitated, be it as research perspectives on the region or as concepts in narrating its past. They are, however, accompanied by analytical limitations. Specifically, they direct attention towards the concerns of the region's sovereigns and their officials, or of the Europeans in their diverse guises; or they privilege the region's conspicuous elites who monopolised the realms of high politics, warfare, government bureaucracy, art, the belles-lettres and formal learning.

These analytical limitations also extend to the periodisations in support of which the geographical notions above have often been deployed. For scholars of earlier generations, stories of the region's past drew on dynasties and civilisations for their sustenance. While their imprint can still be seen in today's formulations, the thresholds of their grand historical transitions or ruptures are essentially a function of how power was structured: the start or end of a period invariably coincides with the imminent unravelling or disintegration of the pre-existing order, or with the formation or consolidation of a new one. For histories covering the Islamic world in its entirety or large portions of it, this principle ensures the primacy of politics and religion.¹⁵ These in turn ensure the centrality of the literate and urban conspicuous elites. Where the main focus is on activities that were not the sole preserve of such elites, some of these are made to conform to the elite's architecture of power, while others are placed beyond its ken by asserting the absence of major changes before the onset of modern times. The limitations of privileging conspicuous power to such a degree are especially acute for those modes of life and work that – like small-scale artisanal manufacturing or arbitration within kinship groups – were frequently autonomous of elite politics and culture, or which – like pilgrimage, trade, finance, education and transport – crossed and re-crossed political and cultural frontiers as a matter of course. Such modes have witnessed many changes over time, and these

¹⁵ This principle may be seen at work in the histories published over the past three decades: Gerhard Endress, *An Introduction to Islam*, trans. Carole Hillenbrand (New York, 1988); Albert H. Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (London, 1991); Jean-Claude Garcin *et al.*, *États, sociétés et cultures du monde musulman médiéval: Xe–XVe siècle*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1995); Bernard Lewis, *The Middle East: 2000 Years of History from the Rise of Christianity to the Present Day* (London, 1995); Francis Robinson (ed.), *Cambridge Illustrated History of the Islamic World* (Cambridge, 1996); John L. Esposito (ed.), *The Oxford History of Islam* (Oxford, 2000); Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (2nd edn, Cambridge, 2002); Stephen F. Dale, *The Muslim Empires of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals* (Cambridge, 2010).