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978-0-521-85031-5 - The New Cambridge History of Islam: Volume 3, The Eastern Islamic World Eleventh to Eighteenth Centuries
Edited by David O. Morgan and Anthony Reid
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Introduction: Islam in a plural Asia

DAVID O. MORGAN AND ANTHONY REID

In writing the history of the Islamic world, there are two expedients which, sooner or later, become impossible to avoid: periodisation and geographical subdivision. These are bound to be, to a greater or lesser extent, arbitrary, but that does not imply that they are necessarily meaningless. It is possible to tell the story of early Islam, the mission of the Prophet Muḥammad, the first Arab Muslim expansion and the Umayyad and ʿAbbāsid caliphates as a single, integrated narrative. There is an essential unity to the historical evolution of the Muslim community, in its first four centuries, which lends itself to such an integrated treatment. From the eleventh century, and increasingly thereafter, this is no longer the case. The political unity represented by the early caliphates is no more. Though caliphs remained important for a time as local rulers, whether in Baghdad, Cairo or al-Andalus, and even more as instruments of legitimisation for Islamic regimes far and wide, real power passed to a multiplicity of sultans, *amīr*s, maliks and so on. There is nothing very surprising about this. At the point at which this volume commences, the Islamic world stretched uninterruptedly from Spain to Central Asia and northern India. Over the next few centuries it was to spread much further, deeper into India and to western China, and by oceanic routes to East Africa, coastal South Asia, South-East Asia and southern China. Not only does such an expanse defy central rule or co-ordination of any kind, the spread of Islam across such cultural and political diversity would also have been impossible if the Islamic lands had remained politically unified. The trader and the mystical order (*ṭarīqa*) became as important as the soldier and administrator in the further spread of Islam. As the faith crossed numerous cultural boundaries, distinctive Islamic idioms emerged in other great linguistic traditions beyond the Arabic – including Turkish, Persian, Swahili, Malay and Chinese.

That is some justification for commencing a volume of this history in the eleventh century, and for dividing the Islamic world into a western and an eastern half. It is convenient, and it is necessary. And as we shall see, the

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historical experience of the eastern Islamic world, from the time of the Saljuq incursions, is in many ways different from that of the western half. But there is a price to be paid, in that crudely severing the lands of Islam into two can easily generate the impression of much greater divergence than was in reality the case. We might mention just two examples. The Saljuqs, who ushered in the new era which, it will be argued, began in the mid-eleventh century, incontestably belong on the eastern side of the divide. Yet they ruled for a time in Syria, and for centuries in Anatolia, both of which fall on the western side of our divide, and therefore cannot be dealt with in this volume. Similarly, the ʿAbbāsid caliphs lived in Baghdad, within our geographical area. But whatever the limitations of their 'secular' power in this period, they were still acknowledged as the titular heads of the Muslim community, until the destruction of the caliphate by the Mongols in 1258, throughout much of the western Islamic world.

A terminal date at the end of the eighteenth century finds its justification in the relationship between Islam and modernity, as understood in both European and Islamic terms. The conventional periodisation of European history makes a crucial break, the division between 'medieval' and 'modern', somewhere around 1450–1500: the time of the Renaissance and the Reformation. There were changes in the Islamic world, too, around 1500: some of these will be discussed later. But they hardly match in their radical significance the changes that overcame Western Europe. By contrast 1800, or the century of which it marks the centre, sees the beginnings of the impact on the world's Muslims of the full weight of modernity in the guise of Western economic and military success in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Islamic modernism, though in most respects a quite different phenomenon from its European counterpart, had its origins in the same watershed, and can be considered a development (however internally varied) of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

There remains an argument for suggesting that for the older-established eastern lands of Islam, the period between the eleventh and eighteenth centuries – the period treated in this volume – has sufficient unity of character to be justly termed a 'middle' age. What sets it apart from the earlier and later periods, however, cannot be equated with what characterised the European Middle Ages. And in any case, for most of the Asian peoples who form the majority of contemporary Muslims, our period is not a 'middle' at all, but rather the foundational period of their Islam. This volume will therefore emphasise three major features which distinguish the time and place from both the earlier experience of Islam, and the universal modernity of the

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nineteenth and twentieth centuries. One with far-reaching consequences – still not wholly exhausted – was the impact on the Islamic lands of the steppe tribal peoples of Central Asia, especially though not exclusively the Turks. A second was the maritime expansion of Islam along the trade routes of the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, which had a quite different character from the conquests of the heroic age. Related to both phenomena was a third, broader one. Until the eleventh century, Islam had expanded and developed in interaction primarily with Christianity and its Greco-Roman heritage, and with Judaism and Zoroastrianism. In the eastern lands thereafter, interactions became extensive with Asian spirituality, including what we today label Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Taoism and Shamanism, as well as with Asian political and cultural forms.

Central Asia and the Turks

The Islamic lands had had relations, friendly and otherwise, with Turks beyond the borders for much of the period covered by volume 1 of this history. The at least partly Judaised Khazar empire had for long been an effective barrier to the spread both of Islam as a religion and of Muslim political rule north of the Caucasus. As the Central Asian frontiers of the *dār al-islām* were pushed forward into and beyond Transoxania, individual Turks were captured in battle or purchased as slaves. The ʿAbbāsid caliphs – most famously al-Muʿtaṣim, though the process was under way before his reign – came to value such slaves particularly for their martial qualities: a trained military force of Turks, newly converted to Islam and loyal to their caliphal master, looked an attractive, efficient and trustworthy alternative to reliance on the fractious Khurāsānī armies which had first brought the ʿAbbāsid dynasty to power. It is true that that loyalty did not last very long: not many years were to elapse before political power in Baghdad became a prize to be fought for between the Turkish generals, with the caliph becoming little more than a conveniently tame, if necessarily legitimising, figurehead. But Turkish slave soldiers (*mamlūk*s or *ghulām*s) had come to stay. Even the Būyids, Persians from the Caspian provinces who ruled in western Iran and in Baghdad itself for a century from 945, had a substantial Turkish element in their army. The notable dynasty to the east which was for a time the Būyids' contemporary, the Persian Sāmānids of Bukhārā, were famed for their efforts not only in encouraging the spreading of the faith of Islam further into Turk-dominated Central Asia but also in trading extensively in Turkish slaves at the frontier markets. And it was one of their

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own dissident Turkish generals who set up the Ghaznavid empire in what is now Afghanistan and northern India.

But all of these developments, important though they certainly were, were changes internal to the *dār al-islām*. Whatever the power ultimately wielded by Turkish military slaves, they had all been brought into Islam, in both its religious and its secular aspects, as individuals. That, indeed, had been part of their appeal to their early masters: they had no local or family loyalties – such ties had been left behind in their Central Asian homeland – and thus it was supposed, initially with some justification, that their allegiance would be exclusively to their new Muslim owners. In the eleventh century, as this volume commences, all this was to change. *Mamlūk* soldiers were to remain crucially important in many Muslim states right to the end of our period. But many of the Turks who entered the *dār al-islām* from now on were not to be warriors acquired as individuals, but tribal hordes coming in *en masse*, their tribal organisation, social structure and nomadic way of life still intact, and their tribal leaders still very much in charge. It has sometimes been suggested, with a degree of exaggeration, that for much of the Middle East the period from the eleventh to the nineteenth centuries was one in which military, and hence political, power throughout most of the region was held either by Turks or by the descendants of Turks. Even at the beginning of the twentieth century, the two major independent Muslim powers in the Middle East were still ruled by Turkish dynasties: the Ottomans, of course, but the Qājārs of Iran were also, in origin, of Turkish descent. Indeed, it may be said that apart from the Zand interlude of the eighteenth century in part of the country, Iran as a whole had no ethnically Persian rulers from the arrival of the Saljuqs until the accession of Reza Shāh in 1925 – very nearly 900 years. In northern India, the first Muslim rulers (discounting the early Arab incursions into Sind), the Ghaznavids, had been of Turkish stock. The sultanate of Delhi, under whose rule the first real advances of Islam as a religion in India were made, was established by Turkish generals of the Ghūrids in what is now Afghanistan. The last and greatest Muslim dynasty, that of the Mughals, which ultimately if briefly reigned over almost the whole of the subcontinent and which did not finally disappear until the mid-nineteenth century, was of Turko-Mongol stock, the founder, Bābur, rejoicing in his descent from both Tamerlane (Temür) and Chinggis Khan.

What impact these incursions had has been much debated. From a strictly religious point of view, things could have been worse in that most of the nomads from the east were already converts to Islam by the time they entered the *dār al-islām*. This was true of the first such incursion, that of the

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Qarakhānids, though in any case their arrival was of comparatively limited effect, in that they progressed no further westwards than Transoxania. Much more important, the Saljuqs had become Muslims before they crossed the frontier: though precisely what kind of Muslims is not as obvious as is sometimes assumed. What is usually said about the conversion to Islam of the tribal peoples of Central Asia is that it was the work of wandering Sufi missionaries – wild, wonder-working figures who were so similar to the shamans of traditional tribal society that the Turks and others were hardly able to tell the difference. There is sometimes, but not always, evidence that something of the sort occurred, but as a general explanation this should be viewed with a degree of scepticism. The Saljuqs are a classic example. If they had in fact been converted to a syncretic, Shamanism-like form of Sufi Islam, it is not immediately obvious why they should have become, once in power in Iran and Iraq, fervent champions of hardline Sunnī orthodoxy. The possibility remains that lurking in the pre-Islamic background may be the influence not so much of Shamanism as of either Nestorian Christianity, which was long to remain influential and widespread on the steppes, or, more probably, the Judaism of the Khazars.[1] That Judaism, it is thought, was probably rabbinic, and the step from rabbinic Judaism to Sunnī orthodoxy is perhaps smaller than one from wonder-working Sufism would have been. Evidence is lacking, but the names allegedly given to the four sons of the Muslim convert Saljuq, though respectably Islamic, have without exception a suggestively Old Testament look to them.

Still, there was no doubting the Saljuqs' Muslim credentials, by whatever route they may have arrived at them. The bigger problem was the Mongols, who ruled large parts of the Islamic world for many decades while still infidels. Chinggis Khan arrived in 1219, and it was not until 1295 that the Mongol rulers of Iran definitively went over to Islam. It was a basic presumption of Islamic political thought that the *dār al-islām* should expand, inexorably, at the expense of the *dār al-ḥarb*, until the whole world was under Muslim rule (though not necessarily entirely converted to Islam). There was no provision for the process to go into reverse, for Muslim lands to come under the rule of non-Muslims. There had already been some losses, notably in al-Andalus and in the Mediterranean. But the loss to the infidel of Iran and Iraq was a far more serious blow. The Mongols were unique in this respect until, in the modern period, large parts of the Islamic world came under the political domination of

1 Peter B. Golden, *An introduction to the history of the Turkic peoples* (Wiesbaden, 1992), p. 218.

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European powers and Manchu China; but at least the Mongols, unlike those later powers, did come ultimately to acknowledge the truth of Islam.

The effect of the Turkish incursions on the fortunes of Islam as a religion was not, then, in any way catastrophic, except perhaps from the point of view of the Shīʿī communities. What was significant was the boost the Saljuqs gave to the Sunnī form of Islam. Prior to their arrival, much of the Middle East had been under Shīʿite rule, most notably but not only the Fāṭimids in Egypt and the Būyids in Iran and Iraq. Of the major Muslim powers of the region around 1000, only the Ghaznavids were Sunnī. It was the Saljuqs who restored Sunnī supremacy in the areas they came to rule; and the ultimate abolition of the Fāṭimid caliphate in Egypt by Saladin may be regarded as another long-term effect, since, as Claude Cahen once observed, Nūr al-Dīn and Saladin are not explicable without reference to the achievement of Ṭoghrıl Beg, the first Saljuq sultan, and Niẓām al-Mulk, the Saljuqs' great Persian administrator.

In other ways, too, the advent of the Saljuqs was epoch-making. They may not precisely have caused, but they certainly initiated, a marked change in the ethnic make-up of the region. Put simply, from the eleventh century onwards, there were a great many more Turks. This is, of course, most conspicuously the case in Turkey, a country the Saljuqs invented, albeit inadvertently. The collapse of the Byzantine eastern frontier after the emperor Romanus IV Diogenes's defeat at the hands of Sultan Alp Arslan, at Manzikert in 1071, allowed Turks to flood into Anatolia. Although some of the territories then lost were later recovered – for a time – by the Byzantines, the battle of Manzikert created the potential for Turkey, a potential which ultimately produced what has been called the last and greatest of the Muslim empires, that of the Ottomans. That, however, is not the concern of this volume. But the influx of Turks did not affect only Anatolia. It had permanent consequences for the ethnic population balance of much of the eastern Islamic world, especially Iran. To this day, a large proportion of the Iranian population is Turkish speaking, and much of that, presumably, is of Turkish ethnic origin. Whether or not that means that their ancestors entered Iran in the wake of the Saljuq invasion or during the Saljuq period is, however, another question: one about which there has been a good deal of discussion. The likelihood is that while the process of Turkish immigration did indeed begin, to a very significant degree, under the Saljuqs, the bulk of the Turks arrived later, particularly during the Mongol period and even after. The numbers quoted by historians of the Saljuq period for the sizes of tribal hordes are not enormous, unlike those routinely ascribed to the Mongol armies by

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those historians' later successors (which may perhaps suggest caution about assuming that medieval chroniclers invariably tend to exaggerate).

In terms, too, of the way of life of the peoples of the eastern Islamic world, the arrival of the Saljuqs and other Turks from Central Asia caused a major shift: in the balance of the population between sedentary and nomad. This was of permanent significance: the nomadic element in the population remained, from then on, of much greater importance, culturally and politically, than was the case in much of the rest of the *dār al-islām*. It was only in the twentieth century that a more or less successful attempt was made to curb the power and comparative independence of the nomadic tribes of Iran – and even then, the last major tribal revolt occurred as recently as 1963. The Saljuqs' followers in their migration across the Oxus were tribally organised nomads, and their military force, therefore, was essentially a classic tribal horde of cavalry archers, not dissimilar in most major respects from the better-known Mongols of the thirteenth century, though certainly not so disciplined and regulated as the armies of Chinggis Khan were to be. Indeed, the tribal Turkish hordes soon came to be something of an embarrassment to the newly respectable Saljuq sultans. Traditionally, a tribal khan was very far from possessing despotic powers in time of peace, though he was expected to command, and to command effectively, in warfare. Not all of the Turks who followed Ṭoghrıl Beg and Chaghrı Beg into Iran and Iraq took kindly to their transformation into, potentially, the subjects of much more powerful Muslim sovereigns. Hence many of them, seen increasingly as disorderly and disruptive by their leaders, voted with their feet. The Turkomans whose incursions into Byzantine eastern Anatolia precipitated the crisis that led to the battle of Manzikert in 1071 are one example. Similarly, the lifelong preoccupation of the last Saljuq sultan of the east, Sanjar (d. 1157), was the containment of the Ghuzz Turkish hordes who were endangering the stability of Khurāsān. It was not long before the Saljuqs found it necessary to provide themselves with a permanent, if fairly small, standing army to reduce reliance on the tribal contingents that had first brought them to power. Their great Persian vizier, Niẓām al-Mulk, in his handbook of government, the *Siyāsat-nāma*, recommended the recruitment of *mamlūk*s as a reliable buttress for the state: he was clearly worried about the ungovernability of the Turkish tribes.

In military terms, the advent of the Turks marked the supremacy, for centuries to come, of the steppe cavalry archer. The Mongols are the most conspicuous example of this, but in principle the same factors, to a greater or lesser extent, worked to the advantage of other conquerors from Central Asia. In the field, in pre-modern times, an army composed of such warriors could

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expect to have a decisive advantage over the armies of the sedentary states they faced, richer and more populous though those states generally may have been (though when it came to siege warfare it was a different story, and nomadic invaders frequently had to avail themselves of the expertise of engineers from the sedentary world). Because of the close approximation between ordinary nomadic life, with its herding and hunting, and warfare, the tribesmen were in effect a permanently available mounted force, trained constantly in appropriate techniques since childhood. What is more, they were all available: no sedentary state could possibly mobilise so large a proportion of its manpower. And in the composite bow of the steppes, the nomads had a battlefield weapon which in terms of accuracy, rate of fire, range and power of penetration had no equal until long after the first appearance of firearms: it was centuries before a handgun existed which could hope to match the composite bow in effectiveness. We should not assume that with the invention of gunpowder, the traditional style of steppe warfare and its composite bow were immediately rendered obsolete.

Maritime expansion and cultural diversity

The second major theme of this volume will be the maritime expansion of Islam, accompanying the vessels that criss-crossed the Indian Ocean and travelled as far as the south-eastern coast of China. This pattern had very little in common with the advancing military and administrative frontiers of the heartlands of Islam and the steppes of Eurasia.

The forested tropical regions around the Indian Ocean were not favourable to the empires of marching armies or cavalry charges. Communication was much easier by water than by land. But the oceans of Asia also offered few examples of military expansion by sea until the advent of European naval power in 1498. Those few examples – the Tamil Cholas in the eleventh century, the Javanese of Majapahit in the fourteenth or the huge Chinese fleets of the early fifteenth – were not Islamic, except in so far as individual Muslims took leadership roles, as the Yunnan eunuch and admiral Zheng He (Cheng Ho) did in commanding the Chinese expeditions. The only explicit uses of central Islamic power in the Indian Ocean – that of the Ottomans in response to Portuguese naval attacks in the 1530s and again in the 1560s – were failures, even if significant ones.

Nevertheless, Muslims held certain advantages in navigation and maritime trade which gave them commercial dominance in the Indian Ocean from roughly the twelfth century to the sixteenth. Arabs, commanding the

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favoured Red Sea and Persian Gulf routes between the Mediterranean and Indian Oceans, had been sailing their dhows to India and beyond since pre-Islamic times. The egalitarian, commercial and legal ethos of Islam appeared well suited to the establishment of Islamic commercial communities in all the ports of that immensely diverse littoral. By the eighth century the Arab and Persian Muslim traders residing in Canton were rich and numerous enough to stage a revolt (758) which briefly took control of the city. By the end of the Tang dynasty in 907 Sinicised Muslims, the Hui, had become a permanent part of several coastal Chinese cities. From the ninth century we have the accounts of Arab geographers, describing the trading routes and ports between the Red Sea and China.

The major ports along this route were in south India and Sri Lanka, northern Sumatra, the isthmian ports of the Malayan peninsula, the north coast of Java and the Cham ports of what is now the central Vietnamese coast. In all these places, as in the Chinese ports themselves, a few Islamic tombstones bear witness to the beginnings of Islamic communities in the eleventh to fourteenth centuries. All began as enclaves and minorities, Islamic quarters in larger trading cities. Islamic law and the Arabic language made it easier for traders to move from one of the quarters to another, creating a kind of Muslim commercial oecumene even before the rise of Islamic political power.

The first Islamic states in South-East Asia which can be clearly documented from tombstones and travel accounts occurred on the northern coast of Sumatra in the 1290s. The most prominent of these was Samudera, later called Pasai, where Ibn Baṭṭūṭa in 1345 found a flourishing Sunnī polity following the Shāfiʿī school of law, as virtually all of South-East Asia does today. As Muslim merchants became more and more important a factor in the prosperity of the host of small river-ports in the archipelago, many of their rulers became Muslim in the following century, through conviction, force, marriage or a judicious choice of alliances.

An intriguing, still unresolved, issue is the extent of northern influences from China and Champa in this phase of Islamisation. The Mongol conquest of China in the late thirteenth century had brought a variety of Central Asian Muslims into the official and military service of China. They were particularly strong in Yunnan, which the Mongols added to the Chinese empire and placed under a Muslim governor. When the Mongols in turn were overthrown by the Ming dynasty in 1368, those Muslims who remained were Sinicised in language and much of their culture, but many remained in privileged positions. The great expeditions sent to South-East Asia and the Indian Ocean under the emperor Yongle were commanded by the Yunnan Muslim Zheng He, and many of his

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soldiers were also Muslim. Some traditions of Java attribute to these fleets an injection of Chinese Muslims into the affairs of the Java Sea, and the rise of Muslim port-states such as Gresik, Tuban, Japara, Demak and Cirebon, along the north coast of Java. Melaka on the peninsula, which replaced Pasai as the most important Malay Muslim trading state in the late fourteenth century, also got its start by cultivating these imperial Chinese fleets.

Once Javanese port-states had become predominantly Muslim, their superior arms, wealth and motivation came into play in the conquest of the Hindu–Buddhist kingdoms of the interior. The fall of Majapahit to Muslim arms is conventionally dated 1478, but was in any case complete by about 1527. But the hegemony of the Islamic coast was brief. Around 1600 a new Javanese kingdom arose at Mataram, centred near modern Yogyakarta. The great king of Mataram, usually known as Sultan Agung (1613–46), though he carried many titles both Hindu and Muslim, achieved what Akbar attempted in India, a synthesis of old and new religions. From his reign stems the idea that Java is a special case within Islam, a stable amalgam of Hindu–Buddhist mystical ideas, animist popular practices and Islamic externals. The controversy this idea has engendered will engage particular attention below.

As Islam became established so far from its roots, translations became necessary into a variety of languages. In the sixteenth century this process began with Malay and Javanese, and the fullest flower of Islamic literature in Malay occurred in the seventeenth century. Most of the most influential writers and teachers known to us in these traditions were Sufis, and many had studied in Mecca or Medina and become members of the Khaḍiriyya or Shaṭṭāriyya *ṭarīqa*. As they were throughout the Muslim world in this period, these Sufis were followed in life and revered in death, often more than they were read. They gave substance and life to the traditions of life and law the traders had brought.

The century from about 1540 to 1640 is a particularly interesting one in maritime Asia, because the reaction against Portuguese attacks on Islam produced a high point of rallying around the banner of political Islam. The Portuguese directed their attacks particularly against the Arab, Gujarati, south Indian and Malay traders who had dominated the pepper and spice trade from South-East Asia to the Red Sea. After severe initial disruption and the loss of many ports, a Muslim trading network was re-established in mid-century, linking Aceh in Sumatra to the Red Sea by way of the Maldives. In the 1560s Aceh envoys were taking their pepper to the Ottoman court and pleading for military assistance against the Portuguese. Military help was sent, but it was especially the idea of a unified counter-crusade in the name of Islam that was influential.

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