

## *In the Mirror of Persian Kings*

For a period of nearly eight hundred years, Perso-Islamic kingship was the source for the dominant social and cultural paradigms organizing Indian political life. In the medieval world of South Asia, Persian kingship took the form of a hybridized and adaptive political expression. The Persian king embodied the values of justice, military heroics, and honor, ideals valorized historically and transculturally, yet the influence of the pre-Islamic Persian past and Persian forms of kingship has not yet been fully recognized. In this book, Blain Auer demonstrates how Persian kingship was a transcultural phenomenon. Describing the contributions made by kings, poets, historians, political and moral philosophers, he reveals how and why the image of the Persian king played such a prominent role in the political history of Islamicate societies, in general, and in India, in particular. By tracing the historical thread of this influence from Samanid, Ghaznavid, and Ghurid Empires, Auer demonstrates how that legacy had an impact on the establishment of Delhi as a capital of Muslim rulers who made claims to a broad symbolic and ideological inheritance from the Persian kings of legend.

BLAIN AUER is Professor of South Asian Studies at the University of Lausanne. He is the author of *Symbols of Authority in Medieval Islam: History, Religion and Muslim Legitimacy in the Delhi Sultanate* (2012), co-editor of *Encountering Buddhism and Islam in Medieval Central and South Asia* (2019) and serves as editor for the journals *Marginalia*, *Études asiatiques*, and the book series *Perspectives on Islamicate South Asia*.

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# In the Mirror of Persian Kings

The Origins of Perso-Islamic Courts and  
Empires in India

BLAIN AUER  
*University of Lausanne*



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*To Amy*

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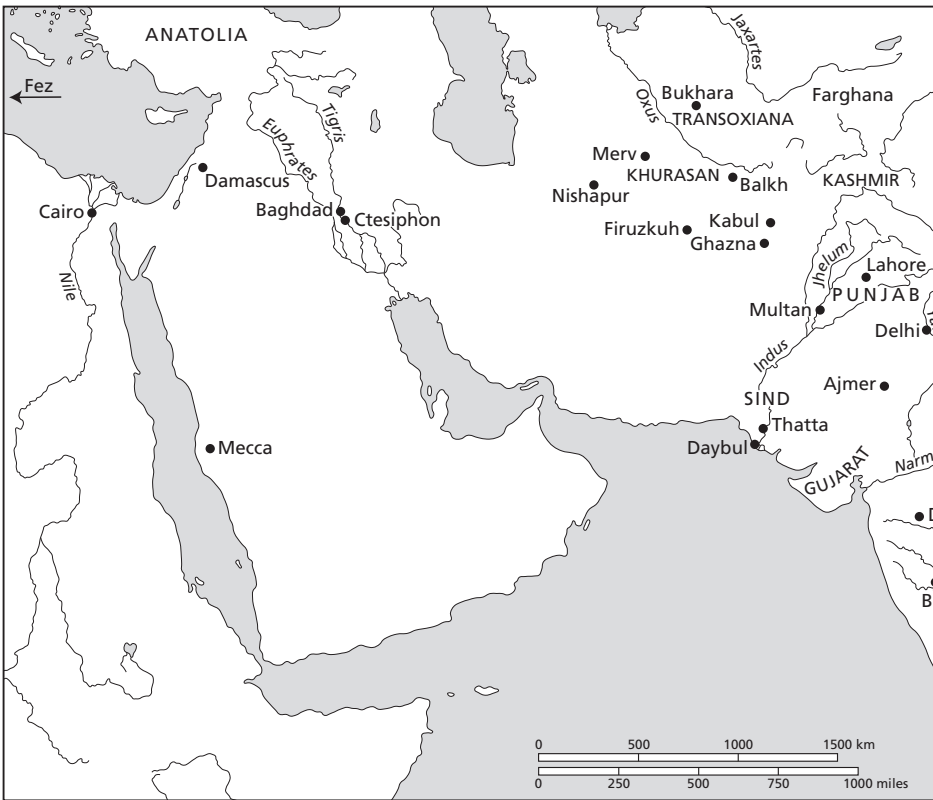
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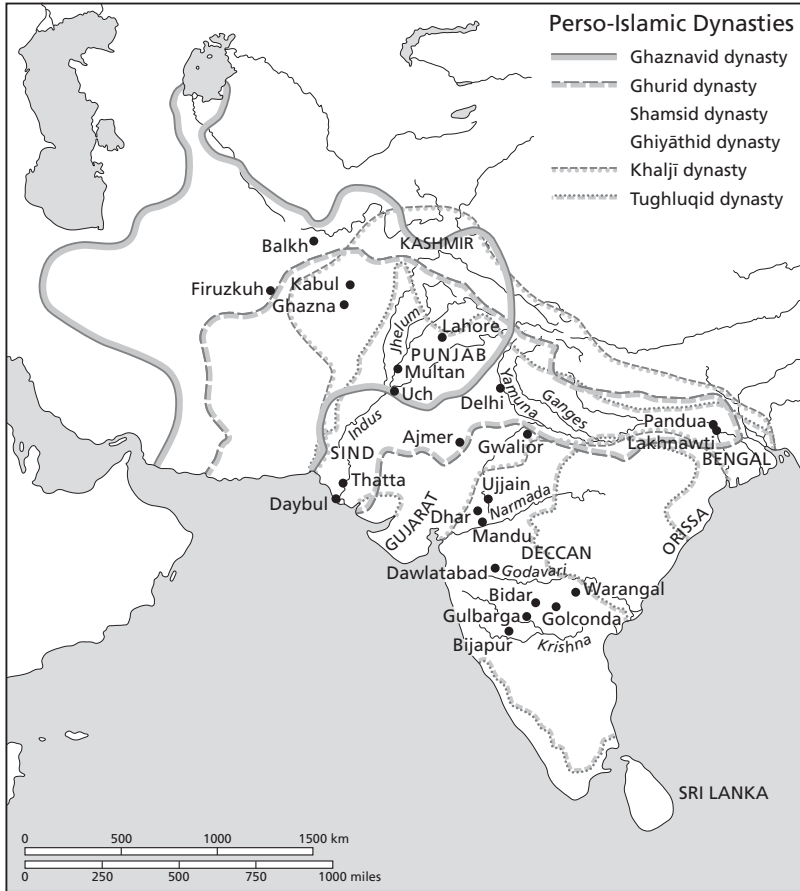
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Map 1 The Medieval Muslim World



Map 2 Medieval India

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## *Preface: In the Mirror of Persian Kings in India*

Just before his death in 1830, the eminent Parsi of Bombay Müllā Fīrūz, writing in Persian, completed his magnum opus, *Georgenāma*, a *Shāhnāma* – or *Book of Kings* – inspired history of the reigns of George I, II, and III (r. 1714–1820). Firdawsī (329–410 or 416/940–1019 or 1025), writing in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, composed the *Shāhnāma*, a masterpiece of Persian literature that is today known as the “national” epic of Iran. Since the *Georgenāma* had not been published at the time of Müllā Fīrūz’s passing, it was ultimately edited by his nephew Müllā Rustamjī and printed in Bombay in 1837. In the preface, Müllā Rustamjī says that his uncle wished to emulate Firdawsī by recording “the conquests of the English in India, which he deemed to be as deserving of celebration as the glorious actions of the ancient monarchs of Irān.”<sup>1</sup> *Georgenāma* was given its title in honor of the British monarch George III (r. 1760–1820), but it eventually had to be dedicated to Queen Victoria (r. 1837–1901), as it was published in the first year of her reign. Müllā Fīrūz and his father, Kāvūs Jalāl, were both prominent members of the Bombay Parsi community and served consecutively as *dastūr* or “priest” of the Kadmi community from 1783–1830.<sup>2</sup> They were deeply involved in the revival of Persian learning that had been spurred on by the intensified cultural exchanges spawned by British colonization and the work of Christian missionaries who brought their critique of Indian religions and culture. The colonial critique of Indian culture was backed by the economic and political power of British governance in India. In this context of cultural competition, Müllā Fīrūz was one of the first Indians to import the technology necessary for lithography, which he put to good use in publishing Gujarati and Persian texts. His earliest literary product was a collection published in 1828, *Risāla-yi*

<sup>1</sup> Müllā Fīrūz b. Kāvūs, *The George-nāma* (Bombay: R. Prera, 1837), 1:i.

<sup>2</sup> John R. Hinnells, “Bombay, Persian communities of,” *EIr*.

*istishhādāt* or *Treatise of Witnessings*, letters written by Muslims and Parsis in defense of their religions in response to the attacks of Christian missionaries.<sup>3</sup>

It may seem remarkable that a Parsi intellectual living in Bombay at the beginning of the nineteenth century would compose a history modeled on Firdawsī's *Shāhnāma* to retell the story of British rule in India. For today's sensibilities, it strikes one as anachronistic. However, during the period of high colonialism, Persian was indispensable, even within the highest echelons of the British foreign civil service. The work had been encouraged by no less than three of the highest serving officers in the British Empire: Jonathan Duncan, the governor of Bombay from 1795 to 1811; John Malcolm, also governor of Bombay from 1827 to 1830; and Mountstuart Elphinstone, a lieutenant-governor of Bombay and the author of *The History of India*. Malcolm was himself an excellent scholar of Persian history and literature and wrote *The History of Persia*, published in 1815, which was one of the first histories of its kind written in English and based on original Persian sources.<sup>4</sup> Outside of a wholly colonial context, European Persophilia, the term used to describe the "love of Persia" and Persian culture, was extremely fashionable during the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> This is exemplified by the fame achieved by works such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *West-östlicher Divan* published in 1819, Edward Fitzgerald's translated work *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* published in 1859, and Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the first part published in 1883. However, the nineteenth century was also a period of intense debates about the role of language in the growing British colonial government of India. These debates led to a dramatic departure in British government policy toward the Persian language.

In 1835, just two years before *Georgenāma* was published, the advisors to the governor-general in the Council of India passed a watershed act that authorized Lord Auckland, the governor-general

<sup>3</sup> See Nile Green, *Bombay Islam: The Religious Economy of the West Indian Ocean, 1840–1915* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 27–28 and 95–96.

<sup>4</sup> A. K. S. Lambton, "Major-General Sir John Malcolm (1769–1833) and *The History of Persia*," *Iran* 33 (1995), 97–109.

<sup>5</sup> Hamid Dabashi, *Persophilia: Persian Culture on the Global Scene* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

of India between 1836 and 1842, “to dispense, either generally, or within such local limits as may to him seem meet, with any provision of any regulation of the Bengal code which enjoins the use of the Persian language in any judicial proceeding.”<sup>6</sup> To “dispense” with the Persian language in its official capacities effectively signed its death warrant. This fact would have been a great blow to Müllā Fīrūz, had he lived to see the British government weaken the high status of Persian. Coincidentally, the year *Georgenāma* was published was also the inaugural year of the reign of the last Mughal ruler of India, Bahādur Shāh II (r. 1837–1857). The tide was clearly turning against Persian language and learning. In the same year, Alṭāf Ḥusayn (1837–1914), who adopted the nom de plume “Hālī” or “Modern,” was born. This poet, under the inspiration of Sayyid Aḥmad Khān (1817–1889), the founder of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College, would proclaim the coming of a new era and advocate for a cultural and literary shift to the modern, while writing in Urdu.

*Georgenāma* is an incredible achievement and deserves much closer study. Written as a *masnavī*, an epic poem, it contained more than forty thousand verses and was published in three massive volumes. It is a monument to the Persian imaginary. It is a testament to the long tradition of history writing in Persian in South Asia and a defiant stance against the political, social, and cultural trends of the time that unleashed overwhelming forces diminishing the relevance of the Persian language. Müllā Fīrūz’s textual metamorphosis of the *Shāhnāma* genre for a British sovereign demonstrates the malleability of the form of kingship embodied in the long and rich traditions of the Persian king. It is not just the fact that a history of British kings was written in Persian that is worthy of note but the entire framework of history that is embedded in it. Müllā Fīrūz began his history in praise of God and the prophets and dedicated his work to King George “great king of kings (*shāhanshāh*) ruling in the place of Jamshīd, a soldier like Farīdūn, inheritor of the kingdom of Solomon.”<sup>7</sup> These are not merely words of praise for a ruling monarch, nor are they just conventions of a literary genre. They are a vision of rule and reuse of the historical memory of ancient kings that, above all, was epitomized by the models

<sup>6</sup> *Acts of the Government of India from 1834 to 1838 Inclusive*. London: Ordered by The House of Commons to be Printed, 1840, 77.

<sup>7</sup> Kāvūs, *The George-nāma*, 1:6.

of Persian sovereigns established in myth and in history – if one can even separate the two. In this intellectual tradition, Müllā Fīrūz was like other Persian authors of the medieval period, a practitioner of the dual art of history and advice literature. He authored the *Pandnāma-yi Müllā Fīrūz* or *The Book of Advice of Müllā Fīrūz*. Working at the intersection of two of the most influential genres of premodern Persian literature, he positioned himself as a vizier to the emerging British power in South Asia.

The *Georgenāma* is certainly a creation of its own unique historical context. However, *Shāhnāma*-styled literary works such as the *Georgenāma* epitomize the cultural milieu of Persian language and learning that spanned the Persianate world. Persian-speaking communities nourished a cultural sphere with a long social history that developed in West and Central Asia and, in particular, in South Asia. Persian language, history, and culture permeated learning and courtly cultures across vast geographical regions and unified ethnic and linguistic differences. The spread of Persianate culture into South Asia is a remarkable story. The roughly nine-hundred-year history of the influence of the Persian language in India is striking for its sheer success. Persian was spoken as a lingua franca in diverse courtly settings from north to south India. It was the mother tongue of immigrants from Central Asia and the Middle East but subsequently became the primary language of the Indian-born descendants of those same immigrants, as well as many others who adopted that language for diverse reasons. In addition to its relevance as a spoken language in India, it was employed in a broad array of literary projects.

It is a phenomenal historical development that Persian was employed as a court language and took root to such an expansive degree in South Asia. Along with the Persian language came the social and cultural norms that served as the basis for rule. The establishment of Islamic kingdoms in India in the medieval period meant the transmission of not only religious ideas but those of governance and politics based on a particular vision of kingship. Muslim kings from the Ghurid period, through the Delhi Sultanate, and into Mughal times, borrowed and adapted models of Persian kingship derived from the pre-Islamic past, implementing them in their imperial projects. The legendary ruler Jamshīd, the Sasanian king Khusraw I, and the warrior Bahrām Gūr, all served as a mirror for Muslim kings ruling in India. Just to give one example: Approximately five hundred years earlier



than Müllā Fīrūz, in the fourteenth century, the Persian poet ‘Abd al-Malik ‘Iṣāmī (b. ca. 711/1310–1311) composed a *Shāhnāma* for the Bahmanid king in the Deccan. At the same time, another Persian poet, Badr-i Chachī, composed a *Shāhnāma* that he dedicated to Muḥammad b. Tughluq in Delhi.<sup>8</sup> These two competing *Shāhnāmas* reflect the rivalry between the two courts and demonstrate how Persian kingship was central to the identity and legitimacy of Muslim rulers. Yet, our understanding of these developments remains fragmentary. There is no single work that treats the origins and development of the major social and cultural transformations occasioned by the establishment of rule on the model of Persian kings in India. Many fundamental questions remain to be explored. How did the vision and imagination of Persian kingship and Persianate culture bind together the diverse segments of the imperial polity established during the Delhi Sultanate? What were the changes made to the earlier precedents of the Ghaznavid and Ghurid polities? How did Persianate culture become dominant in the courts established in urban centers such as Delhi, Lahore, Gulbarga, Lakhnawti, and Dawlatabad and those independent of those courts? These are just some of the questions I hope to answer. In this book, I strive to provide a picture of the social and cultural dynamics of Persianization and relate that to the political history and origins of Perso-Islamic empire in India of the premodern period.

<sup>8</sup> This text did not survive. Some have doubted its existence, but it is clearly mentioned by ‘Abd al-Qādir b. Mulūk Shāh Badā’ūnī, *Muntakhab al-tavārikh* (Calcutta: College Press, 1865), 1:241.

## Abbreviations

- AH Fakhr-i Mudabbir. *Ādāb al-ḥarb wa 'l-shajā'a*. Edited by Aḥmad Suhaylī Khvānsārī. Tehran: Intishārāt-i Iqbāl, 1346sh
- EI2 *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*. Leiden: Brill, 1954–2004.
- EI3 *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*. Leiden: Brill, 2007–
- EIr *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. London: Routledge, 1982–
- FJ Baranī, Z̤iyā' al-Dīn. *Fatāwā-yi jahāndārī*. Edited by Afsar Salīm Khān. Lahore: Research Society of Pakistan, 1972
- TFS1 Baranī, Z̤iyā'. *Tārīkh-i Fīrūz Shāhī*. Edited by Sayyid Ahmad Khan. Calcutta, 1862
- TFS2 'Afīf, Shams Sirāj. *Tārīkh-i Fīrūz Shāhī*. Edited by Vilāyat Ḥusayn. Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1888
- TN Jūzjānī, Minhāj-i Sirāj. *Ṭabaqāt-i Nāširi*. Edited by 'Abd al-Ḥayy Ḥabībī. 2 vols. 2nd ed. Kabul: Anjuman-i Tārīkh-i Afghānistān, 1342–1343sh

## *A Note on Transliteration*

On the whole I have followed the Library of Congress system of transliteration for Arabic and Persian with a few minor changes.

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