

FORUM: MULTIPLE TEMPORALITIES

2.

ON ISLAMIC TIME: RETHINKING CHRONOLOGY IN THE
HISTORIOGRAPHY OF MUSLIM SOCIETIES

SHAHZAD BASHIR

ABSTRACT

This article argues that the academic representation of Islamic history as a single timeline, which was established in the nineteenth century and continues to predominate to the present, is a primary issue restricting fruitful readings of Islamic historical materials. Utilizing insights in thinking about history that favor multiple temporalities, I suggest that scholars in Islamic studies can expand the possibilities of their work by paying attention to the diversity of ways in which time is conceptualized within original materials. As illustrations for the rethinking I advocate, I provide readings of the structures and literary affects of three Persian works in different genres, produced circa 1490–1540 CE. I suggest that a foundational reorientation in the field of Islamic historiography has the potential to help us break out of binds identified in the critique of orientalism provided by Edward Said and others and would lead to better ways to approach developments in Muslim societies.

Keywords: Islam, timelines, chronology, temporality, historiography, Persian

Surveying scholarly literature in European languages, one is struck that the general chronological narrative regarding the history of Muslim societies has remained bound to a single paradigm from the late nineteenth century to the present. The idea of “Islamic history” as a modern academic field was born from the conjunction of a number of different political and intellectual factors. The expansion of modern European empires in Africa, the Middle East, and Central, South, and Southeast Asia spurred production of knowledge that would be useful for comprehending and controlling large populations of Muslims. Linguistic, historical, and sociocultural specializations required to fill this political need came into being concurrently with the invention and reorganization of the humanistic and social sciences underway in Europe and elsewhere during the nineteenth century. As participants in the general socio-intellectual habitus of the times, textual specialists in matters connected to Islam poured the contents of Islamic sources into molds of taxonomies and categories in vogue in the Western academic setting.

The category “history” occupied a particularly significant place in this process of translation of information from one discursive setting to another. On one side, materials produced by Muslims contained a massive wealth of reflection and information on the past of their own communities as well as that of others. And on the other side, adjudication of the past was becoming connected to new requirements of argumentation and material evidence, culminating in the modern

discipline of history. By exploiting the partial comparability between the senses of history to be found in Islamic sources and the modern academic perspective, nineteenth-century scholars initiated a new field that was anchored in a selective reading of sources in the original languages and addressed questions necessitated by intellectual paradigms that governed their own settings. Despite the vigorous critique to which “orientalism” has been subjected over the past few decades, even the most recent scholarship in the field of premodern Islamic history remains tied to the perspective that originated in the nineteenth century.

In this essay, I suggest that a rethinking of the way we conceptualize the relationship among Islam, chronology, and temporality has the potential to open much-needed new perspectives in the field of Islamic history. The essay begins with a brief statement of the general argument, followed by two sections that provide evidence for what I am advocating. I propose that we need to dismantle the accepted, academically normative timeline of Islamic history by identifying its particularities. To do this, I evaluate three recent accounts of Islamic history in English that represent the standard Western pattern in the field, with reifying consequences. Subsequently, I demonstrate the analytical efficacy of my prescription by presenting brief analyses of three Persian works, produced between 1490 and 1540 CE, as illustrations of the way time is manufactured in conjunction with perspectives on human experience within Islamic materials. Altogether, I aim to show that Islamic sources contain multiple constructions of time and that appreciating the diversity to be found in the original sources on this score can aid in the task of writing richer accounts of the pasts of Islamic communities.

THE ARGUMENT IN BRIEF

The constancy of the chronological paradigm that continues to govern the presentation of Islamic history is, I believe, a problematic limiting condition for the field that can benefit from rethinking at the most fundamental level. This pertains particularly to the study of contexts prior to the nineteenth century, where the static understanding of time tends to get mapped to an oversimplified, motionless view of social and intellectual patterns. Over the last three decades, the amount of work done in this area has certainly increased, diversified, and become more sophisticated. However, most graduate training and scholarly production still occurs within frameworks and core understandings that were first established by self-proclaimed orientalists as early as the second half of the nineteenth century.

To attempt the change of course I am advocating we must begin by conceptualizing the relationship between Islam and chronology differently from the prevailing consensus. Whether in introductory textbooks or in highly specialized work, “Islamic history” today continues to be presented as pegged to a straight timeline that begins with the life of Muhammad and continues to the present in (post)modern transformations. This understanding stems from a largely uncritical modern acceptance of a single theologically informed and politically charged chronographic tradition that originated in the period when Islam acquired its contours as a distinctive religion and civilization. Over the centuries, this representation of the past underwent adaptations and modifications in different Islamic

settings, always with connection to political claims and ideologies espoused by various dynasties and states. What we have in this chronographic tradition is a “historical time” that “is tied to social and political units of action, to particular acting and suffering human beings, and to their institutions and organizations. They all have certain inherent modes of performance, each of which has its own temporal rhythm.”¹

Rather than examining the underpinnings of this tradition, scholarly practice in Islamic studies remains beholden to a version of this temporal scheme that has come to be seen as being inherently embedded in the historical trajectory of Muslim communities over the past fourteen centuries. Save certain exceptions, what has been missing here is a concerted effort to treat internal Islamic historical projections as rhetorical constructions situated within complex sociohistorical and literary traditions.² This problem is compounded by the fact that, within the spectrum of Islamic ideas, modern academic understandings have privileged certain perspectives on the past at the expense of suppressing other views. Cumulatively, then, a particular “Islam” has acquired a kind of solidity and commonsensical obviousness that has not undergone extensive questioning in the field despite the accumulation of extensive specialized work that deals with specific topics. This reification of time is the source of a number of fundamental problems in the modern academic conceptualization of Islam. It is connected to familiar plotlines such as: overemphasis on the Arab Middle East; unending concern with the period of the origins of Islam, followed by a classical age, and supposed decline; the tendency to see evolution of ideas and practices as part of a predetermined or natural cycle of some sort that can be understood without reference to material circumstances; and undervaluation of the role of human agency in creating “time” within Islamic social, cultural, and religious contexts. These problems are quite well known and although they have been addressed on a discrete basis, the fact that they relate to investment in a single chronology has received little attention.

I suggest that the reified understanding of Islamic chronology that I consider a structural encumbrance should be replaced by the view of time as an ideological and narrative product that is forever being made and remade within Islamic perspectives. In saying this, I understand the term “Islamic” nominalistically, meaning that a perspective is to be taken as such based on self-identification in language and rhetoric. This conceptualization eschews an a priori attribution of an essential core to “Islam” that would unify all things “Islamic” into a single system. Rather, the term “Islamic” is an aspect of human agentive assertion, can accommodate internal diversity without preset limits, and is characterized by fluidity rather than stasis. To my mind, this understanding rings truest for historicizing assessments of data from Muslim societies. This approach allows us to observe connections, influences, and causation between human acts and events

1. Reinhart Koselleck, “Time and History,” in *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, transl. Todd Samuel Presner et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 110.

2. The work of Aziz al-Azmeh represents a rare example of engaging original Islamic materials with a thoroughly historicizing perspective. For his short, highly perceptive readings of Arabic sources, see Aziz al-Azmeh, *The Times of History: Universal Topics in Islamic Historiography* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2007).

without the necessity of a reified “Islam” that must stand, as an essence, behind the easily observable apparent diversity. Dropping the term “Islamic” altogether by, for example, analyzing matters solely in regional terms (for example, Middle East, South Asia, Africa, and so on) detracts from the fact that human life in these regions has been densely interconnected for centuries. Retaining the term “Islamic” in the way I have conceptualized allows us to appreciate the internal projection of a universalism and the incessant traffic of ideas and peoples within a very large geographical area. In this view, Islam is to be seen as a conglomeration of things Islamic that is forever under construction and varies radically between times and places. And no single Islam can be abstracted out of particular historical experience and then be made into a universal touchstone to measure the “Islamicness” of ideas and actions attributed to Muslims in particular places.

My understanding of the problem of chronology within Islamic studies derives from an engagement with recent theoretical discussions related to the inescapable multiplicity of times and pasts in large-scale narrative traditions. To date, these discussions have not had significant impact on the study of Muslim societies. To be clear, I am not advocating the adoption of a new linear timeline that is to act as an alternative to the one that prevails today. Rather, I take to heart the kind of perspective found in Helge Jordheim’s interpretation of the work of Reinhart Koselleck:

Koselleck’s theory of historical times is not a theory of periodization except in a very superficial sense. Regarded as a whole, what Koselleck has to offer is a radically different theory of overlapping temporal structures and layers, synchronicities and nonsynchronicities that defy periodization and . . . is even constructed with the purpose of defying periodization, at least in the traditional historiographical sense. In the context of this theory of multiple temporalities the logic of periodization, in terms of a chronological succession of more or less well-defined units of time, can only be one of many different temporal experiences, structures, and layers at work at any moment in history—more or less decisive, depending on the subject and the material in question.³

This perspective has the potential to provide a much better accounting of what we find with respect to the construction of time within Islamic materials. My view, then, is that the whole notion of a single timeline as the central repository of Islam needs to be jettisoned in favor of a thoroughly pluralistic view in which all internal Islamic propositions with respect to the validity and authority of the past are appraised with an eye toward the ideological and affective intentions of the individuals and classes that had a hand in producing them. The result of doing this would be to come to see “Islamic time” as an extensive web with multiple veins, conjunctions, contradictions, and crossovers that all require substantiation through the understanding of literary and other rhetorical structures. I am advocating a movement away from reading Islamic narratives at face value and toward an appreciation of the ideological strictures that undergird them. For my purposes, a disaggregated and multivalent approach, which privileges

3. Helge Jordheim, “Against Periodization: Koselleck’s Theory of Multiple Temporalities,” *History and Theory* 51, no. 2 (May 2012), 157.

the historical contingency of Muslim lives, makes for the best way to represent traces of premodern Islamic worlds.⁴

ISLAM IN REIFIED TIME

I would like to exemplify issues with respect to the normative academic understanding of Islamic time by briefly considering three well regarded works directed at different segments of the academic audience. I have chosen these works because of their sophistication rather than faults; my position is that the “problem” at hand is a structural one, endemic to our understandings in general rather than something that can be pinned on scholarly inadequacy. The three works are: Jonathan Berkey’s *The Formation of Islam, 600–1800*, a short general history meant for nonspecialists published in 2002; the much more expansive *Islamic Societies to the Nineteenth Century: A Global History*, by Ira Lapidus, published in 2012 as the updated reissue of earlier work by the same author; and Marshall Hodgson’s *The Venture of Islam*, a three-volume effort to recast Islamic history, published posthumously in 1977, which is looked upon as an inspirational work by many specialists in Islamic studies to this day. My very brief presentations of these works run from one to the next since I see them as being tied to the same overall problematic I am trying to map in this article.⁵

Exhibiting excellent clarity and concision, Berkey’s *The Formation of Islam, 600–1800* is a highly readable account that is used widely as a textbook today. Describing the work’s thematic core, the author writes: “I have cast the central questions as those of religious identity and authority. The question of what it means to be a Muslim requires, I believe, a dynamic answer. Had the question been posed to Muhammad, his answer . . . would have been quite different than that of a jurist in Baghdad in the ninth century, or of a Sufi mystic in Cairo in the fifteenth. From a historical perspective, no answer is better than any other, and none has any value except against the background of the larger historical factors that produced it.”⁶ Within this framework, the book unfolds in four parts and an epilogue that divide the history of Islam as follows: the Middle East before Islam, emergence of Islam (600–750), consolidation (750–1000), “medieval” Islam (1000–1500), and a brief foray into the question of early modern transformations (1500–1800). Each part is itself divided into various chapters (twenty-

4. The argument presented in this essay is part of a larger project tentatively entitled “Islamic Times: Conceptualizing Pasts and Futures” that is to include assessments of a wider set of materials.

5. Jonathan Berkey, *The Formation of Islam, 600–1800* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Ira Lapidus, *Islamic Societies to the Nineteenth Century: A Global History* [1988] (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press). I would like to emphasize that my comments on these works are not presented from the standpoint that my own work is more academically virtuous. Rather, the issues I raise are implicated in my own previous work as well and the engagement presented in this essay is as much a self-critique as it is a comment on the work of others. Among other places, the perspective that presumes a single Islamic timeline is implicated in a topically limited form in my book *Messianic Hopes and Mystical Visions: The Nurbakhshiya between Medieval and Modern Islam* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003).

6. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam, 600–1800*, ix.

six in all) that provide the opportunity to present the basics of generic concerns such as politics, justice, and social organization, as well as distinctively Islamic paradigms such as Sunnism, Shi'ism, and Sufism. The book is also careful to incorporate the significance of Jews and Christians, as religious predecessors and interlocutors, whose presence had a definitive influence on Islamic religious and sociopolitical perspectives.

Most Western readers somewhat familiar with Islam will likely find Berkey's account to be a highly resonant summation of the topic. This is so because the book is remarkable for how little it veers from the framework one finds in textbooks on Islamic history published as early as the end of the nineteenth century.⁷ The fact that the book received the Albert Hourani Book Award for the best book in Middle Eastern studies in 2003 indicates the overall esteem accorded this representation of Islam within academic circles. It is then interesting to reflect on some of the book's specifics to understand the presumptions that structure the modern academic view of Islamic history.

As reflected in the book's organization, Berkey's Islam comes across as an eternal prisoner of its natal Middle Eastern environment. Although Islam is historicized by saying that no one way of being Muslim is privileged over any other, the only people to whom he cares to pose the question "what does it mean to be a Muslim" are those who live in cities such as Mecca, Baghdad, and Cairo. To see the stark effect of this choice, consider the following juxtaposition: Berkey's coverage of Islam spanning twelve centuries (600–1800) provides no information at all about India, but from the perspective of Indian history, the whole period 1000–1800 is impossible to understand without considering the role of Muslim dynasties and ruling elites. How does it come about that a region as large as India in its "Muslim period" does not merit even a peripheral treatment when telling the story of Islam until 1800? Although Berkey provides summaries of political developments from ruler to ruler in Baghdad, Damascus, and Cairo at various points in the book, the narrative is entirely oblivious to anything occurring east of what is today Iran. On the basis of sheer data, developments in India and other regions would seem to require greater comment than Berkey provides, and the omission is acceptable only if one assumes that all developments within Islam must originate eternally from the Middle East.⁸

When we move from the coverage of regions to that of topics, Berkey's presentation of Islam as a religion is derived exclusively from juristic, theological, and (very occasionally) Sufi works written in Arabic. There is almost no consideration of extensive literary traditions in other languages, including even Persian

7. For example, an expanded version of the chronological frame within which Berkey works can be seen in August Müller, *Der Islam im Morgen- und Abendland*, 2 vols. (Berlin: G. Grote, 1885–87). One noteworthy difference between the two books is that Müller's work is organized in the sequence of what he describes as the rise of Arabs, Persians, Turks, and Mongols, with further sections on Spain and North Africa. Although Berkey's much shorter account does not privilege ethnicity, its coverage of matters non-Arab is exceedingly sparse.

8. For particularly perceptive engagements relating to the intertwining between India and the Middle East in the context of Islamic intellectual and social history, see Finbarr B. Flood, *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and the Medieval "Hindu-Muslim" Encounter*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), and Richard Eaton, *Essays on Islam and Indian History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

and Turkish, which are significant for understanding the Middle East. A very short chapter on “popular religion” that occurs at the end of the book is concerned largely with what the scholarly classes are said to have condemned as threatening practices.⁹ The normativity of a certain section of the literary elite is thus maintained without any question, with no effort to see alterity as being inherent in the construction of Islam, save as deviation from the presumed center.

The list of geographical and topical exclusions from Berkey’s account can be extended quite considerably, and my purpose in bringing up these few examples is simply to demarcate the specificity of this work’s perspective. The net effect of this strategy of presentation is to certify the perspectives of certain classes, writing in Arabic alone, as the sole arbiters of what is to be considered the center of Islam. This view of Islam is intimately connected to the single timeline for Islamic history that is derived from nineteenth-century academic accounts and forms the structure as well as guiding force of Berkey’s narrative.

Rather than being an individual scholarly choice, Berkey’s framework reflects a large-scale consensus that is pervasive within modern historiography. To appreciate this further, we can turn to the second work I would like to consider in this very brief survey. Ira Lapidus’s *Islamic Societies to the Nineteenth Century* presents a revised version of the first two-thirds of his earlier work *A History of Islamic Societies* (1988 and 2002). Advance praise for this book describes the original work as “a classic in the field . . . [that] has enlightened students, scholars, and others with a thirst for knowledge about one of the world’s great civilizations.”¹⁰ In the book’s introduction, the author lays out three presumptions that are his guiding principles for this massive undertaking. The first and second of these amount to the following ideas: histories of societies are histories of institutional systems, which in the case of Islam pertain to familial, economic, cultural or religious, and political arenas. Lapidus’s third, more distinctive, stated assumption is that:

the institutional patterns characteristic of Islamic societies had their origin in ancient Mesopotamia in the third millennium BCE. The constellation of lineage and tribal, religious, and political structures created by the Mesopotamian city-states and empires set the foundation for the later development of Middle Eastern societies before and during the Islamic era. Later Middle Eastern Islamic societies were built on the infusion of ancient institutions with an Islamic cultural style and identity. These Middle Eastern Islamic institutions and cultures in turn interacted with the institutions and cultures of other world regions to create a number of variant Islamic societies. In the modern era these variant societies were again transformed, this time by interaction with Europe.¹¹

Like Berkey, Lapidus is committed to keeping Islam anchored in a Middle Eastern environment irrespective of the changes wrought by interfacing with different cultures. Although both historians are sensitive to the issue of contingency in the development of human societies, they seem to believe “Islam” to have an essence rooted in a particular cultural milieu, identified with a geographical region, that stands apart from time working on human actors. The scope of Lapidus’s work

9. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam, 600–1800*, 248–257.

10. Lapidus, *Islamic Societies to the Nineteenth Century*, i.

11. *Ibid.*, 1.

is quite different in that he is explicit about venturing to all regions of the world with significant Muslim populations and also pays greater attention to developments past the fifteenth century. He does, nevertheless, stay true to the presumption stated at the beginning that Islam is a continuing effect of longer-term patterns rooted in the Middle East. The book's first twenty-four chapters focus exclusively on the Middle East to define Islamic essentials, and the remaining eighteen chapters (twenty-five through forty-two) cover the rest of the globe through division into North Africa and Spain (chapters 26–29), Asia (chapters 30–38), and Africa (chapters 39–42). Within all this material, there are chapters whose titles explicitly invoke the issue of variation and diversity among Muslim societies. However, the author's ultimate concern in these chapters is to preserve a sense for the definable core of Islam, around which local factors are arranged. The overall picture we get, then, is that of a continuous Islam emanating from the Middle East that the historian's god-like eye is able to identify and trace over the course of centuries.

One interesting aspect of the narratives put forth by Berkey and Lapidus is that the unity of Islam is presumed rather than ever being brought up for demonstration. I believe this to be a significant choice on the part of these scholars, dictated in great part by the scholarly tradition within which both locate themselves quite comfortably. Leaving aside matters not covered in the narratives, there is enough diverse data present within both books that Islam could be presented as a fundamentally fractured and conflicted tradition, not susceptible to representation by an internally coherent narrative. It seems to me that the ultimate impetus for the unifying approach comes from commitment to the idea that a religion such as Islam must be a factor for cohesion. To put it another way, these scholars presuppose that persons professing belief in "Islam" must share a core in common even though there is no shortage of data to suggest that the meanings and implications of such belief can vary radically from context to context. To my mind, this indicates a theological rather than historical view of the foundation and flourishing of human communities. And this is a theological view of history that invests a particular geographical locality with *longue durée* patterns claimed as eternal constants despite radical change in circumstances.

One of the most strident exemplifications of this "faith" in Islam is to be found in the third work I would like to mention here in brief. From its very title to the thoroughgoing earnestness present on most pages, Marshall Hodgson's *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* is a sweeping account comprised of volumes entitled "The Classical Age of Islam," "The Expansion of Islam in the Middle Periods," and "The Gunpowder Empires and Modern Times." To be fair to the author, the narrative we find in these volumes was published after Hodgson's untimely early death in 1968 and may not reflect fully what he would have wished to have appear in print. Although Hodgson's work was formulated considerably earlier than those of Berkey and Lapidus, it merits consideration in the present discussion for two reasons: first, it continues to be regarded as an important breakthrough in the modern historiography of Muslim societies and is often cited in the most sophisticated academic work;

and second, it is prefaced by a long introduction concerned with method and terminology that is a rare attempt at theorizing Islamic history in a totalizing way.

Although Hodgson's division of the history of Islam is the same as we see in Berkey, Lapidus, and numerous predecessors, his canvas is the broad area described as the "Afro-Eurasian landmass" considered as an internally connected "Oikoumene" that "remained the setting for most historical life in the [Eastern] hemisphere down to Modern times."¹² Within this arena, Islam is described as a civilization bound to belief in the otherworldly revelation of the Quran. Hodgson's judgment on the "venture" that has been Islam begins with the following observation:

Muslims have yet to implement the Qur'anic prophecy fully in all its implications. But they have perennially renewed their hopes and efforts to live the godly life not only as individuals but as a community. In every age, pious Muslims have reasserted their faith, in the light of new circumstances that have arisen out of the failures and also of the successes of the past. The vision has never vanished, the venture has never been abandoned; these hopes and efforts are still vitally alive in the modern world. The history of Islam as a faith, and of the culture of which it has formed the core, derives its unity and its unique significance from that vision and that venture.¹³

These are lofty words that cannot by any standard be considered to reflect a fundamentally negative assessment of Islam. Aspects of the statement do, nevertheless, raise the question of what evidence and argument a historian might bring to justify this vision. For example, given the extensive and unending debates between Muslims regarding the meaning of the Quran, on what basis is Hodgson talking about knowing the meaning of the Quranic prophecy and its supposed implications? As in the case of Berkey and Lapidus, Hodgson's narrative itself contains the descriptions of myriad disputes among peoples claiming to be acting as Muslims. How can all these people then be described as a group moving through time with unified aspirations? How can historians identify the actors that are to be regarded as the "pious" when the term surely reflects a religious judgment that opposing groups would apply to themselves in contradistinction with their "impious" adversaries? In this passage as well as elsewhere in Hodgson's work, one gets the feeling that Islam is a grand ideal, which actual Muslims have failed to live up to for the most part. Rather contrary to principles of the modern historical method, Islam here again comes across as a timeless entity that exists apart from the thoughts, actions, and circumstances of Muslims who profess belief in it.

Hodgson's work is premised also on distinguishing among "Islamdom," "Islamic," and "Islamicate," terminological innovations that have seen significant adoption in the field of Islamic history.¹⁴ Derived from Christendom, he defines Islamdom as the complex of social relations pertaining to "the society in which the Muslims and their faith are recognized as prevalent and socially dominant."

12. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, I, 110.

13. *Ibid.*, 71.

14. For the context as well as some aspects of the influence of Hodgson's work, see *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam and World History*, ed. Marshall Hodgson and Edmund Burke III (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

This then leads to the further differentiation between the adjectives Islamicate and Islamic: the first refers to “a *culture*, centered on a lettered tradition, which has been historically distinctive of Islamdom the *society*” and the latter is to be “restricted to ‘of or pertaining to’ Islam *in the proper, the religious, sense*.”¹⁵ In work currently being prepared, I intend to take up a full-scale analysis of Hodgson’s theoretical framework as well as the consistency (and lack thereof) with which he utilizes his new terminology in the descriptive part of his work. For present purposes, it is worth focusing on the single point that the Islamic/Islamicate distinction rests on a very specific understanding of what is to be included and excluded from the category “religion.” On this, Hodgson’s narrative equivocates since he is aware that religion and culture cannot be separated easily, particularly when one is arguing that a strong connection links the two.¹⁶ However, his most direct statements identify religion in distinctively Protestant Christian terms, extrapolated to a universal truth:

In a person’s life, we can call “religious” in the most restricted sense (in the sense of “spiritual”), his ultimate cosmic orientation and commitments and the ways in which he pays attention to them, privately or with others. . . . In an Islamic context, this has meant, in effect, a sense of cosmic transcendence, and we may apply the word more concretely, to efforts, practical or symbolical, to transcend the limits of the natural order of foreseeable life—that is, efforts based on hope for a struggle toward some sort of “supernatural” realm. . . . What was religion and, in particular, what was Islam, was always, if diversely, kept consciously distinct from the total culture of Muslim society. In even the most pious man’s life there was much that he could not call religious.¹⁷

With all his methodological sharpness, Hodgson’s work distinguishes between religious and nonreligious aspects of Islam rather inconsistently, based on what fits best with the overall picture of Islam that he wishes to reinforce through his long work. The privileging of a “personal cosmic orientation” as religion means that formal religious discourse concerned with delimiting correct belief and action according to particular interpretations holds the position of privilege in determining the core of Islam or those elements that are to be regarded as fully “Islamic.” The result is an account of Islamic history that is rooted in Hodgson’s own Protestant Christian background and is substantiated and, eventually, reified through reference to Islamic theological presumptions embedded within historiographical works.

In the summary to my argument presented at the head of the essay, I suggested that the constancy of the vision of Islamic history that we see in Western

15. Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, I, 58–59 (italics original).

16. For example, the following statement seems to negate the very Islamic/Islamicate distinction that is presented very forcefully in the methodology section: “An integral conception of Islam as a total culture highlights its distinctive style, its cultural integrality as an indissolubly coherent whole, by tracing all its ramifications to what seem to be indispensable foundations. . . . In some sense, Muslim life has had an integral character as Islamic, not to be violated with impunity” (*ibid.*, 78–79).

17. *Ibid.*, 89. In these statements, Hodgson is clearly heir to understandings of religion prevalent in the 1950s and 1960s that have since been subject to poignant critique. In particular, a vast literature is now available highlighting the seepage between Christian-specific understandings and the modern academic study of religion. For a wide selection of essays in this area that may be said to represent the state of the question, see *Religion: Beyond a Concept*, ed. Hent de Vries (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

scholarship is based on theological rather than historicist presumptions. I hope that my review of the three works I have presented makes clear what I mean by this. Despite the variation between their scopes and styles, Berkey, Lapidus, and Hodgson share commitment to a unified Islam that can be described in the manner of a constant core moving through time in historical stages that are essentially the same for these three authors as well as their many predecessors. I would like to emphasize that I am not suggesting that this view of Islam is ill-intentioned, naïve, or prone to errors that can be corrected through better information. The issue, rather, is the presumed unified nature of this scholarly Islam that is able to withstand any amount of diverse data. In the narratives I have surveyed, the unified perspective derives from placing the essence of Islam in a vision of the essentials of a timeless Middle Eastern culture. This view has the effect of casting Islamic perspectives produced outside the Middle East as being forever derivative on the one hand and encumbered with accretions from “other” cultures on the other. An Islam divided between an essence and additions is made possible by imagining Islamic history as a single timeline that begins in pre-Islamic Middle Eastern religions, consolidates in the Middle East in the “classical” Islamic age, and then eventually flows out from there to other regions to constitute weaker, diluted, or deviant versions.

A particular feature of this view of Islamic history is that the mapping of time and geographical space always goes hand in hand. Islam is provided with a prehistory, since its essence is seen as being latent in unchanging patterns connected to the Middle East. The birth of Islam is an exteriorization of these eternal patterns that initiate a kind of life cycle that begins in the Arabian peninsula, achieves adulthood in surrounding Middle Eastern regions, and mellows out into slow but assured decay as it comes to inhabit lands outside the Middle East. In an irony that seems to have gone unnoticed, the farthest geographical spread of Islam is seen to signify its loss of vigor rather than indicating the resources of a flexible tradition that adapts to new locales. The city of Mecca does, of course, occupy a central place in a number of Islamic rituals, and many Muslims over the centuries have sought to bolster the authenticity of their religious credentials through cultivating connections to the Arabian peninsula. Although this results in a geographical division between a center and an ever-expanding periphery, this is a matter of religious ideology rather than indicating the pattern on which we must plot the history of Islamic communities. By following a center and periphery model in the writing of history, scholars seem to have absorbed Islamic ritual structuring of geography and the cosmos into accounts that are ostensibly concerned with detailing the lives of individuals and societies based on material evidence. Moreover, as I will show later in this article, the geographical orientation toward Mecca is very far from being a universal in Islamic literary materials concerned with the past.

To my mind, the unified description of Islam that has dominated in Western scholarship is based on taking Islamic religious presumptions at face value. Consider the following aspects of religious dogma that are shared between Islamic theological visions, even though such visions differ considerably on points of further detail: Islam is the continuation of a Middle Eastern God’s earlier revelations

to Jews and Christians; the fundamentals of Islam were adumbrated in the Quran and the details were worked out by pious Middle Eastern Muslims in the early centuries; religious “innovation” (*bid‘a*) is the accretion of elements onto the core of essential Islam and is often attributable to “foreign” cultural influence past the “classical” period. These theological points map almost exactly to Western scholarly narratives of Islamic history, where Islam is shown as being preternaturally trapped in essential Middle Eastern patterns. This is problematic from a historical perspective since the theological propositions should be seen as aspects of historically contingent self-understandings rather than as “facts” about the Islamic past that can be adjudicated with reference to material evidence. Instead of structuring historiographical reconstruction on the basis of these presumptions, scholarship would be served better if we become attuned to the deployment and continuing evolution of theological ideas.¹⁸

THE MANUFACTURE OF ISLAMIC TIMES

My chief proposition in this essay is that we can expand the interpretive possibilities available within Islamic studies by untying the consideration of texts and other materials from the standardized timeline of Islamic history that predominates in the field. A major arena for attempting this is the question of time within Islamic narratives themselves. Here, I would like to exemplify the possibilities indicated by my prescription through considering three Persian works composed during the period 1490–1540 CE. The critical issue for me is to extract these works’ understanding of time and the past from within their own structures. This seems to me to be the first step to convince us that time-related matters within Islamic materials represent a worthwhile arena for exploration. Although ranging considerably in scope and style, all of these works are thoroughly laden with Islamic religious references and are clearly in conversation with the larger Islamic literary tradition. In my view, then, they belong squarely in the category “Islamic” as I have defined it earlier in this essay.¹⁹

The first work I would like to present belongs to the genre of “universal history,” meaning a narration of the past from creation to the author’s own time. This genre is, I believe, the ultimate source for the particular Western academic picture of Islamic history that I have described above. The salience of this genre is due to the partial resemblance between the organization of time to be found in it and the modern Western perspective on the writing of history. When material is carried over from Islamic universal chronicles to modern historiography without adjudicating the very different overall presumptions that govern the two genres, the resulting narratives signify an obscuration and an unfortunate reduction of the

18. As a corollary to this discussion, it is worth noting that the past has often featured as a critical element within Islamic religious arguments. For a consideration of this question that includes references for further literature, see Shahzad Bashir, “The Many Spirits of the Islamic Past,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Islamic Spirituality*, ed. Vincent Cornell and Bruce B. Lawrence (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, forthcoming).

19. For general surveys of Persian chronicle literature, see *Persian Historiography*, ed. Charles Melville (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), and Julie Meisami, *Persian Historiography to the End of the Twelfth Century* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).

complexity of the information contained in the original sources. To exemplify this point, I present Ghiyas al-Din Khwandamir's *Habib al-siyar fi akhbar-i afrad-i bashar* ("The beloved of biographies reporting on multitudes of people"), a universal chronicle completed circa 1524 in Herat (present-day Afghanistan). Although this work's arrangement of time presages modern Western understandings, it also contains crucial differences that pertain to the context of its production and are elided if we see it solely through our accepted perspective.

The second work I highlight is Mu'in al-Din Isfizari's *Rawzat al-jannat fi awsaf madinat Herat* ("Heavenly gardens describing the qualities of the city of Herat"). Completed circa 1493, this work is concerned with a city as a microcosm of time. It represents a kind of inversion of the time-space relationship found in the universal chronicle in that it takes the space of the city as a constant and then narrates the lives of those who have inhabited or ruled over it from earliest times to the author's own day. This work belongs to the substantial genre of city and regional histories, in which particular locales are regarded as the center of the narrative drama with a self-consciously Islamic religious orientation. Such works are not limited to the Arabian peninsula or the great cities of the Arab Middle East but include cities and regions throughout areas that have been sites of Muslim communities. A source such as this work provides us a radical alternative to the kinds of narratives of Islamic history penned by Berkey, Lapidus, and (to a lesser extent) Hodgson.

The last work I consider is Zayn al-Din Vasifi's *Badayi' al-vaqayi'* ("Marvelous occurrences"), an extraordinary memoir of Herat, penned in Tashkent (present-day Uzbekistan) circa 1538–39. This narrative is an extended series of vignettes in which the author relates his memories of encounters, gatherings, and competitions whose liveliness is conveyed through poetic citations. The work comes across as a deeply personal narrative that nevertheless conveys one of the richest accounts of the cultural life of a great self-consciously Islamic space in a highly vibrant period. Vasifi is a masterful manipulator of the tension among chronological, personal, and narrative time, making the *Badayi' al-vaqayi'* the most creative work among the three I present in this essay. In its framing, literary allusions, and use of language, this work bears a thoroughly Islamic religious orientation. In my view, considering this work as a cultural rather than religious text (Islamicate rather than Islamic, in Hodgson's terms) would amount to a serious misreading. All three works that I discuss are massive, multi-volume narratives that I can present only in highly synoptic form. In order to convey dense information in a clear form, I have included a schematic diagram relating to the arrangement of time in the discussion of each work.

Khwandamir's Habib al-siyar

This work is a distinctive iteration within the larger genre of Islamic universal history, the ultimate source for the reified view of Islamic time that I have discussed above. Early examples of this genre include Abu Ja'far b. Jarir al-Tabari's *Tarikh al-rusul wa-l-muluk* ("The history of messengers and kings"), a work that

has had defining influence on narrative accounts of Islam since its completion in the tenth century CE.²⁰

In Khwandamir's *Habib al-siyar*, we see time being understood simultaneously and inextricably as both an objective fact and a subjective experience representable through qualities associated with human lives (Figure 1). The objective side is reflected in the concern with dates, although pertaining only to the period of Muhammad's life and thereafter. The subjective side comes out in the fact that the story is not told through a straightforward movement from one year to the next but reflects forward and backward movement as the author attempts to include multiple strands of historical memory that were relevant for his context. Modern academic understandings of Islamic history follow from this paradigm, except that they narrate in a straight line instead of preserving the type of "stuttering" lines visible in the schematic presentation of Khwandamir's work.

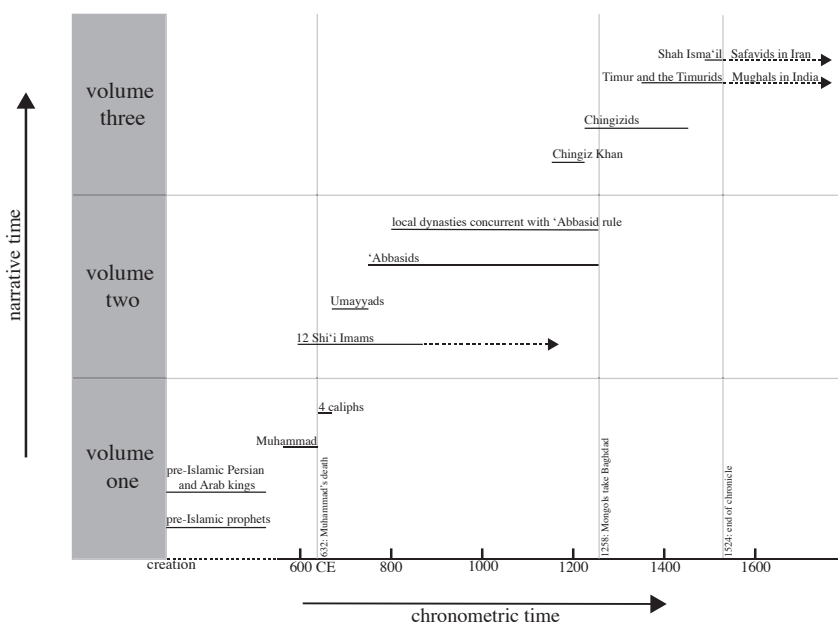


Figure 1. Timelines in Khwandamir's *Habib al-siyar*

Whereas Khwandamir's overall organization of time follows from the established tradition of writing works of universal history, the particular division into volumes and sections we see in the *Habib al-siyar* is the result of his own intention.²¹ The

20. Tabari's work is now available in a forty-volume English translation: *The History of al-Tabari* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989–2007). For the background and particular characteristics of this work, see Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), and Chase Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

21. For a more extended account of this work than I can present here, see Shahzad Bashir, "A Perso-Islamic Universal Chronicle in its Historical Context: Ghiyas al-Din Khwandamir's *Habib al-siyar*," in *Historiography and Religion*, ed. Jörg Rüpke, Susanne Rau, and Bernd-Christian Otto (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, forthcoming).

Habib al-siyar is divided into three volumes, each one with four parts. Within the twelve sections, we can observe the interlacing of three different strands of times that were relevant for the self-understanding of someone living in the eastern Islamic world in the beginning of the sixteenth century. These are: the religious view of time anchored in the Quranic version of the biblical account of creation; the time represented in Persian mythology, concerned with ancient kings who had ruled until the Islamic conquest of Iran; and Mongol time as present in the history of Chingiz Khan and his descendants. For all three strands of time, the periods that fall before Muhammad are narrated without dates. The dated part of history is thus concomitant with the beginning of the Islamic calendar in 622 CE.

The first strand of time that runs through the *Habib al-siyar* may be called religious time in that it originates in statements in the Quran and was part of the triumphalist religious rhetoric espoused by Muslim rulers who justified themselves in religious terms. This strand begins with the biblical story of creation in its Quranic version, following the line of individuals regarded as prophets such as Adam, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and so on (volume 1, section 1). This history also includes the mention of Greek philosophers and Iranian sages (Pythagoras, Socrates, Jamasp, and so on) whose work had continued to influence intellectual life in Islamic settings. The life of Muhammad (volume 1, section 3) represents the endpoint of prophetic time since he is regarded as the last prophet. The religious timeline continues after Muhammad in the form of Muslim rulers who saw themselves as the prophet's legitimate successors. However, the strand is split into two based on the sectarian division between Sunnis and Twelver Shi'is. Khwandamir provides both the Sunni version of early history in the form of the lives of the so-called "rightly guided" caliphs (volume 1, section 4) and the Twelver Shi'i version through the lives of the Twelve Imams (genealogical successors to Muhammad) (volume 2, section 1). The account of the Imams includes an aspect of the future as well since the Twelfth Imam is supposed to have gone into an occultation in the year 874 CE. Khwandamir's narration of Shi'i history ends with a description of prophecies about what will happen at the time the Twelfth Imam returns to normal presence just before the apocalypse and the end of the world.²² The Sunni-Shi'i differentiation is based substantially on alternative understandings of early history of Muhammad's community. For Sunnis, Muhammad's first four successors represent the golden age of Islam, whereas Shi'is regard this same period as having set a pattern of tragedy in which Muhammad's legitimate heirs were denied their rights as rulers and religious guides of the Muslim community. In the *Habib al-siyar*, Khwandamir acknowledges that the two versions of history represent alternatives, but then tells the two versions of this history separately.²³ The traditions are thus conveyed on their own terms rather than through adjudication between them. This pattern of representing alternative histories as independent streams of time is a general principle followed throughout the work.

22. Ghiyas al-Din Khwandamir, *Habib al-siyar*, ed. Dabir Siyaqi, 4 vols. (Tehran: Kitabfurushi-yi Khayyam, 1984), II, 111-113.

23. *Ibid.*, I, 444-445.

After the early period, Khwandamir's narrative moves to the two dynasties that make up the period until the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century. Khwandamir treats the Umayyads and the 'Abbasids in succession, followed by accounts of local dynasties in the Iranian region that were, in effect, independent rulers even though they affirmed the 'Abbasid caliph as the nominal legitimate sovereign (volume 2, sections 2, 3, and 4). The dynastic kingship described in these sections rests on the amalgamation of two different timelines: one, the religious one I have described above, and two, the account of pre-Islamic Persian and Arab kings that Khwandamir provides following the narrative about biblical prophets (volume 1, section 2). Stories associated with pre-Islamic Persian kings in particular carried tremendous cultural prestige in the Iranian geographical area, commemorated in such celebrated works as Abu l-Qasim Firdawsi's epic work *Shahnama* ("Book of kings"). This book was composed in Persian in the early eleventh century and had lasting influence on later perceptions.²⁴ Values associated with Persian kingship fed into Khwandamir's work directly through the Iranian heritage of the region, where he worked, as well as in the form that these had been absorbed and naturalized in the ideals of self-consciously Islamic kingship among the 'Abbasids and the local dynasties that maintained allegiance to them. By the time Khwandamir was writing, Persian royal time was equal in significance to Islamic religious time, accounting for its salience in the *Habib al-siyar* and other similar works.

Societies of Central Asia and Iran underwent a radical transformation in the thirteenth century CE with the arrival of the Mongols. Chingiz Khan's descendants eliminated the 'Abbasids from Baghdad as the titular heads of Islamic polities and inaugurated a new era in which Mongol royal descent was the marker of political legitimacy. With the conversion of the Mongol rulers to Islam in the late thirteenth century, Mongol descent became a prominent feature of Muslim ruling ideologies in combination with Islamic religious and Persian royal ideas of earlier periods.²⁵ The Mongol past is the third strand of time reflected in Khwandamir's account of universal history, comprising sections on Chingiz Khan and his descendants (volume 3, sections 1 and 2). Tamerlane and his descendants, the Timurids, were a continuation of Mongol dominion in that they respected Mongol customs and prestige. But during the fifteenth century CE, the Timurids increasingly derived their authority from Tamerlane's own prestige and synthesized a new royal culture that combined religious, Persian, and Mongol understandings of the past.²⁶ This was the milieu in which Khwandamir was born and raised, forming the background to his quite extensive account for the

24. For considerations of the historiographical significance of the *Shahnama*, see *Shahnama Studies II: The Reception of Firdausi's Shahnama*, ed. Charles Melville and Christine van den Berg (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

25. For the incorporation of Mongol history in Islamic historiography, see Beatrice Forbes Manz, "Mongol History Rewritten and Relived," *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 89–90 (2000), 129–149, and Stefan Kamola, "Rashid al-Din and the Making of History in Mongol Iran," PhD diss., University of Washington, 2013.

26. For the formation of Tamerlane's historiographical image, see Michele Bernardini, *Mémoire et propagande à l'époque timouride* (Paris: Association pour l'Avancement des Études Iraniennes, 2008).

fifteenth century (volume 3, section 3). The last historical section of the *Habib al-siyar* describes the rise of Shah Isma‘il and the establishment of a new dynasty, the Safavids (volume 3, section 4). The work ends with a conclusion that contains a brief geography of the inhabited world.

Khwandamir’s narrative is clearly tied to a sense of progression of time from prehistory to his own present, with particular emphasis on political rulers. Although this marks a similarity with the work of modern academic historians, the differences between the two perspectives are also quite noteworthy and instructive. In addition to the issue of maintaining multiple perspectives that I have already mentioned, Khwandamir’s most extensive treatments of the past are reserved for the time closest to his own life (fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries CE) rather than the distant golden age of the life of Muhammad. Similarly, his geographical description is focused on the city of Herat as the center of Islam rather than the great Arab cities that are the primary references for many modern interpreters of Islamic history. At the most basic level, then, an author such as Khwandamir treats the time and place of his own surroundings as a full manifestation of “Islam” as a historical reality. This runs contrary to the perspectives of authors such as Berkey and Lapidus with their fixation on the Arab Middle East. And against the perspective of someone like Hodgson, “Islamic” history here is able to incorporate Mongol time that bears no internal connection to the supposed Quranic vision that is purported to have guided Muslims throughout history. From a historicizing view, the Quran’s extensive presence in the narrative reflects an overarching tradition of interpretation rather than Muslims simply trying to live up to a definable ideal. In a text such as this, there is no obvious way to distinguish between Islamic and Islamicate aspects save through adopting a theological perspective on history. The comparison between Khwandamir and modern writers indicates that the latter represent stripped-down and intellectually impoverished versions of the chronographic tradition contained in the genre of Islamic universal chronicles.

Isfizari’s Rawzat al-jannat fi awsaf madinat Herat

If Khwandamir’s complex organization of time points to the unnecessary narrowness of modern academic visions of the chronology of Muslim societies, the second work I would like to describe turns the matter entirely on its head by privileging space over time. Mu‘in al-Din Isfizari takes the city of Herat as its main subject and proceeds to show the passage of peoples and events on this space.²⁷ The work’s very first sentence strikes an identification between the human body and the city as entities that gather the divine spirit into material form: “Gratitude and glorification are rightfully due to that owner of the created cosmos who adorned the city-realm of the human body—the enthronement place of the king of spiritual knowledge—with the four bazaars of the elements and the five doors of the senses.”²⁸ He then concretizes the personification and glorification of the city

27. For reflection on Persian local histories as a genre, see Charles Melville, “Persian Local Histories: Views from the Wings,” *Iranian Studies* 33, nos. 1–2 (2000), 7–14, and forthcoming work by Derek Mancini-Lander.

28. Mu‘in al-Din Zamchi Isfizari, *Rawzat al-jannat fi awsaf madinat Herat*, ed. Sayyid Muhammad Kazim Imam, 2 vols. (Tehran: Intisharat-i Danishgah-i Tihiran, 1959), I, 1.

further with a longer discussion that includes the following poem by an earlier scholar named Taj al-Salmani (fl. ca. 1410):

Herat, among cities, the eye and the lamp,
the life force that animates the world's body.
If Khurasan is the chest on the spread of earth's surface,
Herat, then, is the heart within, in the sense of its true meaning.
It is the flourishing abode of God's friends,
and the axial point of knowledge, religion, and the just.
Heaven's fragrant breezes are manifest in its undulating winds.
Water of life impregnates its pure dust.
Its purity causes the beauty of paradise to grow jealous.
Its air is the envy of spirits and sweet-smelling herbs.
Paradisiacal pleasures and pride exceed one upon the other,
and its caretaker is also like the angel, the heavenly garden's keeper.
Reaching beyond, surpassing the grandeur of heavens,
it rules in the manner of the blazing sun.²⁹

This description accomplishes the dual purpose of proclaiming Herat as a paramount location on earth while also exalting it to the level of the heaven beyond material realities. Both these projections have the effect of eternalizing the city of Herat beyond the vicissitudes of ordinary material transformations. Here too, a distinction between Islamic and Islamicate aspects of the work as suggested by Hodgson would run diametrically counter to the work's self-projection. Rather, what we see is the presentation of a particular Islam that is surely connected to other forms but is, in synthesis, a reflection of the author's historiographical agency, with emphasis on a place.

Following upon the basic geographical commitment, the work is organized into twenty-six chapters that are called *rawza* or gardens, some of them also containing internal subdivisions that are named *chaman* or garden-beds (Figure 2).

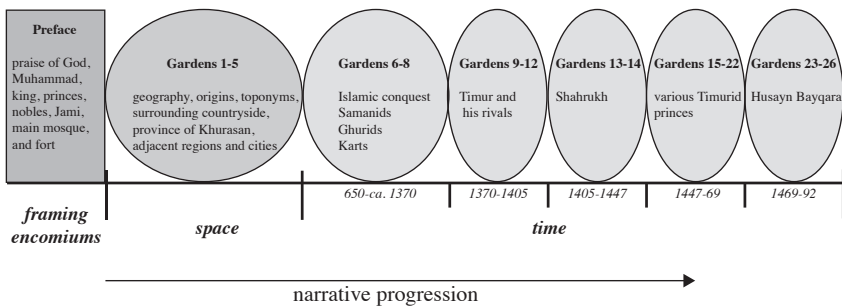


Figure 2. Narrative Progression in Isfizari's *Rawzat al-jannat fi awsaf madinat Herat*

The first five chapters/gardens concentrate on space through geography by providing details for the city's origins and prominent toponyms, describing the surrounding countryside, and giving an overall account of the region of Khurasan and its adjacent provinces and cities. The remaining twenty-one chapters are concerned with time via accounts of the city's rulers since the Muslim conquest,

29. *Ibid.*, I, 21-22.

ending with the reign of Husayn Bayqara, the king of Herat at the time of writing (1469–92). As the distribution of the chapters indicates, Isfizari's narrative is tilted heavily toward Timurid rule over Herat (eighteen out of twenty-six chapters), even though this constitutes only 120 years out of a total history spread over nearly nine centuries.

Isfizari's topical distinction in the chapters pertains largely to the titles since the actual narratives within the chapters constantly intermix time and space. This arrangement seems to foreground Herat as a kind of metaphysical structure on which space and time can be mapped as equivalent contingent qualities. Time is also fundamentally anchored in human bodies since the chapter divisions refer to dynasties and rulers rather than to a calendar that may act as an abstract scale. Although the succession of time-related chapters is chronological, the narrative within each chapter contains topical deployments of time. It is thus possible to take the work's self-ascription seriously and see each chapter as a plotted garden in which the events being narrated are equivalent to visible plants and trees, and their invisible but necessary roots trace paths to pasts of varying types and scales. The final chapters on Bayqara represent the apogee toward which the narrative builds from its beginning.

As in the case of Khwandamir, Isfizari treats the time closest to his own life as a fully authentic "Islamic" time that, moreover, deserves the longest treatment. To see this in some degree of detail, I will focus on the twenty-third garden/chapter, devoted to Bayqara's accession to the throne. The chapter begins with the theme of the ease that God provides after hardship, as in the cases of the prophets Joseph and Moses who suffered tribulations in life but were eventually successful. This leads to the introduction of Bayqara as the hero of the age, whose years of itinerancy in search of a kingdom come to an end with the imminent coronation. The auspiciousness of the time of his birth is ratified through a hadith in which Muhammad states: "I was born in the age of a just ruler." For Muhammad, this is seen as referring to the Sassanid king Anushirwan, who is described as worthy of pride despite the fact that he was not Muslim. For Bayqara, the just kings are his Timurid predecessors Shahrukh (d. 1447) and Abu Sa'id (d. 1469). The chapter's preliminaries end with the author stating that, at the point of writing, it has been twenty-six years since Khurasan began to experience peace and plenty upon Bayqara's accession (899/1493–94).³⁰

To this point, Isfizari's references are reminiscent of Khwandamir's work since he legitimizes Bayqara's status in religious, Iranian royal, and Turko-Mongol terms. He provides the date for Bayqara's enthronement in 1469, followed by accounts of universal celebration, his sagacity in appointing able and trusted administrators, and his marriage to Shahr Banu Begum, the daughter of Abu Sa'id Mirza. The marriage marks further solidification of his status as the rightful Timurid ruler over Khurasan. After this, Isfizari writes: "Once he had satisfactorily gathered royal power to himself and consummated the wedding, he followed the command 'God hates the nether world (*dunya*) but loves those who inhabit it.' Royal attention was drawn to the construction of a quadrilateral garden (*chahar*

30. *Ibid.*, II, 310-314.

bagh) that would make manifest the seven wheels of the heavenly sphere and put to shame the eight gardens of the abode of Islam.”³¹

The first garden-bed (*chaman*) to follow the main narrative within this garden/chapter concerns the world-adorning garden (*bagh-i jahan-ara*) and exhilarating palace (*qasr-i dilgusha*) that are presented as Bayqara’s own contributions to the city. These are described as places still being adorned by skillful craftsmen, twenty-three years after the inauguration of construction. The description of the results of this activity is presented in prose and poetry:

[The garden and palace are] such that their like has never entered the thought of a builder (*muhandis*), and a similar example has never crossed the mind of a philosopher (*faylasuf*). Salman [Savaji says]:

The king’s palace is better, in every way, than the eternal paradise.

No words to describe it—an earthly paradise.

A royal abode strong, beautiful, laudable, and high,

on a bit of earth, he has assembled together a heaven.

...

Seeing it, a virgin of paradise (*hur*) would turn its face,

embarrassed, hiding itself in the garden of paradise.

An orchard where peacocks constantly take flight,

launching into air from the tops of Sidra trees.

The curve of its vault a twin to the heavenly roof,

its ceiling-edge whispering secrets into Saturn’s ear.³²

The garden with its palace is a perfectly ordered universe inhabited by those represented as being perfect.

I would suggest that Isfizari’s work is poised between two different notions of time that are endemic to the garden as an idea. On the one hand, we have the ordinary passage of time, indicated by matters such as the cyclical growth and decay of bodies, and on the other, time is the feeling of being in a moment, such as the experience of being present at the coronation and in the garden and palace. The first marks duration, regularity, and cyclicity, and the second connects to the notion of event or occurrence. The garden provides a template for representing both because it is organized and changes regularly by seasons, but is also the quintessential backdrop for experiences that memorialize events through registering feelings and expressing emotions. The internal tensions between these differing notions of time are fully resolvable only in a space like the heavenly paradise that is impossible in material terms. Such space has sensual pleasures and events but no anticipation of change or denial of desire. In the terrestrial sphere, creating and maintaining the garden is a continual process, much as the work of living human lives is suspended between ideals and realities. In this sense, Isfizari’s effort to compose his work parallels the work of artisans who, he says, were still busy adorning Bayqara’s palace and garden twenty-three years after the inauguration.

In comparative terms, we may see the works of Isfizari and Khwandamir as structural inversions of each other. Khwandamir uses timelines as stable structures for the representation of space and human experience. For Isfizari, the space

31. *Ibid.*, II, 316.

32. *Ibid.*, II, 318-319.

of Herat is the eternal backdrop on which time and human action flow. In the details of the two possibilities, we see myriad descriptions of human lives. Both representations reflect thorough amalgamation of immediate material factors and religious ideology that is linkable to discursive patterns with longer histories. To observe the notion of personal experience itself becoming the anchor for narrating the past we can turn to the third work I wish to highlight in this essay.

Vasifi's Badayi' al-vaqayi'

Rather than adopting the viewpoint of an omniscient narrator, Zayn al-Din Vasifi in his memoir uses vignettes related in the first person to describe the history and social life of the city of Herat during the approximate period 1500–1540 CE. Writing circa 1539, Vasifi begins with a vivid account of his personal experience of the capture of Herat by the Safavid conqueror Shah Isma'il in 1512. Since he identified with the vanquished party, this event compelled Vasifi to go into self-imposed exile in Central Asia, where he served various Uzbek courts in the capacity of *littérateur* and boon companion to royalty. As he describes it himself, his patrons valued him particularly because of his status as a raconteur at the great court of Husayn Bayqara at Herat, whose term had come to an end with the Safavid takeover of the city.

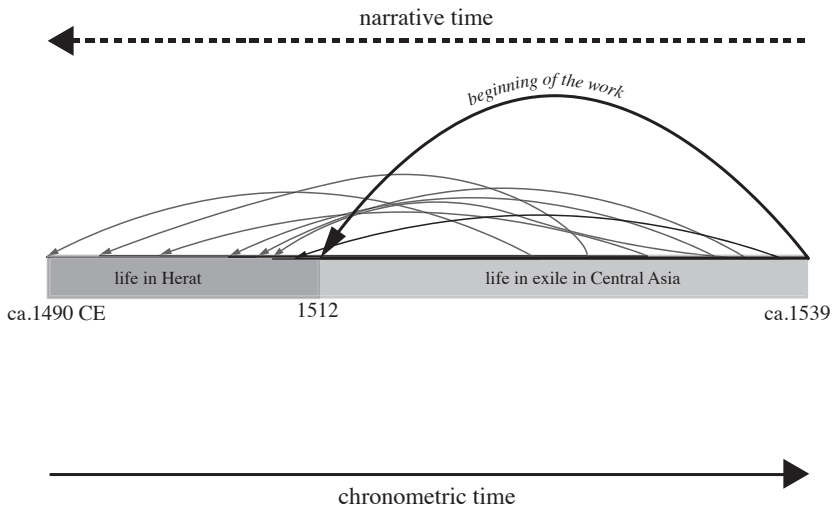


Figure 3. Time and Narrative in Vasifi's *Badayi' al-vaqayi'*

As I have attempted to visualize in Figure 3, Vasifi's narrative moves back and forth between various times in a complex way. The beginning connects his point of writing (1539) to the pivotal moment in his own life when the city was captured (1512). Subsequently, all the information he provides is couched in the form of relating a personal experience or his response to his patrons when they ask about people or events concerned with Bayqara's court. As a result, the frames for the vignettes are all placed between the years 1512 and 1539, whereas the stories themselves belong almost entirely to the period before 1512. This pattern imbues the work with a thoroughly nostalgic mood in which the reader

is invited into the narrative at one point and then swiftly transported to earlier times that come across as having been filled with greater adventure and charm. Overall, the work's narrative time is oriented opposite to chronometric time because of constant and repetitive movement to periods earlier than when each vignette starts.

The overall quality of Vasifi's play on time is best exemplified through some examples. In the beginning of the work, Vasifi tells of his despondency at the time of the Safavid takeover of Herat in 1512, which had led him to the point of denouncing the conquerors in public and thereby courting instant death. While on his way to do this, he came across an acquaintance who suggested that, instead, he should visit a man with the sobriquet Abu l-Jud (Father of Generosity) who had arrived recently from Spain and possessed miraculous powers to set his devotees' minds at ease through his possession of sciences such as alchemy, gematria, mathematics, and various forms of magic. This led to an encounter in which Abu l-Jud gave Vasifi a highly detailed account of his future, telling that he would migrate to Transoxiana, serve particular kings and princes descended from Chingiz Khan, and eventually write a work entitled *Badayi' al-vaqayi'*. Overcome by this information, Vasifi fainted in the man's company and then never saw him again. However, the prognostication he had provided soon began to come true when he availed himself of the opportunity to join a caravan going toward Transoxiana.³³ The augury sutures the time at which Vasifi was fulfilling the prophecy by writing the *Badayi' al-vaqayi'* (1539) to the moment of the capture of Herat at which he begins the narrative. The rest of the dance between the present and the past in the remainder of the extensive work is carried out within this frame.

A further example can give a sense of the work's texture with its focus on linguistic virtuosity. Vasifi states that he left Herat for Transoxiana in 1512 in the company of associates who either knew one another already or became friends in the midst of their common affliction. Those present in the party were bound for two different destinations, which compelled the group to break into two at a river crossing. Some companions decided to commemorate this event with verses. The first offered the following quatrain (*ruba'i*):

Like the Pleiades, in a moment, we had come together,
the way jewels become sewn side by side in a garment.
All of a sudden, heaven split the thread of that union,
flinging each piece away to a different corner of the world.

To this, a second responded with a short poem (*qit'a*):

In this disappointing abode, better not to become attached to someone.
For everyone on whom you may set your heart,
his hypocritical company will be spiritual torture,
if his demeanor is anathema to your nature.
And if his manners accord well with your ways,
separating from him will give the taste of death's elixir.

And finally, Vasifi himself provided a short poem:

33. Zayn al-Din Vasifi, *Badayi' al-vaqayi'*, ed. A. N. Boldyrev, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Tehran: Bunyad-i Farhang-i Iran, 1970-72), I, 5-8.

When gathered letters, joined one to other, mark company full of pleasures,
 the heavenly sphere takes up enmity and the will to quarrel.
 Casting a thousand tricks and subterfuges in the way,
 it causes separation, as manifest in the letters of farewell.³⁴

Vasifi's contribution here contains a play on the way the words "gathered" (*jam'*) and "farewell" (*vida'*) are written in the Arabic script: the first contains letters that are joined when they are written together, whereas the second contains letters that must be written separately. As portrayed in these verses, human life appears suspended between individuals' volition and desire to be together, on the one hand, and the disruptive play of heavenly powers, on the other. The ultimate marker of togetherness is discourse, celebrated most prominently through the act of poetic invention.³⁵ The two competing forces bear strong relationships to objective versus subjective experiences of time: the heavens move on in their regularity, going about the business of influencing human lives without care for individual fortunes, while the human experience of time is conditioned fundamentally by the pains and pleasures of communal interactions. Interwoven throughout all the stories Vasifi provides, these two senses of time constitute a fundamental premise underlying the whole narrative.

In addition to its personal focus, Vasifi's work exhibits intimate awareness of immediate as well as distant pasts, which he deploys skillfully in the construction of the narrative. Here too, an example makes this clear. He states that one day in the city of Shahrukhiyya in Central Asia, his Uzbek patron mentioned the famous vizier of Husayn Bayqara named Nizam al-Mulk Khwafi, whom the king had held in very high esteem. This led Vasifi to first provide some amusing stories about the vizier and to state that once the king called him the most precious ruby in his treasury. However, the vizier eventually fell from royal grace in a manner that contains larger lessons for loyalty and statecraft.

The story begins by stating that when a grandson of Bayqara named Muhammad Mu'min Mirza was governor in the city of Astarabad, Bayqara decided, at the instigation of his wife Khadija Begum, to depose him in favor of his son Muzaffar Husayn Mirza. This was a matter of political conflict between rival factions within the ruling house. Mu'min Mirza decided to resist his demotion by coming into battle, but was defeated and brought to Herat as a prisoner. This caused commotion in the city because he was a prince much loved by the population. Bayqara then sought the advice of the vizier Nizam al-Mulk to deal with the situation. He responded with a verse:

For an unfaithful army, the best thing is for it to be made to disperse.
 For a royal person who causes rifts, the best thing is that he lose his head.

Basing his decision on this advice, Bayqara ordered the prince to be executed, but this led to mourning throughout the city. Various poets occupied themselves in writing elegies for the occasion, among whom Vasifi says that he himself was

34. *Ibid.*, I, 35.

35. Although poetry is pervasive throughout Persian works concerned with the past (including the three I am treating in this discussion), its characteristics and functions have received little attention in discussions of historiography. I aim to address this issue in detail in my forthcoming work.

able to do the best despite being only sixteen years of age. The adverse public reaction to the execution did not sit well with Bayqara and he blamed the vizier's advice for having precipitated it. The king then ordered that the vizier and his beloved sons and associates be hung and flayed in public. The vizier showed great bravery in this terrible hour but the sentence was carried out according to the king's wishes.³⁶

Vasifi's narration of events in this instance interweaves the story of his own life, the account of the Timurid court at Herat, and the general vicissitudes of human existence. He himself is a constant presence in the narrative through the framing and as a character within the events as they unfold. This and other similar narratives, placed throughout the work, combine to provide a view into the politics of the Timurid house and the life of the city of Herat under its rule. And the king acts as the hand of indifferent fate, which brings forth the cruel end of the noble vizier despite the evocation of his sincerity. The connection between this story and a more general lesson is heightened by the fact that the vizier's name, Nizam al-Mulk, recalls the much earlier Saljuq vizier of the same name (died 1092), who penned a famous treatise on governance and was regarded as the paragon of statecraft by the time Vasifi was writing.³⁷ Overall, then, the story combines direct statements and literary and historical allusions that gather various strands of personal memory and historical reportage into an account filled with pathos as well as political lessons. And the work's language and plethora of citations to earlier works in Persian and Arabic constitute its ubiquitous connection to Islamic literary traditions that he adapts for his own rhetorical purposes.

CONCLUSION

Given the vast scope of literary and other materials produced in Islamic societies over the past fourteen centuries, what I have presented in this essay amounts to a minuscule patch on the proverbial tip of the iceberg when it comes to exploring the topic of multiple temporalities in the Islamic context. I nevertheless hope that my short assessments of certain aspects of three Persian works provide convincing beginnings for the suggestion that Islamic materials contain complex and varied constructions of time. By implication, this makes the single timeline for Islamic history that was initiated by nineteenth-century European orientalists and continues to predominate in Islamic studies to this day amount to a kind of limited utility. By loosening the notion of a single time, we become better equipped to examine Muslim lives and literatures in the context in which they were lived. This, in turn, provides us a better framework for representing the tremendous internal diversity of Muslim perspectives that permeates the vast corpus of materials available to us for study.

The sources I have presented share a thorough sense of "Islamic" commitment, but they organize time in radically different ways. I suggest that a framework that acknowledges the multiplicity of Islamic temporal regimes from the outset

36. *Ibid.*, II, 331-339.

37. Cf. Nizam al-Mulk, *The Book of Government or Rules for Kings: The Siyar al-Muluk or Siyasat-nama of Nizam al-Mulk*, transl. Hubert Darke (Richmond, Surrey, UK: Curzon, 2002).

presents a better option for future academic explorations of these materials. In this context, it is noteworthy that even the genre of universal chronicles, which is the ultimate source of the single timeline adopted by modern scholars of Islam, is fundamentally perspectivalist in its orientation and easily accommodates pre-Islamic, Iranian versions of the past as well as the Mongol legacy that came to affect Muslim societies from the thirteenth century onward. The principle involved here indicates the genre's capaciousness in being able to accommodate other temporal schemes, such as those associated with India, China, Europe, and so on. Farther afield, Isfizari's rootedness in space and Vasifi's emphasis on personal memory and nostalgia provide temporalities that exceed altogether the view of history of Muslim communities that is tied to a single timeline. By adopting a pluralistic perspective and treating these and other materials as expressions of value equal to works from the Middle East written in Arabic, we have the possibility of overcoming the constricted view of Islam that continues to persist despite numerous calls for change.

In my perspective, the problem of stilted perception of Islam and Muslims has as much to do with the way specialists in the field have read Islamic sources as the question of colonial and postcolonial politics. I believe this to be the result of hermeneutically stunted "under-reading" of original Islamic materials through which scholars have remained tied to theological presumptions rather than working toward historicizing frameworks for assessing premodern Islamic intellectual and social worlds. As indicated by the Persian examples I have discussed, Islamic sources implicate objective and subjective understanding of time in complicated and varying ways. Accounts of the past we find in them contain blends of elements such as reportage, moral discipline, political and ideological commitment, aesthetic judgment, doubt, and explicit as well as implicit rules for adjudicating what is to be considered historical evidence. We must take issues such as these into account when we evaluate the sources for the purposes of generating our own narratives about the contexts in which they were produced.

In addition to the matter of making sense of the past, the type of foundational, "time-sensitive" rethinking of Islamic studies that I am advocating contains significant political implications for the world in which we live today. Although contemporary politics is not my direct concern here, noting this aspect of the matter in conclusion may bring into relief the stakes involved in the questions that I have tried to address. When we examine the ideologies of contemporary Muslim individuals and movements that continue to populate the headlines of today's newspapers, it is hard to escape the central significance accorded to understandings of the past. Whether they are referred to as traditionalists, Islamists, moderates, or modernists, Muslim actors in the public sphere today construct and advocate the legitimacy of their positions through reference to golden ages of the past or the future, which they contrast with the situation in the present.³⁸ If we interpret these actors within the single timeline that has dominated modern academic views of Islam, we turn to moments in the records of earlier Muslims

38. For a perceptive treatment of these themes in the vein that I have tried to highlight, see R. Stephen Humphreys, *Between Memory and Desire: The Middle East in a Troubled Age*, updated ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

to find clues for understanding the present. This perspective leads to explanatory paradigms centered on notions of linear and unidirectional development, positive or negative evolution, “medievalism,” and so forth, which have had a nearly universal monopoly on understanding modern Muslim individuals and movements. If we break away from the myth of a single Islamic time, we can understand these Muslims as active interpreters who create new forms of Islam in conjunction with their readings of the past and the circumstances of the present. Human actors, Muslim and otherwise, are bound to intellectual and material struggles that involve the production of many different pasts usable for particular situations. To represent Muslim individuals and societies, incorporating the possibility of multiple pasts at the most fundamental level can help to create richer and more meaningful accounts that are relevant to historians and social scientists alike. Quite possibly, such reconfiguration may lead to more effective options in the realm of political policy as well, providing a course out of the binds that critics of orientalism have seen as forming the crux of the problem of skewed Euro-American perceptions of Islam and Muslims.

Stanford University