From Adam to ‘Ādil Shāh: Rethinking Inter-Religious Encounter in the *Tārīkh-i Firishteh*

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Abstract

Despite the *Tārīkh-i Firishteh*'s continued importance for scholarship on early-modern South Asia, little attention has been paid to analyzing the text's introduction, where its author, Muḥammad Qāsim Astarābādī (Firishteh), articulates a conception of historical time in part by critiquing the *Mahabharata*. Existing scholarship on the Introduction has invoked the conceptual framework of 'encounters' between Persianate and Sanskritic cultural spheres, where Firishteh's critique of the *Mahabharata* is made possible through Mughal engagement with Sanskrit texts. By analyzing two registers of the Introduction—*tārīkh* as a mode of historical narration central to dynastic legitimation, and Abū al-Faẓl's use of the *Mahabharata* as a way to critique certain Abrahamic conceptions of genesis—this paper suggests that the language of 'encounter' is ultimately ill-suited to understanding the Introduction's most controversial passages.

Keywords

Hindu-Muslim encounter – *Mahabharata* (*Razmnāmeḥ*) – Firishteh – Abū al-Faẓl – *Tārīkh*

Shortly after establishing Bijapur the capital of the young ‘Ādilshāhī dynasty, Yūsuf ‘Ādil Khān (r. 1490–1510) declared Shī‘ism the kingdom's official religion. Emboldened by the Safavid revolution in Iran, Khān's 1503 declaration cast, in the words of Richard Eaton, a “shadow of stifling austerity over the cultural life” of the city.¹ Over the course of the sixteenth century, this austerity gave way

¹ Richard M. Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur 1300–1700: Social Roles of Sufis in Medieval India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 68.

to vibrant religious and intellectual exchange cultivated in part by later monarchs such as Ibrāhīm ‘Ādil Shāh II (r.1580–1627). Surrounded by a diverse entourage of bureaucrats and courtiers, Ibrāhīm ‘Ādil Shāh is widely seen as having brought Bijapur to an apogee of cultural and religious colloquy. Of the numerous texts authored during this period of Bijapur’s history, few have enjoyed the continued popularity of the *Tārīkh-i Firishteh*. Although ‘Ādil Shāh commissioned the *Tārīkh-i Firishteh* during a period of unprecedented exchange, scholars have highlighted a kind of parochialism in the text, where its author, Muḥammad Qāsim Astarābādī (penname Firishteh), is described as having opposed the “seep” of certain knowledge systems “noisily and vigorously,” in the words of Sanjay Subrahmanyam.² More specifically, the Introduction has been cited as evidence of Firishteh’s opposition to “brahman savants” whose scientific, theological, and literary sensibilities attracted the attention of Muslim intellectuals and translators throughout early-modern South Asia.³

As the preface to a history of Indo-Islamic rulers, the introduction of the *Tārīkh-i Firishteh* asserts a direct connection between Muslim rulers in the Deccan and Adam, the first man according to Abrahamic traditions. As Audrey Truschke has pointed out, this allows Firishteh to argue that India, and the Deccan especially, is fundamentally “connected to the Islamic world.”⁴ Firishteh establishes this connection in part by critiquing an account of genesis derived from the *Mahabharata*, a text he calls the “most authoritative and credible” (*mabṣūṭtar va mu‘tabartar*) historical chronicle belonging to the “people of Hind” (*ahl-i Hind*).⁵ Firishteh’s critique of the *Mahabharata* has led to speculation about Firishteh’s place within the world of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century inter-religious ecumenism exemplified most famously at the Mughal court during the reign of Akbar. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, for instance, has suggested that Firishteh’s “resistance” to the *Mahabharata*’s historical and cultural attachments be understood within a “far larger global conjuncture” where “expanding empires encountered unfamiliar peoples and attempted to come to terms with them conceptually.”⁶ Audrey Truschke has argued we understand Firishteh in the context of “Mughal encounters with Sanskrit texts” and their effects on “Indo-Persian literary and historical

2 Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Courtly Encounters: Translating Courtliness and Violence in Early Modern Eurasia*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 4.

3 Subrahmanyam, *Courtly Encounters*, 4.

4 Audrey Truschke, *Culture of Encounters: Sanskrit At the Mughal Court* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 221.

5 Firishteh, *Tārīkh-i Firishteh* (Tehran: Anjuman-i āṣār va mafākhir-i farhangī, 1387/2008), 11.

6 Subrahmanyam, *Courtly Encounters*, 4.

sensibilities.”⁷ Although both Subrahmanyam and Truschke are cognizant of the problems of conceptualizing encounter as the contact between disparate and self-constitutive “politico-cultural entities,” in describing the encroaching “seep” of brahmanical knowledge, or the “conflict between the Sanskrit record and Islamicate sources,” both locate Firishte at the juncture of opposing cultural and epistemic worlds.⁸ As important as their work has been for calling attention to the cultural contexts of the *Tārīkh-i Firishte*, this paper argues that the language of encounter—framed either between ‘Sanskritic’ and ‘Persianate’ or ‘brahmanical’ and ‘Islamicate’ systems—is ill-suited to fully understand Firishte’s critique of the *Mahabharata* or the methods through which he does so.

Drawing from sources as varied as the Qur’ān, Shī’ī *ḥadīth*, Perso-Islamic court-historical writing, and Persian redactions of Sanskrit texts, the *Tārīkh-i Firishte* straddles a number of textual and cultural domains. To conceive of his critique as a tension between Sanskritic and Islamicate religio-cultural spheres obscures the purport of passages in which Firishte manipulates the *Mahabharata* to critique other Muslim intellectuals and their conceptions of genesis. To this end, this paper analyzes Firishte’s critique of the *Mahabharata* by evaluating two inter-texts that figure prominently in the Introduction: The first is the Perso-Islamic historical genre known as *tārīkh*, which Firishte marshals to establish a sanctified royal lineage that links the rulers of the Deccan plateau to Abrahamic prophets. By understanding *tārīkh* to serve “more far-reaching ends than mere political expression,” as Julie Scott Meisami argues, we can better assess how the creation of royal genealogies originating with Adam, Noah, or other Abrahamic prophets—a stock trope of the *tārīkh* genre—strengthened ‘Ādilshāhī claims to power.⁹ The second inter-text is Abū al-Faḥr’s introduction to the *Razmnāmeḥ*, the Persian redaction of the *Mahabharata* commissioned by Akbar in 1585. In his introduction to the *Razmnāmeḥ*, Abū al-Faḥr advances a provocative claim: the *Mahabharata* might be evidence against a central precept of many Persian historical chronicles and of Abrahamic conceptions of genesis—namely, that seven thousand years is thought to separate Adam and the Day of Judgment. By understanding Firishte’s critique of the *Mahabharata* not as an end in itself, but as a site of intra-Islamic debate over conceptions of historical time, we are compelled to

7 Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, 219.

8 Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, 219.

9 Julie Scott Meisami, “The Past in Service of the Present: Two Views of History in Medieval Persia,” *Poetics Today* 14, no. 2 (1993): 250.

rethink a Sanskritic-Islamicate binary as a useful framework for understanding the stakes of Firishteh's critique of the *Mahabharata*.

Part one of this paper situates the *Tārīkh-i Firishteh* within the wider discipline of courtly historical writing. Although *tārīkh* is a heterogeneous and expansive literature, this paper draws from the work of Julie Scott Meisami and Elton Daniel who outline common motifs and strategies in *tārīkh* writing. These include reconciling Abrahamic accounts of human history with those of other traditions, where an 'Abrahamic' account of human history is understood to begin with Adam and culminate in the Day of Judgment. By tracing *tārīkh* writing from Samanid court-chroniclers like Bal'amī through later north Indian and Deccani historians, we can establish a genealogy for the strategies Firishteh uses in his critique of the *Mahabharata*.

The second part of this paper closely analyzes Firishteh's critique of the *Mahabharata*, which he develops in three maneuvers: he first acknowledges the potential validity of its account of genesis by citing Shī'ī *ḥadīth* drawn from 'extremist' or *ghulāt* sources associated with the sixth Shī'ī Imām Ibn Ja'far al-Ṣādiq. Firishteh then backs away from this explanation by invoking the testimony of an ancient group of brahman 'verifiers' (*muḥaqqiqān*) who attest to a Day of Judgment. Lastly and most significantly, Firishteh refigures epic heroes such as Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa as Jinn, pre-Adamic beings described in the Qur'ān. Rather than reject the historical claims of the *Mahabharata* outright, Firishteh explains competing accounts of human antiquity in a way that does not controvert accounts of genesis beginning with Adam.

By analyzing how these three maneuvers work to subsume the *Mahabharata* within an Abrahamic temporal frame, this paper highlights two divergent accounts of genesis and what they might suggest for conceptions of dynastic legitimation and courtly power. Abū al-Faḍl cites the *Mahabharata* as evidence supporting more ancient conceptions of the past, and while this imperils the enterprise of placing courts and kings within seven-thousand year chronologies, Abū al-Faḍl gestures to figures like Ja'far al-Ṣādiq and multi-Adamite theories as a way to think about longer historical cycles without supplanting Adam as the origin. Firishteh, on the other hand, acknowledges the historical claims of texts like the *Mahabharata* without admitting to the multi-Adamite theories considered apostasy among most Shī'ites. These divergent conceptions of genesis signal a more nuanced set of social and textual relationships than have been previously accounted for.¹⁰

10 Where Firishteh uses terms that index broad cultural formations such as 'ahl-i Hind,' 'Hanudān,' 'Hindiyān,' 'Hindavān,' 'Hinduvān,' and so on—which colonial translators uniformly translate as "Hindu"—I opt for 'people of Hind.'

The third section of this paper traces the colonial reception of the *Tārīkh-i Firishteh*, making a case that modern scholarship has yet to fully reconcile the erroneous readings and biases interposed by its earliest translators. Valued for its sparing prose and dispassionate account of pre-colonial India, Orientalists such as Alexander Dow, Jonathan Scott, John Briggs, Henry Miers Elliot, and John Dowson translated portions of the *Tārīkh-i Firishteh*. By taking Firishteh's Abrahamic account of the "peopling" of the Deccan as fundamentally true, both Dow and Scott saw the Introduction as a convenient surrogate to justify both colonial power as well as Biblical notions of history. For translators such as John Briggs, whose translation continues to enjoy a readership today, the *Tārīkh-i Firishteh's* account of political upheaval and dynastic ruin became a portent of British power. Neither Dow, Scott, nor Briggs translated the Introduction in its entirety, dismissing it as ultimately ahistorical and speculative compared to the rest of the text. The only full translation of the Introduction, published by John Dowson in 1875, was styled to help those who strive to "penetrate the gloom of Hindu antiquity," but numerous errors make it unreliable as a scholarly source.¹¹ By briefly sketching its colonial reception, this paper calls for greater critical engagement with the *Tārīkh-i Firishteh* in the manner scholars of Islamic history have engaged other Persian *tārīkh* works.

1 *Tārīkh* and the Geographies of Islam

As early as the fourteenth century, the wealthy courts of the Deccan plateau were a place of lucrative employment for Persian émigrés. After the Bahmanids rose against the Tughluqs in the mid-fourteenth century, the movement of courtiers between North India and the Deccan was severely compromised. With a continued need for qualified courtiers, the Bahmanids recruited directly from Iran. The over-sea migration of elite Persian bureaucrats and littérateurs continued well after the Bahmanid state fragmented into individual sultanates such as Bijapur and Ahmadnagar in the late-fifteenth century. Ghulām 'Alī Astarābādī along with his young son Muḥammad Qāsim Astarābādī (Firishteh) left Iran in the 1570s and settled at the court of Nizām Shāh in Ahmadnagar. Displaced later by an accession struggle, Firishteh fled to Bijapur in the late 1580s, where, at the request of Ibrāhīm 'Ādil Shāh II, he wrote the *Gulshān-i Ibrāhīmī*, also known as the *Tārīkh-i Firishteh*.

11 John Dowson, ed. *The History of India as told by its own Historians: The Muhammadan Period, the Posthumous Papers of the Late Sir H.M. Elliot*, (London: Trübner, 1875), 532.

As a work of dynastic history, the *Tārīkh-i Firishteh* employs themes and motifs common to the broader genre of Persian historical writing known as *tārīkh*. Two defining themes of the *tārīkh* genre that figure prominently in the *Tārīkh-i Firishteh* are the construction of regnal lineages extending to Abrahamic figures such as Adam and Noah, and the problem of reconciling conflicting chronologies within those lineages. We can see these two strategies as early as the tenth-century Samanid historian Abū 'Alī Bal'amī's Persian adaptation of Muḥammad b. Jarīr Ṭabarī's *Ta'rikh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk* from Arabic. A central strategy of the *Tārīkh-i Bal'amī* is the construction of genealogies between Samanid rulers and a pre-Islamic past. This entailed constructing a historical narrative that established the Samanid court as scions of both Abrahamic prophets as well as ancient Iranian figures.

The process of constructing dynastic lineages required seeing the past, according to Meisami, as uniquely "usable."¹² The issue of use is particularly prescient: as a genre borne from the pen of state functionaries, Persian historical writing was in the service of courtly power from its inception. In the case of the *Tārīkh-i Bal'amī*, Meisami argues that constructing lineages to include Abrahamic prophets was at the center of a broader Samanid campaign to assert an "ideologically correct version of Islamic history and doctrine" over ethnically and religiously diverse regions brought under Samanid control.¹³ As such, the *Tārīkh-i Bal'amī* can be seen as a strategy in managing "various heterodox and sectarian groups," including other Muslims who rejected Adamite regnal lineages.¹⁴ This entailed redirecting the lineages of earlier dynasties such as the Tahirids, Saffarids, and Sasanians—whose rulers claimed consanguinity with ancient Iranian figures such as Rostam, Khusraw II Parvīz, and Kayūmars, respectively—back to the prophets of Israel starting with Adam. In doing so, Bal'amī effectively linked the Sasanian court to both Iranian as well as Abrahamic figures.

The second strategy of the *Tārīkh-i Bal'amī* that figures into later *tārīkh* writing is harmonizing conflicting views on the duration of time thought to have elapsed since Adam. According to Bal'amī, Jews, Christians, and Muslims agree that no more than seven thousand years separate Adam from the Day of Judgment, but precisely how many years separate Adam from the present is a point of contention. By Bal'amī's account, "Jews claim that 4,340 years have passed from the time when Adam was put on earth to the birth of our Prophet ... Christians claim that there have been 6,313 years from Adam to

¹² Meisami, *Persian Historiography*, 11.

¹³ Meisami, *Persian Historiography*, 24.

¹⁴ The Karrāmiyya and Bāṭinī sects in particular. See Meisami, *Persian Historiography*, 24.

Muḥammad. These two numbers cannot be reconciled.”¹⁵ For Firishteh and Abū al-Faẓl, the debate widens to whether a seven-thousand year chronology is reasonable at all.

The conjunction of religious doctrine and realpolitik demands of rule in Persian historical writing engendered numerous and often creative attempts at reconciling alternative historical claims within the framework of Abrahamic time. And while these narratives responded to local conditions differently, they followed themes and strategies pioneered by early writers such as Balʿamī. The thirteenth-century historian Minhāj al-Sirāj (Jūzjānī) was the first to apply such strategies in South Asia. Displaced from Ghur during the Mongol invasion of 1227, Minhāj al-Sirāj settled in North India as a qāẓī to the Delhi Sultanate. Written after the execution of the ʿAbbasid caliph and Mongol occupation of his native Khurasan, Minhāj al-Sirāj’s *Ṭabaqāt-i Nāṣirī* marks an important stage in Indo-Persian historical writing—the genealogical methods of Balʿamī are applied to establish the Delhi Sultanate as successors of an Abrahamic lineage. Not only does this work to legitimize Sultanate rule, it also expands the geographical scope of Islam to include North India. In light of Mongol presence in his homeland, Minhāj al-Sirāj lamented that “all of the lands of Turan and the East have come under the sway of the infidel Mongols.”¹⁶ Where Khurasan became Dār al-Kufr, north India became the “focus for the people of Islam and the orbit for the possessors of faith.”¹⁷ This expanded conception of Dār al-Islām to include north India, however, would not extend to the Deccan until nearly a century later with the work of ʿAbd al-Malak ʿIṣāmī.

Writing in the wake of the forced migration of a tenth of Delhi’s population to the Deccan under Muḥammad b. Tughluq in 1327, ʿIṣāmī’s *Futūḥ al-salāṭīn* is one of the first attempts at integrating the Deccan within the ambit of a sanctified Islamic geography. Commenting on the impact of exile on both Minhāj al-Sirāj’s and ʿIṣāmī’s conception of the geographies of Islam, Richard Eaton writes:

In the mid-thirteenth century, Minhāj had juxtaposed a Khurāsān overrun by pagan Mongols with a north India understood as Dār al-Islām. A century later, however, ʿIṣāmī understood north India under Muḥammad b.

15 Translation is Elton Daniel’s. See Elton L. Daniel, “Balʿamī’s Account of Early Islamic History,” In *Culture and Memory in Medieval Islam: Essays in Honour of Wilfred Madelung*, ed. Farhad Daftary and Josef W. Meri (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), 178.

16 Translation is Richard Eaton’s. See Richard M. Eaton, “Patterns of Migration to North India and the Deccan, 1200–1700,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 33 (2007): 394.

17 Eaton, “Patterns of Migration,” 394.

Tughluq as a zone of infidelity and oppression, while the Deccan was now constructed as the natural abode of Islam.¹⁸

Together with ‘Ayn al-Dīn Bijāpūrī (d. 1393), whose lost work allegedly continued the *Ṭabaqāt-i Nāṣirī* and to which Firishteh admits his debt, ‘Iṣāmī marks an important shift in conceptions of the Deccan within the wider geographic locus of Islam. Like Firishteh some centuries later, Bal‘amī, Minhāj al-Sirāj, ‘Iṣāmī, and other chroniclers such as the Sultanate historian Baranī (d.1357) use court historical writing to negotiate matters of state and geography within the broader rubric of Abrahamic time. Unlike Bal‘amī and the issue of ancient Iranian figures, Minhāj al-Sirāj and ‘Iṣāmī make no attempt to reconcile conflicting narratives outside of Abrahamic sources. Instead, they draw from prior historians such as Ṭabarī and the Ghaznavid chronicler Bayhaqī to construct genealogies between Indo-Islamic rulers and Abrahamic prophets.

Akbar’s order in 1585 to mark the new *hijrī* millennium with a history of Islam beginning with the Ghaznavids has been seen by scholars such as Gavin Hambly and Ali Anooshahr to mark a new era of Indo-Persian historical writing.¹⁹ Late-sixteenth century histories such as those of Nizām al-Dīn Aḥmad and ‘Abd al-Qādir Badā‘ūnī, who were both at Akbar’s court, construct more ambitious and totalizing narratives that convey, in Hambly’s words, the “entire Muslim experience of conquest and state-building in India.”²⁰ In addition to collaborating on Akbar’s millennial history known as the *Tārīkh-i alfi*, Nizām al-Dīn Aḥmad wrote a chronicle of rulers seen by some to be the first concerned exclusively with the Muslim dynasts of South Asia.²¹ Where scholars such as Azfar Moin have understood Mughal claims to power in the context of charismatic authority harnessed in part through links to Timurid rulers, the extent to which court historical writing, not to mention works like the *Razmnāmeḥ*, helped facilitate those claims requires further research.²²

Abū al-Faḥr, who wrote the introduction to the Persian redaction of the *Mahabharata* known as the *Razmnāmeḥ*, tells us that the *Mahabharata* contains the “essential articles of faith (*muṭaqadāt*) for the brahmans of Hind

18 Eaton, “Patterns of Migration,” 398.

19 See *Encyclopedia Iranica*, s.v. “Ferešta, Tārīk-e” (by Gavin Hambly); and Ali Anooshahr, “Mughal Historians and the Memory of the Islamic Conquest of India,” *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 43, no. 3 (2006): 275–300.

20 *Encyclopedia Iranica*, s.v. “Ferešta, Tārīk-e” (by Gavin Hambly).

21 Anooshahr, “Mughal Historians and the Memory of the Islamic Conquest of India,” 275–300.

22 Azfar Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

(*barāhimeh-i Hind*),” and is the most voluminous (*buzurgtar*) and exhaustive (*mufaṣṣaltar*) of any book of this sect (*tāyifeh*).²³ ‘Abd al-Qādir Badā’ūnī relays the context for the authorship of the *Razmnāmeḥ* as follows: “His Majesty (Akbar) assembled some learned Hindus and gave them directions to write an explanation of the *Mahabharata*, and for several nights he himself devoted his attention to explaining the meaning to Naqīb Khān so that Khān might sketch out the gist in Persian.”²⁴ Although not styled a work of *tārīkh* per se, Abū al-Faḥl suggests the *Razmnāmeḥ* might rectify erroneous historical claims circulating among various religious groups, including Muslims. As Abū al-Faḥl writes:

Those Muslims who have not studied the pages of religious books (*kitāb-i āsmānī va dīnī*); who have not set their lesson-seeing eyes (*dīdeh-i ībrat-bīn*)²⁵ on the different histories of the age, particularly of the Scythians and people of Hind (*hindīyān*); who have not read the words of the great people of their own community like Imām Ja’far al-Ṣādiq and Ibn al-‘Arabī; and who consider the beginning of humankind to be seven thousand some-odd years ago ... because of them, the Generous-Minded One (Akbar) intended that this book demonstrate the antiquity (*qidam*) of the world and humankind.²⁶

Unlike Bal’amī, who worked under the pretext that Muslims, Jews, and Christians agreed on a seven-thousand year chronology, Abū al-Faḥl is clear in relegating this belief to philistine Muslims and other “charlatans” (*muzawvirān*). These charlatans, Abū al-Faḥl tells us, conceal the ancient books (*kitab-i avā’il*) and advice of ancient teachers (*naṣā’ih-i salaf va avā’il-i ḥukamā’*) from ignorant (*nādānī*) and impious (*bī dīyānat*) people.²⁷ The *Mahabharata*, Abū al-Faḥl implies, is one such ancient book.

In suggesting that those unfamiliar with the histories of their age read the *Mahabharata*, or the Mughal retelling of it, Abū al-Faḥl seems to see the

23 Mīr Ghiyāṣ al-Dīn ‘Alī Qazvīnī Naqīb Khān, *Mahābārāt: buzurgtarīn manẓumeh-i kuhneh-i mawjūd-i jahān beh zabān-i Sānskrit* (Tehran: Kitāb-khāneh-i Ṭahūrī, 1358/1980), 16.

24 Dowson, *The History of India as told by its own Historians*, 537.

25 Khāqānī uses the term “*dīdeh-i ībrat-bīn*” in his qasideh on the broken arches of Madā’in as a way to implore passersby to take note of the transience of political rule. The term carries didactic overtones in later Persian literature.

26 For crucial passages the Persian is included an appendix. See excerpt no. 1 (Naqīb Khān, *Mahābārāt*, 19).

27 Naqīb Khān, *Mahābārāt*, 18–19.

Mahabharata—understood as *vr̥ttānta*, or chronicle in Sanskrit—as a historical work not unlike *tārīkh*. Rather than offering a history of kings and courts bracketed between Adam and the Day of Judgment, Abū al-Faḥl suggests that the *Mahabharata* offers a more ancient account of human history. Despite its utility for curating the historical memory of charlatans and philistines, Abū al-Faḥl doubts the *Mahabharata* as a truly accurate account of the past:

Let it be clear that in the kingdoms of Hind, whether among the philosophers, ascetics, or jurists, there is much disagreement about the manner of the creation of the world. Among them, there are thirteen versions mentioned in the *Mahabharata* alone, none of which, for people of reason (*khāṭir-i taḥqīq-ṭalab*), is of the type that lends certainty to the truth-seeking mind.²⁸

Dissatisfied with the seven-thousand year chronology as well as those found in the *Mahabharata*, Abū al-Faḥl stresses the impossibility of knowing when creation truly began. Writing in two separate verses that Firishte later uses in his Introduction, Abū al-Faḥl remarks:

One cannot see the beginning of the thread of the secret of creation with insightful eyes;
Fate has not woven this thread in such a way that one can find its beginning;
Not everyone can untie the beginning of the thread of God's power.²⁹

In this old, six-doored house (the world), who can discern anything except its name?
Who can discern the essence of cosmic motion and stillness?
It is futile to think on this unfathomable talisman;
Who has seen the beginning of the world, and who has seen its end?³⁰

Although Abū al-Faḥl considers the *Mahabharata* dissatisfying to “people of reason,” that he promotes it as possible proof against certain conceptions of Abrahamic time is particularly important for understanding Firishte's subsequent engagement with the text. As Audrey Truschke has already pointed out,

28 See excerpt no. 2 (Naqīb Khān, *Mahābārat*, 20).

29 Naqīb Khān, *Mahābārat*, 20; Firishte, *Tārīkh-i Firishte*, 11.

30 Naqīb Khān, *Mahābārat*, 21; Firishte, *Tārīkh-i Firishte*, 12.

Firishteh's engagement with the *Mahabharata* is limited to the *Razmnāmeḥ*, and likely only to Abū al-Faẓl's introduction.³¹ Firishteh admits his debt to Abū al-Faẓl and Akbar's official translation, remarking that "Shaykh Abū al-Faẓl, son of Shaykh Mubārak, translated that [the *Mahabharata*] from the language of Hind to Fārsī during the time of the Jamshīd-like Pādishāh Akbar. The writer of these lines ... has recorded in its place an abstract."³² That Firishteh admits his discussion of the *Mahabharata* comes out of his reading of Abū al-Faẓl is all the more reason to assess any critique therein within the context of Abū al-Faẓl's initial provocation.

2 Refiguring the *Mahabharata*

Firishteh's strategy for reinterpreting the *Mahabharata* in service of Abrahamic time involves first citing Shī'ī *ḥadīth* to support the claim that humankind is older than seven thousand years and that such claims in the *Mahabharata* may not be incorrect. By invoking the testimony of a group of ancient brahmans who esoterically interpret the *Mahabharata* in support of the Day of Judgment and the Resurrection, Firishteh then reverts back to a seven-thousand year chronology. Finally, Firishteh argues against epic heroes such as Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa as proof of a human antiquity predating Adam. Rather than reject their antiquity outright, Firishteh reinterprets epic figures as Jinn, beings that pre-date Adam but who do not possess earthly features. In doing so, Firishteh brackets epic figures like Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa out of human history without dismissing them altogether. This allows Firishteh to reassert a chronology beginning with Adam, Noah, his sons, the people of the Deccan, and ultimately the Deccani rulers.

After reusing Abū al-Faẓl's statement about the *Mahabharata*'s thirteen conflicting accounts of history, Firishteh then uses the above verses—"One cannot see the beginning of the thread of the secret of creation with insightful eyes," et cetera—to bolster the idea that the beginning of creation is impossible to know through human faculties. To support this, Firishteh supplies an account given in one of the "authoritative books" (*kutub-i mu'tabareh*), namely, Shī'ī *ḥadīth*. Firishteh writes:

In one of the *ḥadīth* collections it has been noted that somebody asked the One who said "Ask me what is below the throne of God and what is

31 Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*.

32 Firishteh, *Tārīkh-i Firishteh*, 11.

above it?" ('Alī)—“Oh Commander of the Faithful (Amīr al-mu'minīn) ('Alī), who was there thirty-thousand years before Adam?” 'Alī answered, “Adam.” When this was repeated thirty times the questioner became quiet and hung his head. The Shāh ('Alī), who is the refuge of sanctified power (*valāyat*), said with his blessed tongue: “if you had asked me thirty thousand times who was there before Adam, I would have answered, Adam.” From this, one is able to deduce the antiquity of the world, and one cannot consider what the people of Hind say to be entirely foolish.³³

By drawing from the multi-Adamite theories of 'extremist,' or *ghulāt* sects of twelver Shī'ism, Firishteh seems to indicate that Shī'ism, albeit at its margins, can accommodate the much longer historical chronology of the *Mahabharata*. The passage itself, whose mistranslations have led scholars to read an unjustified animus on Firishteh's part (see the last section of this paper), involves a person asking Amīr al-mu'minīn (the Commander of the Faithful), a common *laqab* of 'Alī, who there was thirty thousand years before Adam. To this question, 'Alī replies that it was Adam, and before that Adam there was another, and another, and so on.

The idea of multiple Adams, while rejected in Shī'ī heresiological literature, was central to *ghulāt* sects of Shī'ites who followed the sixth Shī'ī Imām Ja'far al-Ṣādiq. The *Kitāb al-haft wa-l-aẓilla*, attributed to a disciple of Ja'far al-Ṣādiq named Al-Mufaẓẓl b. 'Umar al-Ju'fī, details numerous iterations of the multi-Adamite theory. These range from seven Adams whose lineages span fifty thousand years each, to four hundred Adams each with four-hundred thousand year cycles.³⁴ As Daniel De Smet has argued, multi-Adamite theories, while having roots in Gnostic and Manichean texts, became increasingly central among eighth- and ninth-century Shī'ites in the Umayyid city of Kufa, and were later transmitted through Ismā'īlī, Nuṣayrī, and Tayyibite groups.³⁵ The *ḥadīth* Firishteh uses, while its precise textual history is difficult to trace, likely came down through one of these later groups. This is supported by the title used in the *ḥadīth*, where 'Alī is referred to as “the One who said”—literally ‘the owner’ or the ‘author’ of the *ḥadīth* that begins—“Ask me what is below the throne of God and what is above it?” (*salūnī mā dūna al-'arsh wa-fawq al-'arsh*).³⁶ The title “*salūnī mā dūna al-'arsh wa-fawq al-'arsh*” to refer to 'Alī is

33 See excerpt no. 3 (Firishteh, *Tārikh-i Firishteh*, 12).

34 See Daniel De Smet, “Le Mythe Des Préadamites En Islam Chiite,” *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World* 6 (2018): 252–80; and Mushegh Asatryan, “An Early Shī'ī Cosmology: Kitāb al-ashbāḥ wa'l-aẓilla and its Milieu,” *Studia Islamica* 110, no. 1 (2015): 1–80.

35 De Smet, “Le Mythe Des Préadamites En Islam Chiite,” 255.

36 Firishteh, *Tārikh-i Firishteh*, 12.

used in a truncated form by *ḥadīth* narrators such as Ibn Shādhān al-Qummī as early as the eleventh century. But the form Firishteh uses can be traced to fourteenth century scholars such as Abū Saʿīd Ḥasan b. Ḥusayn Shīʿī Sabzavārī and his *Maṣābiḥ al-qulūb*, a period corresponding to the expansion of ghulatist literatures.³⁷

Abū al-Faʿl does not explicitly mention multi-Adamite theories in the introduction to his *Razmnāmeḥ*, but he refers to Jaʿfar al-Šādiq as among those writers philistines and charlatans have not read. In his *Akbarnāmeḥ*, however, Abū al-Faʿl expands on Jaʿfar al-Šādiq's septuple Adam theory as a way to understand accounts of Brahmā, whose antiquity is variously described in Vedic, epic, and Puranic literatures.³⁸ Although Firishteh acknowledges the multi-Adamite theory of the ghulatist Jaʿfar al-Šādiq traditions as a possible resolution to the question of human antiquity, he ultimately rejects this theory for one that is decidedly more conventional. In doing so, however, Firishteh does not foreclose the possibility of reconciling the *Mahabharata*'s long temporal arc within a more circumspect seven-thousand year chronology. To do so, he cites the testimony of an ancient group of brahmans who affirm the Day of Judgment and Resurrection. These brahman 'verifiers' (*muḥaqqiqān*), according to Firishteh, esoterically interpret (*taʿvīl*) statements in the *Mahabharata* to support a historical progression culminating in the Day of Judgment. As Firishteh writes:

According to the testimony of some of the ancient brahmans (*barāhimeh-i salaf*) it is understood that the world ends and that it is true that there is a Day of Judgment and Resurrection (*rūz-i ḥaṣhr va nashr*)—the verifiers (*muḥaqqiqān*) among them esoterically interpret (*taʿvīl*) these statements [in the *Mahabharata*].³⁹

As a term of high praise, the word *muḥaqqiqān* (Arabic, *al-muḥaqqiqūn*) applied to a group of brahmans raises a number of questions. In Ibn al-ʿArabī's writings, William Chittick suggests that the term is reserved for the "highest

37 Abū Saʿīd Ḥasan b. Ḥusayn Shīʿī Sabzavārī, *Maṣābiḥ al-qulūb: Sharḥ-i Fārsī-i panjāh va siḥ ḥadīth-i akhlāqī-i payāmbār-i akram* (Tehran: Daftar-i mirās-i maktūb, 1375/1956), 441.

38 Abū al-Faʿl ʿAllāmī ibn Shaykh Mubārak, *Akbarnāmeḥ* (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1887), 52. Seemingly at odds with his stance in the *Razmnāmeḥ*, Abū al-Faʿl then goes on to describe a chronology from Adam to Akbar within the standard seven thousand year frame. Having presaged Akbar's lineage with a nod to Jaʿfar al-Šādiq without explicitly disavowing him, Abū al Faʿl seems to leave room to infer Akbar as linked to the most recent Adam.

39 See excerpt no. 4 (Firishteh, *Tārīkh-i Firishteh*, 12).

category of the friends of God.”⁴⁰ The *muḥaqqiqūn*, Chittick argues, are “those friends whom Ibn al-‘Arabī considers of the highest rank—the ‘Verifiers’” who “will have verified the truth of their vision of God on every level of existence.”⁴¹ In post Ibn al-‘Arabī Sufi writing, occult masters and esotericists use the word as a self-laudatory designation. In applying the term to a group of brahmans, Firishteh seems to afford them both esteem as well as wisdom befitting the most erudite Muslim esotericists.

Although the *Mahabharata* as a whole has attracted significant commentarial activity, its sixth book, the *Bhagavadgīta*, has been a perennial touchstone of esoteric speculation for various bhakti traditions as well as for proponents of Vedānta, for whom the *Bhagavadgīta* is considered one of three foundational texts (*prasthānatrayī*). Abū al-Faḥl is clear in regarding proponents of Vedānta among the most religiously adept of his time. In the *Ā’in-i Akbarī*, for instance, Abū al-Faḥl ranks proponents of non-dualist (Advaita) Vedānta such as the sixteenth-century polymath Madhusūdana Sarasvatī on par with Sufi shaykhs such as Niẓām al-Dīn, presumably Niẓām al-Dīn Awliyā’. These thinkers of the highest order, Abū al-Faḥl tells us, are capable of perceiving “the secrets of the exoteric and esoteric world” (*asrār-i birūnī va darūnī*).⁴² Whether Firishteh agrees with Abū al-Faḥl’s ranking of Vedāntins, or who precisely he means by the brahman *muḥaqqiqān*, is difficult to say on the basis of the text itself. The import of Firishteh’s use of the term, however, is clear enough: the highest order brahman esotericists confirm the truth of Abrahamic time.

After introducing the multi-Adamite theories popular among followers of Ja’far al-Šādiq, which Abū al-Faḥl quietly endorses in both the *Razmnāmeḥ* and the *Akbarnāmeḥ*, and reinforcing the Day of Judgment on the basis of brahman ‘verifiers,’ Firishteh then makes his final and perhaps most significant attempt at reconciling the *Mahabharata* with Abrahamic time. By Firishteh’s account, the people of Hindustan (*hanudān*) consider the first person(s) to be earthly in nature (*khākī-nahād*); to have been brought into existence contemporaneously with the creation of the world (*aḡarīnash-i ‘ālam*); and to persist until the world’s destruction.

The simultaneity of world-creation and humankind poses significant problems for Firishteh’s understanding of genesis. Resistant to the ghulatist ideas mentioned above, which could explain Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa by admitting multiple Adams, Firishteh is equally unable to admit that the world and

40 William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-Arabī’s Metaphysics of Imagination*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 389.

41 Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 4.

42 Abū-l Faḥl, *Ā’in-i ‘Akbarī* (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1872), 232.

humankind came into being simultaneously and that beings such as Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa could be older than seven thousand years and yet possess qualities considered exclusive to Adam. Rather than reject Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa as fundamentally incompatible with the Qurʾān, Firishteh argues that the heroes and gods of epic literature should be thought of as Jinn, beings thought to have populated the world before Adam who are made not of earth (the proprietary material of Adam himself), but of fire and wind. As Firishteh writes:

Another belief of the people of Hind is that since the beginning of the world's creation humankind has been earthly in nature, and after [creation] they would be the same endlessly, and the world is uncreated and will never perish. But, let it not be hidden from the possessors of insight (*arbāb-i dānish va bīnish*) that from the beginning of creation [of the world], which may be approximately eight-hundred thousand years, some thousands of Adams would have appeared and returned behind the veil of concealment (*pardeh-i ikhtifā*). The Jinn son of Jinn father of Jinn, (Jān bin Jān abū al-Jān) whose account is recorded in the Qurʾān (*kalām-i ilāhi*), are the same, except they were not formed of clay; rather, some were borne from air, others from fire. Anytime a group of them disobeyed they were annihilated at the decree of the forceful, vengeful Almighty, and, another tribe [of Jinn] were brought into existence, but were not made of earth.⁴³

Here, Firishteh argues that if the material conditions for the world and humankind arose simultaneously, then one would have to acknowledge multiple Adams in order to rationalize earthly beings who existed at the creation of the world some eight-hundred thousand years ago. Dissatisfied with this proposition, Firishteh points to the pre-Adamic beings attested to in the Qurʾān. On the Jinn, the Qurʾān states: "We created man from sounding clay, from mud molded into shape, and the Jinn race, we had created before, from the fire of a scorching wind."⁴⁴ Considered to be borne of smoke-free fire (Q. 55:15), Qurʾānic exegetes such as Abū al-Futūḥ Rāzī claim the Jinn ruled the world before Adam.⁴⁵

43 See excerpt no. 5 (Firishteh, *Tārīkh-i Firishteh*, 28).

44 Q. 15:26–27; "wa al-jānn khalaqnāhu min qabli min nāri al-samūm." For more on the Jinn, see Abū Ishāq Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Thaʿlabī, *Arāʾis al-majālis fī qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā*, or "Lives of the Prophets," as Recounted by Abū Ishāq Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Thaʿlabī (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

45 See Thaʿlabī, *Arāʾis al-majālis fī qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā*, Leiden: Brill, 2002.

In the passage above, Firishteh refers to the Jinn by the title "*Jān bin Jān abū al-Jān*," which has confounded prior translators and obscured the equivalence Firishteh establishes between Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, and the Jinn. Ghiyās al-Dīn b. Humām al-Dīn al-Ḥusaynī (Khvāndamīr), historian and courtier to Bābur, explains in his general history *Ḥabīb al-siyar* how the Jinn received the title "*Jān bin Jān abū al-Jān*," which Firishteh may very well be drawing from. Khvāndamīr's description of the Jinn and their disobedience is paraphrased as follows:

Prior to Adam God created a class of beings (*khalqī*) out of fire; God gave them religion (*sharī'atī*) and aided them in his worship (*'ibādat-i khvud*); according to Ibn 'Abbās, they are called Abū al-Jinn and received the *laqab*, Jān (the Arabic plural of Jinn); still more, in the *Rawzat al-ṣafā* (*Garden of Purity*), according to Abū 'Īsa Ja'far b. Ya'qūb al-Iṣfahānī, the translator of the *Asfār-i Ādam*, they were known as 'Tārnus.' God commanded them to be obedient (*muṭī'*) and submissive (*minqād*). After some began to disobey, God sent them to hell (*dār al-bavār*) and renewed the yoke of obedience for the others.⁴⁶

The mistake that Firishteh thinks the people of Hind have made with epic heroes such as Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa is not that they predate Adam, but that they are thought to possess human qualities. It is important to keep this in mind when looking at the following passage, which Subrahmanyam, Truschke, and others have cited as evidence of Firishteh's broadly adversarial stance. In the following passage, Firishteh explicitly rejects the notion that Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa could both pre-date Adam and still possess human characteristics.

Evidently, the people of Hind (*zāhīran-i hindavān*) have considered them (the beings who predated Adam) to possess the qualities of earthly beings (*ādam-i khākī-nahād*). What speech it is, that they talk on matters of the magnitude of their bodies and the length of their lives, and the miraculous and strange deeds they attribute to Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, and so on, which are not conformable to the condition of mortals. All of this is talk and sound (*ḥarf va ṣawṭ*). If they would admit to the occasion [of such a group of beings], then they would be of the group already mentioned (the Jinn). And, before Abū al-Bashar (Adam), peace be upon him, there were no earthly people (*ādam-i khākī-nahād*).⁴⁷

46 Khvāndamīr, *Ḥabīb al-siyar* (Tehran: Kitāb-furūshi-i khayyām, 1352/1933), 13.

47 See excerpt no. 6 (Firishteh, *Tārīkh-i Firishteh*, 28).

Firishteh makes clear that it is not the existence of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa that is contestable, nor the idea that they existed long before Adam; Firishteh merely contests their having earthly qualities—size, lifespan, and human deeds. In other words, Firishteh suggests that Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa as Jinn is a more germane way to think about accounts of genesis that antedate Adam than the multi-Adamite theory Abū al-Faḥl tacitly endorses. Reading the above passage with a sensitivity to the argument set up by the ghulatist *ḥadīth* and brahman verifiers shifts the burden of critique from a community of “brahman savants,” or the people of Hind, for that matter, to include thinkers like Abū al-Faḥl who invoke the *Mahabharata* as evidence against Abrahamic notions of time.

Whether likening figures such as Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa to Jinn is original to Firishteh is difficult to say. A text attributed to the thirteenth-century Sufi Shaykh ‘Abd al-Ghanī Ṣufī called the *Mabda’-i jahān* explicitly links various gods and goddesses to Jinn, but its authorship and date of composition are dubious. As Carl Ernst explains, through a gloss of the word ‘*mārīj*’ in Qur’ān 55:15 (“And he created Jinn from fire free of smoke”), the *Mabda’-i jahān* understands Mahādeva (Śiva) to be the father of Jinn. From Mahādeva’s thigh came a Jinn name Gauri Parvatī, and the two had children, a pantheon of Jinn gods and goddesses. Ernst points out, however, that all manuscripts of this work were written quite late and may be attributed to ‘Abd al-Ghanī Ṣufī in name only.⁴⁸ Moreover, Ernst understands the *Mabda’-i jahān* to “discredit Indian religions,” whereas Firishteh’s refiguring of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa as Jinn establishes a Qur’ānic basis for their alleged antiquity.

On the issue of human antiquity, Firishteh goes on to argue that a concurrent genesis of humankind *and* the world is impossible. By claiming that the testimony of the inhabitants of Hindustan (*hinduvān*) is a “pure lie” (*maḥẓ-i durūgh*), Firishteh reasserts in no uncertain terms the seven-thousand year chronology Abū al-Faḥl suggested the *Mahabharata* might upend. As Firishteh writes:

No more than seven thousand years have passed from the time of Adam to the occasion of writing these lines. What inhabitants of Hindustan (*hinduvān*) say about more than one hundred thousand years is a pure lie. The truth is that the people of Hindustan are like other people of the habitable quarters. The possibility of human proliferation (*ma’mūrī*) is accepted on account of the existence of the children of Adam, may peace

48 Ernst, Carl W., 2016, “Mabda’-i jahān”, *PersoIndica. An Analytical Survey of Persian Works on Indian Learned Traditions*, F. Speziale—C. W. Ernst, eds., available at http://persoindica.net/work/mabda-i_jahan.

be upon him. And the description of this is that after the flood of His Majesty the Light, may peace be upon him, Nūḥ (Noah) sent by the decree of the Creator of the Earth and the Sky each of his three sons—Sām, Yāfiṣ, and Ḥām—to the edges of the inhabitable quarters and ordered them to farm.⁴⁹

Where Firishteh considers the historical presumptions of the inhabitants of Hind a “pure lie” or “talk and sound” as he does above, it is crucial to understand these statements within his broader discussion of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa cited as evidence of a history that usurps Adam, and not as a general condemnation. By arguing Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa are perfectly sensible to Qur’ānic creation-stories if understood as Jinn, Firishteh simultaneously asserts the primacy of the Qur’ān without either sanctioning the ghulatist notion of multiple Adams or dismissing the accounts of the *Mahabharata*. As a matter of further clarification, we should be careful in arguing, as Truschke does, that Abū al-Faḥl thinks “some Muslims erroneously believe that the *earth* is only seven thousand years old” (emphasis mine), when both he and Firishteh are clear in saying the disagreement is about the age of humankind.⁵⁰ Firishteh, for his part, says the world is eight-hundred thousand years old. If understood in the way Truschke suggests, then the force of the equivalence drawn between Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa as Jinn is further obscured.

As central as genesis is to the disagreement between Abū al-Faḥl and Firishteh, the above discussion raises the larger issue of regnal legitimacy and courtly power in early-modern South Asia and their relation to historical narrative. By citing the *Mahabharata* as evidence for more ancient conceptions of the past, Abū al-Faḥl imperils the enterprise of constructing dynastic histories within a seven-thousand year frame. Abū al-Faḥl works around this in the case of Mughal dynasts by tacitly endorsing Ja’far al-Šādiq and multi-Adamite theories that sanction longer genesis cycles. Firishteh, however, rejects the multi-Adamite theory for a more parsimonious but equally surprising explanation: one could admit to the chronology laid out in the *Mahabharata* by understanding any purported pre-Adamic being as Jinn. In this way, Firishteh may well have considered the *Mahabharata* a work “that must be addressed as part of the Indo-Islamic tradition,” as Truschke suggests. But insofar as the *Razmnāmeḥ* incited debates about genesis within the so-called ‘Indo-Islamic’ tradition, these debates signal a more nuanced set of social and textual relationships than those previously accounted for. As such, where Truschke concludes

49 See excerpt no. 7 (Firishteh, *Tārīkh-i Firishteh*, 29).

50 Emphasis is mine. Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, 219.

that the *Mahabharata* is “ultimately rejected in favor of a different story,” it may be more apposite to say that Firishteh refigures the *Mahabharata* in favor of the very same story Abū al-Faẓl suggested it might upend.⁵¹ By shifting the target of Firishteh’s critique away from “brahman savants” or the “Sanskritic record,” we can begin to think through what Abū al-Faẓl’s and Firishteh’s differing conceptions of genesis might suggest about their respective understanding of dynastic legitimation and courtly power, and the discursive means through which such power is asserted.

3 The *Tārīkh-i Firishteh* in the Shadows of Colonialism

The previous two sections have charted two registers of the introduction to the *Tārīkh-i Firishteh*—*tārīkh* as a mode of historical narration central to dynastic legitimation, and Abū al-Faẓl’s use of the *Mahabharata* as a way to critique Abrahamic conceptions of genesis. The remaining pages will briefly sketch the colonial reception of the *Tārīkh-i Firishteh* and the ways in which contemporary scholarship on its introduction has yet to fully reconcile the legacies of earlier translators. To do so, the *Tārīkh-i Firishteh* can be understood in the context of historical research as an agent of British imperialism. Bernhard Cohn, for instance, points to the writings of Orientalists such as Alexander Dow, the first English translator of the *Tārīkh-i Firishteh*, as essential to “historiographic modalities” that promoted historical knowledge as the “most valuable form of knowledge on which to build the colonial state.”⁵² Others have described the relationship between colonial state-building and the recovery of “native” historical knowledge, the supposed decline of which was thought to correlate to the poor governance and political instability of pre-colonial rulers.⁵³ Although a good amount of work has been done on the link between history and colonialism in South Asia, how Orientalists constructed texts like the *Tārīkh-i Firishteh* as sources of historical knowledge has been considerably less well studied.

51 Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, 221.

52 Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 5.

53 Nicholas B. Dirks, “Colonial Histories and Native Informants: Biography of an Archive,” in *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia*, ed. Carol Appadurai Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 279–313.

In 1830, two hundred years after John Milton penned a eulogy to Shakespeare, Lieutenant Colonel to the Madras Army John Briggs thought it equally fitting for Firishteh:

*What needs Ferishta, for his honor'd bones,
The labour of an age in piled stones;
Or that his hallowed relics should be laid
Under a starry pointing pyramid ...*⁵⁴

Like Milton, Briggs wrestled with the gulf between a person's literary achievements and the physical monuments commemorating their life. Lamenting the absence of "even a stone to mark the spot where [Firishteh's] mortal remains were interred,"⁵⁵ Briggs considered his translation of the *Tārīkh-i Firishteh*, completed just one year prior, a gesture of due recognition. Briggs, however, was not the first colonial scholar to lionize Firishteh. As early as 1768, Alexander Dow praised Firishteh as an author who "would do no dishonour to the best writers in the west,"⁵⁶ and a quarter century later, Jonathan Scott remarked that Firishteh was "one of the most esteemed writers of Hindoostan."⁵⁷ Their praise was not earned on the basis of literary style, which they considered to contain ornamentation "hurtful to the sense in our language,"⁵⁸ as well as poetry thought to "clog" rather than "elucidate the subject."⁵⁹ Rather, it was Firishteh's seemingly sober account of historical events that Dow and Scott considered his greatest intellectual gift. Read as a chronicle of despotic Islamic empires "founded neither upon laws, nor upon the opinions and attachments of mankind,"⁶⁰ the *Tārīkh-i Firishteh* for Orientalists like Dow and Scott strengthened the case that British rule was both historically and morally justified. "As arbitrary government can inflict the most sudden miseries," Dow remarked, "when in the hands of good men, it can administer the most expeditious relief to the subject."⁶¹

After his unpublished translation was destroyed along with his home in the last Anglo-Maratha war, John Briggs took a more circumspect view of the

54 John Briggs, "Essay on the Life and Writings of Ferishta," *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 2, no. 2 (1830): 361.

55 Briggs, "Essay on the Life and Writings of Ferishta," 361.

56 Dow, *The History of Hindostan*, ix.

57 Scott, *Ferishta's History of the Dekkan*, vi.

58 Scott, *Ferishta's History of the Dekkan*, vi.

59 Briggs, *History of the Rise of the Mohamedan Power in India*, xiv.

60 Dow, *The History of Hindostan*, xiii.

61 Dow, *The History of Hindostan*, xiv.

value of the *Tārīkh-i Firishte* to British imperialism. When he adapted Milton's poem in 1830, Briggs had begun to read Firishte's *longue durée* account of political ascendance and ruin as a possible portent of British power. "Let us not repose too confidently in the magnitude of our present power," Briggs wrote; "the perusal of the pages of Indian history will teach us a lesson we should never forget."⁶² Chief among those lessons, Briggs indicated, is the "energy" with which India's population might be "capable of exerting when smarting under injustice and oppression."⁶³ Read as a record of political catastrophe, the "pages of Indian history," Briggs implored, should be "strongly inculcated on the minds of all who are appointed to rule over that important part of the British empire; and we are, I conceive, highly indebted to Ferishte for affording us the means of doing so."⁶⁴

As has been well documented, the link between historical knowledge and colonial state-building underpinned attempts at making sense of India's pre-colonial past. Firishte's enumeration of dynasties, wars, and diplomatic activity fortified the trope, according to Dow and Scott, of pre-colonial political mismanagement and Islamic despotism. In the case of Briggs, Firishte's history signaled the need to reassess strategies of colonial rule. Although Dow, Scott, and Briggs understood the imperial implications of Firishte's history differently, they were unanimous in seeing the Introduction as out of step with the rest of the work. In the case of Dow and Scott, the reason was not due to Firishte's Abrahamic account of India's past. Indeed, both were sympathetic to Biblical notions of world history common among other Orientalists like William Jones, who, as Thomas Trautmann points out, sought to validate the Bible through his work on South Asian texts.⁶⁵ For his part, Dow insisted that "Hindoos pretend to know nothing of the flood," about which Firishte's account leaves "little room to doubt of its truth."⁶⁶ Similarly, Scott saw in Firishte "no better authority" on the etymology of the word 'Deccan,' which he agreed came from "Dekka, the son of Hind, son of Ham, the son of Noah."⁶⁷ Instead, their contention with the Introduction was Firishte's engagement with the *Mahabharata* as a source of history. As but a "historical poem" that blends a

62 Briggs, "Essay on the Life and Writings of Ferishta," 359.

63 Briggs, "Essay on the Life and Writings of Ferishta," 360.

64 Briggs, "Essay on the Life and Writings of Ferishta," 360.

65 Thomas R. Trautmann, *Aryans and British India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 48.

66 Dow, *The History of Hindostan*, 8.

67 Scott, *Ferishta's History of the Dekkan*, x.

“great deal of fable ... with a little truth,”⁶⁸ both Dow and Scott understood the *Mahabharata* to be a text that could “never satisfy the enquirer.”⁶⁹

The emergent forms of knowledge production and statecraft that Trautmann shows to motivate William Jones—Dow and Scott’s contemporary—offer a compelling framework to understand the reception of the *Tārīkh-i Firishteh* before Briggs. Framed as a project of “Mosaic ethnology” emerging from the conjunction of state-building, philology, and history, Jones’s attempt at squaring India’s ancient texts with the Bible served both British claims to power as well as Christianity’s historical versatility.⁷⁰ But where Jones torturously interpreted Vedic and epic works to serve Christian historical sensibilities, Dow and Scott found in *Firishteh* incontrovertible proof of India’s Abrahamic past.

For as deferential as Dow and Scott were to *Firishteh* on the Adamite origins of the Deccan, neither translated *Firishteh*’s Introduction. John Briggs was the first to translate this portion of *Firishteh*’s work, but, aside from noting *Firishteh*’s “rapid and imperfect account of Hindoo history previously to the Mohemedan invansion,” Briggs affords it scarcely more than a terse and highly imperfect summary.⁷¹ The introduction to *Firishteh*’s history was largely ignored until the Indologist John Dowson appended his full translation to the posthumously published papers of Henry Miers Elliot in 1875. Dowson was clear in setting out to rectify the gaping elisions in Briggs’s translation. These elisions, Dowson tells us, stemmed from Briggs’s “very low opinion of [the Introduction’s] value,” adding that “Sir H. Elliot [also] spoke very disparagingly of this part of the work.”⁷²

More accurate and thoroughgoing than Briggs’s, Dowson’s translation continues to inform scholarly work to this day. Despite its continued reference, no attempt has been made to address misleading and incorrectly translated passages, particularly where they concern *Firishteh*’s alleged admonishment of “Hindu dogmas.” Dowson based his translation on Briggs’s lithographed edition as well as a manuscript belonging to the Royal Asiatic Society. The edition consulted for this paper, published in Tehran in 2008, lists variants from six editions, including Mumbai (1832), which is based on Briggs’s manuscripts; Naval Kishore (1883); two editions from Patna; and two others from Iran. Where Dowson’s translations are explainable on the basis of variant

68 Dow, *The History of Hindostan*, viii.

69 Scott, *Ferishta’s History of the Dekkan*, x.

70 Trautmann, *Aryans and British India*, 59.

71 John Briggs, *History of the Rise of the Mohamedan Power in India*, (Calcutta: R. Cambray & Co., 1829, reprint 1910), ix.

72 John Dowson, ed., *The History of India as Told by its own Historians: The Muhammadan Period, the Posthumous Papers of the Late Sir H.M. Elliot*, (London: Trübner, 1875), 532.

readings—"according to the faulty beliefs of the Hindus" (*ʿitiqād-i [nāqīṣ-i] ahl-Hind*),⁷³ for instance—Dowson consistently overextends terms such as *ʿahl-i Hind* to entail unjustifiable religious connotations.

While some of Dowson's translations are inexplicable but innocuous—translating *ʿshakhṣī* (someone) in the *ḥadīth* mentioned earlier as a "person of false and frivolous character,"⁷⁴ a translation for which I can find no variants—others are egregiously misleading. Take for example the same *ḥadīth* just mentioned: after 'Alī conveys the possibility of a much greater human antiquity, Firishte writes, "from this, one is able to deduce the antiquity of the world, and one *cannot* consider what the Indians say to be entirely foolish" (emphasis mine) (*az ʾinjā nīz kuhniḡī-i ʿālam istinbāṭ mītavān namūd va aqvāl-i hindīyān rā maḥẓ-i turrahāt na mītavān dāst*).⁷⁵ Dowson translated this line to say "and so the age of the world cannot be ascertained, and the Hindu dogmas upon this point are sheer absurdities"—a strong yet unjustifiable condemnation.⁷⁶ Still more, where Firishte used the title "*Jān bin Jān abū al-Jān*" to refer to the totality of Jinn, Dowson understood it as the name of a single person. This is not only irreconcilable with the sentence's plural verb (*na būdeh-and*), it also led him to overlook the crucial equivalence Firishte establishes between the Jinn and epic figures, an oversight, I should add, that seems to have carried forward into modern scholarship on Firishte.⁷⁷

These examples and others contribute to continued misconceptions about both the methods and the conclusions of Firishte's Introduction. By Dowson's reading, Firishte articulates a full-throated repudiation of various 'Hindu' presuppositions about history and genesis. In doing so, Dowson reads a Muslim-Hindu dynamic into the *Tārīkh-i Firishte*, and by extension early-modern South Asian history, that is difficult to support both textually and historically. To bring sharp Hindu-Muslim binaries to our reading of Firishte, as translators from Dow to Dowson do, renders whole swaths of his Introduction inexplicable. Scholars such as Subrahmanyam and Truschke have taken a more nuanced approach to understanding the political and social entanglements of early-modern literary cultures, which has yielded important insights into the various intersections of courtly cultures and knowledge-production. On the issue of Firishte, however, the use of encounter to theorize his critique of

73 Dowson, *The History of India as told by its own Historians*, 533; Firishte, *Tārīkh-i Firishte*, 12. Variant belongs to one of two Patna editions used in the 2008 Tehran printing.

74 Dowson, *The History of India as told by its own Historians*, 533.

75 Firishte, *Tārīkh-i Firishte*, 12.

76 Dowson, *The History of India as told by its own Historians*, 534.

77 Dowson, *The History of India as told by its own Historians*, 545.

the *Mahabharata* has yet to yield a satisfactory framework to understand the contentious and misread passages dealt with in this paper.

This paper has charted a different course by reading *Firishteh* in the context of the *tārīkh* genre, for which regnal lineages extending to Adam serve notions of originary geographical entitlement as well as courtly legitimacy. In understanding Abrahamic time as the standard frame through which to construct royal histories, this paper then argued that the *Tārīkh-i Firishteh* cannot be read independently of Abū al-Faẓl's claim that the *Mahabharata* demonstrates histories antithetical to Abrahamic time. In doing so, Abū al-Faẓl not only goads certain theological mores, he also threatens the enterprise of court-historical writing. In reading *Firishteh* between these two poles of influence—Persian court-historical writing and the Mughal court—this paper has suggested that *Firishteh*'s engagement with the *Mahabharata* serves to recuperate the *tārīkh* project within standard seven-thousand year chronologies used in an overwhelming number of *tārīkh* texts. In doing so, *Firishteh* does not reject the *Mahabharata* in favor of a different story, as Truschke has suggested, nor does he “resist the seep” of brahmanical learning, like Subrahmanyam argues; rather, *Firishteh* refigures the *Mahabharata* in a bid to tell a history of Deccani kings within a temporal frame imperiled by Abū al-Faẓl's provocation. In reappraising *Firishteh* on these terms, I hope the *Tārīkh-i Firishteh* will continue to attract scholarly discussion. For a text as important as the *Tārīkh-i Firishteh*, critical and rigorous scholarship may be a more enduring and appropriate monument than a poem of Milton's.

Appendix: Persian Excerpts

- 1) “musalmānān keh awrāq-i kitāb-i āsmānī va dīnī rā nik muṭālaʿeh nakar-deh-and va dīdeh-i ʿibrat-bīn rā bar tavārīkh-i mukhtalifeh-i rūzgār az khaṭāʾīyān va hindīyān va ghayr ẓalik nagushūdeh-and bal sukhanān-i buzurgān-i millat-i khwod rā miṣl imām jaʿfar-i ṣādiq va ibn ʿarabī va ghayruhumā na khwāndeh-and ibtidāy-i ādamiyān rā haft hazār sāl va chīzī mīdānand va īn ḥaqāyiq-i ʿulūm va daqāyiq-i fuhūm keh dar miyān-i ṭavāyif-i ʿālam mashhūr va mazkūr ast az natāyij-i afkār-i mardum haft hazār sāl mīshumurand binābar ān khāṭir-i fayyāz bar ān shud keh īn kitāb rā keh mutaẓammin-i bayān kuhnaḡ-i ʿālam va ʿālamīyān bil mutaṣaddī qīdam-i jahān va jahānīyān ast” (Naqīb Khān, *Mahābārat*, 19).
- 2) “makhfi namānād keh dar mamālīk-i hind cheh az khānavādeh-i ḥikmat va cheh az zumreh-i riyāzat va cheh az aṣḥāb-i faqāhat dar kayfiyat-i āfarīnish-i ʿālam ikhtilāf bisyār manqūl ast az ān jumleh sizdah ṭarīq dar

kitāb-i gharā'ib ma'āb mazkūr khwāhad shud har chand dar naẓar-i inṣāf-guzīn-i istidlāl hich kudām az ān qabīl nīst keh khāṭir-i taḥqīq-ṭalab rā ẓannī bakhshad bal keh az radd va inkār qadrī bāz ārad" (Naqīb Khān, *Mahābārāt*, 20).

- 3) "va daryeki az kutub-i mu'tabareh beh naẓar āmadeh keh shakhṣī az ṣaḥīb-i salūnī mādūna al-'arsh wa fawq al-'arsh pursīd keh yā amīr al-mu'minīn pīsh az ādam beh sī hazār sāl keh būdeh ast ān ḥazrat javāb dādeh keh ādam va chūn īn ma'nī sī martabeh takrār yāft ān shakhṣ sākīt shudeh sar dar pīsh afkand shāh-i valāyat-panāh bar zabān-i mubārak āvard keh agar sī hazār bār mī pursīdī keh pīsh az ādam keh būd mīguftam ādam az īnjā nīz kuhnigī-i 'ālam istinbāṭ mītavān namūd va aqvāl-i hindīyān rā maḥẓ-i turrahāt na mītavān dāst" (Firishteh, *Tārīkh-i Firishteh*, 12).
- 4) "va az gufteh-i ba'ẓī az barāhimeh-i salaf mustafād mīgardad keh 'ālam muntahī mīshavad va rūz-i ḥashr va nashr ḥaqq ast va mudaqqiqīn va muḥaqqiqīn-i īshān īn sukhanān rā ta'vīl mīkonand" (Firishteh, *Tārīkh-i Firishteh*, 12).
- 5) "dīgar i'tiqād-i hanudān ast keh az ibtidāy-i āfarīnash-i 'ālam ādam khākī-nahād būdeh va b'ad az īn nīz ghayr al-nihāyat khwahad būd va 'ālam qadīm ast hargiz fānī nakhwāhad shud ammā bar arbāb-i dānish va bīnish makhfī namānād keh agar cheh az ibtidāy-i āfarīnīsh keh iḥtimāl-i hasht ṣad hazār sāl dārad shāyad chandīn hazār ādam beh 'arṣeh-i ẓuhūr āmadeh bāz pas dar pardeh-i ikhtifā khurāmīdeh bāshand va jān bin jān abū al-jān keh aḥvāl-i īshān dar kalām-i ilāhī nāzil gashteh az ān jumleh ast likan khākī-nahād na būdeh-and aṣl-i ba'ẓī az havā būdeh va aṣl-i ba'ẓī az nār va hargāh az qawmī nāfarmānī va sarkashī bi wuqū' anjāmīdeh bi ḥukm-i jabbār-i shadīd al-intiqām ma'dūm mīgardīdeh-and va dīgar qawmī mawjūd shud va likan nah az khāk" (Firishteh, *Tārīkh-i Firishteh*, 28).
- 6) "ẓāhīran-i hindavān ānhārā ādam-i khākī-nahād taṣawvur kardeh-and cheh sukhanānī keh dar bāb-i 'aẓm-i juṣṣeh va ṭul-i 'umr-i īshān mīguyand va kārhā-i 'ajīb va gharīb keh beh rām va lakhman va ghayreh mansūb mīsāzand muvāfiq-i bi ḥāl-i bashar nīst hameh ḥarf va ṣawt ast va dar mīzān-i 'aql vaznī na dārad va bar taqdīr-i wuqū' agar bāshand az ān qawm keh ẓikr shudeh khwāhand būd va pīsh az abū al-bashar 'alayh al-salām ādam-i khākī-nahād nabudeh" (Firishteh, *Tārīkh-i Firishteh*, 28).
- 7) "va az 'ahd-i ādam ziyādah bar haft hazār sāl tā ḥālat taḥrīr īn suṭūr nagzashteh va ān cheh hinduvān mīguyand keh az ṣad hazār beh marātib mutajāviz ast maḥẓ-i durūgh ast va taḥqīq-i ān ast keh mam-lakat-i hindūstān nīz mānand-i dīgar mamālik-i rub'-i maskūn az vujūd-i farzandān-i ādam 'alayh al-salām ṣifat-i ma'mūrī pazīrūfteh ast va sharḥ-i

in ij̄māl ān ast keh ba'd az tūfān-i ḥaẓrat-i nūḥ 'alayh al-salām har seh pīsar-i khvud sām va yāfiš va ḥām rā bi ḥukm-i khāliq-i arz va samā bi aṭrāf-i rab'-i maskūn firistād va beh kisht va kār amr farmūd" (*Firishteh, Tārikh-i Firishteh*, 29).

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