

THE LAST HINDU EMPEROR

PRITHVIRAJ CHAUHAN AND THE
INDIAN PAST 1200–2000

CYNTHIA TALBOT



establish the Chahamanas and their *agnikula* peers as different from, and superior to, other kshatriya groups.¹⁴ These various lineages that would later be regarded as Rajput jostled for power in North India between 1000 and 1200, in the vacuum left by the decline of the Imperial Pratiharas.

The most persistent competitors for territory coveted by the Chahamanas were the powerful Chalukya kings of Gujarat.¹⁵ The rivalry became fiercer during the twelfth century, particularly after the capture of Nagaur by Jaysimha Siddharaja of Gujarat in 1137; his successor, Kumarapala (r. ca. 1143–72), was also a strong ruler.¹⁶ Several Chahamanas–Chalukya intermarriages occurred in this era, as part of peace settlements no doubt; as a result, Someshvara, our hero Prithviraj III's father, was born of a Chalukya princess, and both he and Prithviraj spent much of their early lives in Gujarat.

The kings from the northwest with whom the Chahamanas also contended for power were “as powerful as the wind,” in the words of *Pr̥thvīrāja Vijaya*. Among them, “the Lord of Horses had true courage to boot, and so surpassed all others.” This is an early occurrence of the title Lord of the Horses (here, Hayapati), referring to a ruler who not only had command over an ample supply of horses but also a large force of horse-riding fighters.¹⁷ In Indic language texts, it typically referred to a king of Turkic or Central Asian background, whose men were especially skilled in cavalry warfare and had high-caliber mounts, when compared to the armies of Indian kingdoms.¹⁸ Here it most probably refers to the Ghaznavid dynasty, which reached its zenith under Mahmud (r. 998–1030), whose armies campaigned over a large area extending from western Persia well into India. Their Indian possessions became even more important after the Ghaznavids lost western Khurasan to the Seljuq Turks in the 1040s and were forced to retreat to Lahore and the Punjab.¹⁹ This last remnant of Mahmud of Ghazni's empire was seized in 1186 by Shihab al-Din Muhammad of Ghur. Hence, despite his greatness,

¹⁴ Alf Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking India's Oral and Classical Epics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 455.

¹⁵ Although historians often call this dynasty the Chaulukyas, to differentiate them from the Chalukyas of the western Deccan, I use Chalukya here because it is closer to the term used in *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso: cāluka or cālukka* (e.g. verses 19.26–28 & 19.24 in Chand Bardai, *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*, ed. Kavirav Mohansimha [Udaipur: Sahitya Sansthan, Rajasthan Vishvavidyapith, 1954]). This edition of the *Rāso* is henceforth referred to as Mohansimha *Rāso*.

¹⁶ D. Sharma, *Early Chauhan Dynasties*, pp. 52–61, 64.

¹⁷ Cynthia Talbot, “Inscribing the Other, Inscribing the Self: Hindu-Muslim Identities in Pre-Colonial India,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37, no. 4 [1995]: 708–10.

¹⁸ For a discussion of the Turkish edge in cavalry warfare as compared to the Indian use of war-elephants, see André Wink, *Al-Hind, the Making of the Indo-Islamic World*, vol. 2, *The Slave Kings and the Islamic Conquest, 11th–13th Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. 79–110.

¹⁹ Clifford Edmund Bosworth, *The Later Ghaznavids: Splendour and Decay* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), pp. 8–9.

Prthvīrāja Vijaya tells us that the Lord of Horses “had been robbed of rule in Ghazni” by the evil Gori, Shihab al-Din of Ghur.

The contrast drawn between the Ghaznavids and the Ghurids in the quoted passage is instructive: while the Lord of Horses was a powerful and courageous neighbor, the Gori (Ghuri, Ghauri) was an evil eater of foul foods and an enemy of cows. In this age of constant competition for tribute and territory, the Chahamanas had engaged in intermittent battle with the Ghaznavids for generations, just as they had with “Rajput” warriors to the east and south of their kingdom.²⁰ The Ghaznavids were clearly a familiar presence in the northern and western regions of the subcontinent, whereas the Ghurids were a destructive force that had only recently emerged on the geo-political horizon of the Chahamanas.

Ghur was a mountainous area in central Afghanistan whose people were not Turks like the Ghaznavids, but most probably of Tajik or Persian origin; the remoteness of their region meant that they were latecomers to Islam, however, beginning the process of conversion only in the eleventh century. In 1173, Ghazni was taken over by the Ghurid leader Ghiyath al-Din, who concentrated his energies on conquering territories to the west, while his brother Shihab al-Din (known as Mu’izz al-Din in Persian texts) focused instead on expansion into the Indian subcontinent. Initially, Shihab al-Din took a more southerly route, beginning with the capture of Multan in 1175, followed by an expedition into northern Gujarat in 1178 that ended with defeat at the hands of the Chalukyas. Soon thereafter, the Ghurids began pressing against the Ghaznavids in the Punjab, culminating in the seizure of Lahore in 1186. Shihab al-Din’s armies, which included many Turkish warriors, went on to seize the fort of Tabarhind in modern Haryana. The fort was retaken by Chahamanas troops and a defeat inflicted on the Ghurids in the first battle of Tarain in 1191.²¹

This first battle of Tarain is surely the military triumph commemorated in *Prthvīrāja Vijaya*, or “Prithviraj’s Victory.” The existing text is incomplete and ends well before the victorious battle with which it would have originally culminated, so we cannot be absolutely certain who the king’s opponent was on this occasion. Given the denigration of Shihab al-Din and his men, however, it is almost certain that the poem celebrated his defeat in a conflict with Prithviraj. We learn from Persian chronicles composed some decades later (and discussed shortly) that Prithviraj’s army trounced Shihab al-Din and the

²⁰ Judging from the list of accomplishments attributed to Prithviraj’s predecessors in *Prthvīrāja Vijaya*, the Chahamanas had major conflicts with the Ghaznavids in 1079, in 1118, and again in 1133, when their capital Ajmer itself was threatened (Jayanaka, *Prthvīrāja Vijaya* 5.70, 5.113, 6.1–20; D. Sharma, *Early Chauhan Dynasties*, pp. 41, 45, 49).

²¹ Peter Jackson, *The Delhi Sultanate: A Political and Military History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 5–10; Wink, *Al-Hind*, pp. 135–45.

Ghurids in 1191 at the site of Tarain. They fought again at the same place the following year, but in this second battle Shihab al-Din was successful rather than Prithviraj. Hence, *Pr̥thvīrāja Vijaya* must have been written in the short interval of time between the two encounters at Tarain.²²

Seeing Prithviraj through contemporary sources

In the last few pages I have repeatedly referred to *Pr̥thvīrāja Vijaya*, the only surviving literary text from the king's reign.²³ Much of what we know about Prithviraj's predecessors comes from *Pr̥thvīrāja Vijaya*, whose more detailed genealogy agrees quite closely with the genealogies contained in Chahamanā inscriptions.²⁴ Among the deeds narrated are the founding of Ajmer and the construction of various temples and tanks there. The text repeatedly situates the royal family in Ajmer and praises the city's beauty, as well as nearby Pushkar's holiness.

While historians have resorted to *Pr̥thvīrāja Vijaya* for details not available elsewhere, they have preferred to rely on inscriptions whenever possible in reconstructing the history of Prithviraj's era. This has been the typical practice since the early nineteenth century, partly because inscriptions are more often dated than texts. Stone inscriptions have another advantage, in that they are generally found where they were originally placed and thereby make it possible to map a dynasty's sphere of influence or a cultural practice's geographic extent. The Delhi Siwalik Pillar Inscription is a case in point, for it is one of the reasons that historians consider Prithviraj's uncle Vigharaja IV to be the greatest of the Chahamanā kings. Also known in the vernacular as Visaldev, he ruled from ca. 1152 to 1164 or 1167 CE, having been victorious in battle all the way from the Vindhya mountains in the south to the Himalayas in the north, according to his inscription. This boastful claim is not as much of an exaggeration as it might first seem, for the Ashokan pillar on which the inscription is recorded was once situated about 400 miles away from Ajmer in the Himalayan foothills.²⁵ This confirms that

²² Adding to the likelihood that *Pr̥thvīrāja Vijaya* was composed during the king's lifetime is the fact that it is quoted in a text dating from approximately 1200 (Har Bilas Sarda, *Prithviraja Vijaya: The Great Epic Poem on Prithviraja, the Last Chauhan Emperor of India* [Ajmer: Vedic Yantralaya, 1935], p. 5).

²³ For summaries of the text, see Sarda, *Prithviraja Vijaya*, pp. 6–25; and Chandra Prabha, "Pr̥thvīrājavijaya," in *Historical Mahakavyas in Sanskrit* (Delhi: Shri Bharat Bharati, 1976), pp. 148–58.

²⁴ James Morison, "Some Account of the Genealogies in the Pr̥thvīrāja-Vijaya," *Vienna Oriental Journal* 7 (1893): 188–92.

²⁵ F. Kielhorn, "Delhi Siwalik Pillar Inscriptions of Visaladeva: The Vikrama Year 1220," *Indian Antiquary* 20 (1890): 216, 219. This Ashokan pillar from Topra was relocated by Firuz Shah Tughluq in the late fourteenth century to Delhi, where it still stands.

the Chahamanas did extend their control as far north as the Himalayas, even if it was just for a short span of time.

Vigraharaja is also said to have captured both Delhi and Hansi, a strong fort on the plain between the Sutlej and Yamuna rivers, in an inscription issued by Prithviraj's father in 1170 CE; another Chahamanas inscription from 1168 is found at Hansi itself, corroborating that this fort was truly once in Chahamanas hands.²⁶ It is likely, therefore, that Vigraharaja's sovereignty was acknowledged over much of Haryana and the Delhi territory, as well as a large expanse of Rajasthan. In addition to his military successes, Vigraharaja is known for his patronage of the arts. He was most probably responsible for the construction of the building in Ajmer that was later transformed into the Adhai-din-ka-jhompra mosque, where the play about him titled *Lalita Vigraharāja* was inscribed.²⁷ Prithviraj ascended to the Ajmer throne soon after the Chahamanas reached the apex of their power under Vigraharaja IV and may have controlled an equally large territory. He had become king by 1178 CE, when he is cited as the ruler in an epigraph, although he appears to have still been a minor.²⁸

Unfortunately, inscriptions from Prithviraj's reign are relatively short in length, few in number, and were not issued by the king himself. Only seven inscriptions both mention Prithviraj and provide a date that can be assigned to this specific Chahamanas ruler, rather than one of the two earlier Prithvirajs.²⁹ These records were found in five locations, ranging from the vicinity of Ajmer to sites in Mewar and western Marwar. The most useful inscriptions for historical purposes were found outside Rajasthan, in Madanpur village on

²⁶ Akshaya Keerty Vyas, "Bijholi Rock Inscription of Chahamanas Somesvara: V.S. 1226," *Epigraphia Indica* 26 (1940–41): 95, 105; D. R. Bhandarkar, "Hansi Stone Inscription of Prithviraja [Vikram] Samvat 1224," *Indian Antiquary* 41 (1912): 17–19.

²⁷ Another Sanskrit play – composed by the king rather than a court poet – is also recorded on the walls of that structure. For a description of both works, see F. Kielhorn, "Sanskrit Plays, Partly Preserved as Inscriptions at Ajmere," *Indian Antiquary* 20 (1891): 203.

²⁸ Dasharatha Sharma believes that Prithviraj was born in 1166/67 CE (*Early Chauhan Dynasties*, p. 80), while Somani suggests a wider window of time from 1162 to 1168 (*Prithviraj Chauhan and His Times*, p. 28).

²⁹ In chronological order, they are: D. C. Sircar, "The Barla Inscription of the Time of Prithviraja III, V.S. 1234" (*Epigraphia Indica* 32 [1957–58]: 299–304); the Phalodhi Inscription of v. s. 1236 (L. P. Tessitori, "A Progress Report on the Preliminary Work done during the year 1915," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* n.s. 12 [1916]: 85–93); three inscriptions from Madanpur, one dated v.s. 1239 (Alexander Cunningham, *Report of Tours in Bundelkhand and Malwa in 1874–75 & 1876–77* [Varanasi: Indological Book House, 1966], pp. 98–100; and Alexander Cunningham, *Reports of a Tour in Bundelkhand and Rewa in 1883–84; and of a Tour in Rewa, Bundelkhand, Malwa, and Gwalior, in 1884–85* [Varanasi: Indological Book House, 1969], pp. 171–5); the Udaipur Victoria Hall Museum Inscription dated v.s. 1244 (*Archaeological Survey of India, Western Circle, Progress Report, 1906*, p. 62); and the Visalpur Inscription of v.s. 1244 (A. C. L. Carleyle, *Report of a Tour in Eastern Rajputana in 1871–72 and 1872–73* [Varanasi: Indological Book House, 1966], pp. 154–6).

the border of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh states. Madanpur is not far from Mahoba or Khajuraho, two places associated with the Chandella dynasty, and its three short inscriptions mention the defeat of Chandella king Paramardi by Chahamanas Prithviraja in 1182/83.³⁰ This war between Paramardi and Prithviraj was immortalized in the oral traditions of the Gangetic plain in the form of the Alha epic, whose main heroes are warrior-subordinates of the Chandella ruler. Despite its literary fame, Prithviraj's success over the Chandellas was ephemeral and did not lead to any annexation of territory in the Bundelkhand region.

Scholars have therefore had to turn to literature to fill in the picture of Prithviraj's career. He is referred to tangentially in *Kharataragaccha-paṭṭāvali*, a Sanskrit text containing biographies of the Kharatara lineage of Jain monks. It devotes considerable attention to a debate between two Jain leaders conducted in 1182 CE, which took place at Prithviraj's temporary encampment at Narain. Upon his return to the capital, Ajmer, Prithviraj issued a *jaya-patra* or certificate of victory to the winner Jinapati Suri, who was welcomed to Ajmer with a lavish celebration paid for by a Jain merchant.³¹ While *Kharataragaccha-paṭṭāvali* as a whole was not completed until 1336, the portion dealing with the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries was written down ca. 1250.³² Historians view this text as reliable in its details, even though it was written sometime after the events described, due to the Jain tradition's interest in historical matters.³³ We learn from *Kharataragaccha-paṭṭāvali* that Prithviraj defeated the Bhadanakas, a little-known dynasty who controlled the area around Bayana in northeastern Rajasthan, and that a peace treaty between Prithviraj and Gujarat's king Bhima was negotiated in the 1180s, suggesting that the two kingdoms had been at war previously.³⁴

It is in this context of a paucity of epigraphic and literary material from Prithviraj Chauhan's era that historians of Rajasthan have tried to mine *Prthvīrāja Vijaya* for its factual evidence, a notoriously difficult task when dealing with works in the highly formulaic *mahākāvya* genre. Furthermore, the

³⁰ Prithviraj's victory over a Paramardin is also mentioned in Merutunga's *Prabandha Cintāmaṇi*, a Sanskrit text from Gujarat dated 1304 CE.

³¹ Muni Jinavijaya, ed., *Kharataragaccha Brhadgurvāvali* (Bombay: Singhi Jain Shastra Sikshapith, 1956), pp. 25–34; also Mahopadhyay Vinayasagar, ed. and Hindi trans., *Kharataragaccha kā Itihās*, vol. 1 (Ajmer: Dada Jinadattasuri Ashtam Shatabdi Mahotsav Svagatkarini Samiti, 1959), pp. 55–75.

³² Dasharatha Sharma, "Gleanings from the Kharataragacchapaṭṭāvalī," *Indian Historical Quarterly* 26 (1950): 223, 226–7; Dasharatha Sharma, "The Kharataragaccha Paṭṭāvalī, Compiled by Jinapāla," *Indian Historical Quarterly* 11 (1935): 779–81.

³³ On Jain historical consciousness, see John E. Cort, "Genres of Jain History," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 23 (1995): 469–506. For more on *paṭṭāvalis*, see Phyllis Granoff, "Religious Biography and Clan History among the Svetambara Jains in North India," *East and West* 39, no. 1–4 (1989): 195–215.

³⁴ Jinavijaya, *Kharataragaccha*, p. 43; Vinayasagar, *Kharataragaccha*, p. 97.

existence of only one manuscript, obtained from Kashmir, suggests that *Pr̥thvīrāja Vijaya* had a limited circulation. Since the sole reference to *Pr̥thvīrāja Vijaya* in medieval literature comes in the work of another Kashmiri poet ca. 1200, the poem seems to have only circulated within the Kashmir region.³⁵ *Pr̥thvīrāja Vijaya*'s multiple connections with Kashmir explain why its authorship is usually attributed to Jayanaka, a poet mentioned in the poem's last chapter as arriving at Prithviraj's court from that region.

Since the single surviving manuscript of *Pr̥thvīrāja Vijaya* ends abruptly in the middle of the twelfth chapter, we are not sure how the narrative would have ended. In a typical courtly poem of its *mahākāvya* genre, the hero achieves a major success in battle and marries a human princess who is homologous to the Goddess of Royal Fortune. (Shihab al-Din) Ghuri figures in the tenth chapter as a major adversary of Prithviraj, while we learn that the Gujarat ruler was another opponent in the text's eleventh chapter, when Prithviraj's advisors are pleased at news of hostilities between Gujarat and the Ghurids.³⁶ Gujarat is said to have successfully repulsed a Ghurid incursion on this occasion, most probably in 1178 CE.

Pr̥thvīrāja Vijaya's eleventh chapter introduces another unfinished theme, that of Prithviraj's love for an unnamed woman residing on the banks of the Ganges, said to be an incarnation of the celestial nymph Tilottama. The poem's geographic placement of this queen-to-be has led Dasharatha Sharma, among others, to equate her with *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*'s Samyogita, whose home was in Kanauj city along the Ganges river.³⁷ It is possible that both texts allude to the same queen, but that is no reason to accept as accurate the *Rāso*'s story of *how* Prithviraj came to marry the Kanauj princess – through an armed abduction entailing much violence. A stronger correspondence between *Pr̥thvīrāja Vijaya* and *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* is found in Prithviraj's minister Kadambavasa, who plays a prominent role in both texts; his *Rāso* equivalent is called Kaymas.

These few points, plus some details on Prithviraj's ancestors, are the main political facts to be gleaned from *Pr̥thvīrāja Vijaya*, but the text is more interesting and informative when it comes to cultural attitudes towards the Muslim enemies of the Chahamanas. We have already seen that it describes Shihab al-Din as a wicked eater of cows, portrays his ambassador as alien in appearance to the point of extreme ugliness, and castigates the "Goris" for their destructive nature. At the outset of the poem, Brahma makes a plea to Vishnu

³⁵ Sarada, "Prithviraja Vijaya," pp. 3–6. The extant copy includes a commentary by Jonaraja, a Kashmiri scholar who also wrote a continuation of Kalhana's *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, the chronicle of Kashmiri history. Several manuscripts were available to Jonaraja in the mid fifteenth century, for he mentions variant readings.

³⁶ Jayanaka, *Pr̥thvīrāja Vijaya* 11.4–23.

³⁷ D. Sharma, *Early Chauhan Dynasties*, pp. 110–14.