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**Finbarr B. Flood: Objects of Translation**

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## | *Introduction*

*Contact is never pure, always about something.*

—Per Otnes, *Other-Wise: Alterity, Materiality, Mediation* (1997), 38

### | *Roots or Routes?*

In the spring of 2006, an article appeared in the *Guardian*, a liberal British newspaper, in which an Oxford historian considered the intercultural tensions afflicting contemporary Europe. The problem, the writer concluded, was not cultural difference per se but rather the effect of global mobility, a peculiarly modern inability of human subjects to stay in place or at least to abandon their cultural baggage as they migrate:

For centuries, there has been a good rule for the coexistence of civilizations. It said: “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” Globalisation has undermined that rule. Because of mass migration, peoples and their cultures are physically mixed up together. Rome is no longer Rome; it’s also Tunis, Cairo and Tirana. Birmingham is also Kashmir and the Punjab, while London is all the world.<sup>1</sup>

In both content and spirit, these sentiments resonate with Samuel P. Huntington’s idea of a contemporary “clash of civilizations,” central to which is a marked contrast between mobile modern populations and their sedentary predecessors.<sup>2</sup> Both writers presuppose a universe in which people and things once had their proper places. Geographic displacement and the cultural complications arising from it are seen as defining characteristics of modernity, a condition in which people and things are increasingly out of place.<sup>3</sup>

By contrast, the material presented in this book suggests that people and things have been mixed up for a very long time, rarely conforming to the boundaries imposed on them by modern anthropologists and historians. Rejecting any notion of a prelapsarian time when people knew their place, the book emphasizes the remarkable mobility of premodern subjects and objects, and considers the nature and effects of this mobility on the identities of both.

Shaped by colonial and postcolonial displacements, global capital, and technological innovation, the patterns and scale of modern mobility are quite different from those that marked premodern societies, in which populations were smaller and mobility was generally associated with specific socioeconomic groups. The idea of mobility is, however, intrinsic to the history and prescriptions of Islam, a religion whose year zero is measured not from the birth of the Prophet but from the migration of the nascent Muslim community from Mecca to Medina. Moreover, the duty to make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime imbues Islam with an institution that is global in its extent and impact, not least on the circulation of artistic concepts and forms. Without entailing a deterritorialized concept of identity, the need to negotiate between the local and the translocal, the lived experience of the quotidian and the ideal of the *umma*, an imagined community with a global reach, has been a distinguishing feature of Islamic cultures from their inception.<sup>4</sup>

This “double movement” is especially evident in the regions that form the subject of this book: the frontier territories between what are usually described as the Hindu and Muslim polities of South Asia. The rough contours of this amorphous region are delineated in the west by the important eastern Iranian province of Khurasan, in the east by the Ganges River, in the north by the river Oxus, and in the south by the province of Sind, which abuts the Indian Ocean. It thus includes all the territories of the modern states of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and parts of those now integrated into the republics of Iran, Turkmenistan, and India. For the sake of convenience, I will make anachronistic use of these terms, as geographic rather than narrowly political descriptors. Similarly, although in its literal sense—an interlude between high classicism and its revival during the European Renaissance—the term medieval has little relation to South Asian history, since it has entered general usage there I have deployed it alongside the no less problematic “premodern.”

Straddling regions with different topographies but entangled histories, the book that follows argues the need for a reconfiguration of premodern cultural geography, moving beyond the linear borders of the modern nation-state and the static taxonomies of modern scholarship. To this extent, it is in agreement with calls for the writing of histories that displace “civilisation-history” and its vertical emphasis on narratives of rise and fall with alternative models emphasizing horizontal dimensions of mobility.<sup>5</sup> As David Ludden put it in a recent article that called for a shift from the stasis of “civilisational” histories, with their boundaries, boundedness, and closures, to a more dynamic emphasis on networks of encounter and exchange, “the idea of civilisation necessarily (if not intentionally) indices a reading back of ‘present-national-sentiments’ into a timeless past; it thereby prevents history from working against cultural hegemonies in the present by stultifying our analysis of mobility, context, agency, contingency and change.”<sup>6</sup>

Analyses of the interlocking and overlapping economic zones and trade networks that emerged in the wake of the Mongol conquests of the thirteenth century (what is now often referred to as the thirteenth-century world system) have demonstrated the productive potential of these sorts of approaches.<sup>7</sup> However, this burgeoning of interest in premodern

global trade networks fostered by the Pax Mongolica has to some extent obscured the existence of much earlier but no less complex circuits of exchange linking the Mediterranean, Middle East, and Central and South Asia in the preceding centuries that form the chronological focus of this book.<sup>8</sup>

The chronological scope of the book stretches from the conquest of Sind by Arab armies in the early eighth century to the establishment of the Delhi sultanate in the early thirteenth. In terms of scholarship, the period is enigmatic and obscure.<sup>9</sup> This lacuna reflects not only the paucity of materials that might be used to craft the cultural history of these centuries, or the difficulties entailed in the fact that such a project would cut across national and disciplinary boundaries that have traditionally set the limits of scholarship, but also a more insistent focus on the glories of the Mughal period in South Asian historiography. Long seen as the epitome of Indo-Islamic cultural production, Mughal art and architecture has been consistently celebrated for its synthetic aesthetic qualities, in contrast to the more “hybrid” and less immediately appealing remains from other periods. As one nineteenth-century antiquarian put it: “It is only after the Mughal conquest that the Mahomedan architecture begins to be beautiful.”<sup>10</sup> Consequently, there has been a tendency when dealing with the period between 800 and 1250 in South Asia either to ignore it or see it as an undifferentiated monolith within which fragmentary monuments (and even fewer objects) subsist at random.

Despite the dearth of dedicated studies, the centuries covered by this book have occupied center stage in colonial and nationalist constructions of a past that has been cast as a perpetual confrontation between Muslim invaders and Hindu resisters, a Manichaean dyad that has structured and constrained the history of the region for almost a millennium. Within the master narratives of South Asian historiography, the pre-Mughal period unfolds as a series of iconic moments within the “Muslim” conquest of South Asia, a cultural and historical rupture that prefigures the bloody Partition of India in 1947.<sup>11</sup> The notion assumes a unity of identity and purpose among the Arab amirs of Sind in the eighth through tenth centuries, their Arabized Persian contemporaries in Afghanistan, the Ghaznavid Turks who expanded their domains as

far east as the Indus Valley in the eleventh and twelfth, and the Persianized Ghurids who succeeded them. Acting in concert across more than five centuries, these disparate agents—differentiated not only by ethnicity and language but also by intra-Muslim sectarian affiliations—effected a “slow progress of Islamic power” in India, as D. R. Bhandarkar wrote in 1930.<sup>12</sup> Conversely, in a retrojection of the values of the nation-state, the denizens of premodern South Asia have been figured as the noble citizens of “Hindu India” valiantly resisting the Muslim onslaught.

The military conquests undertaken by the sultans of Ghur from their heartlands in central and eastern Afghanistan in the 1190s (the subject of chapter 3) are usually seen as the definitive “Muslim” conquest of India, with later expansion and mopping-up operations left to the Delhi sultanate, which emerged after the collapse of the Ghurid sultanate in 602/1206.<sup>13</sup> In this teleological view of history, the exploits of the Ghurid sultan Mu‘izz or Shihab al-Din Shansabani (d. 602/1206, often referred to as Muhammad Ghori) continue and culminate a project of “Muslim” expansion begun by Muhammad ibn Qasim (d. 95/714), the Arab general who conquered Sind several hundred years earlier. As the historian A.B.L. Awasthi put it, “The Turkish conquest of India began with the Arab conquest of Sind.”<sup>14</sup> The notion would be farcical had it not proven so tenacious in scholarship and its ramifications in the politics of the present so deadly.<sup>15</sup>

Like most teleologies, these scenarios operate through a collapse of all possible identities into a single monolithic identification, producing as singular, static, and undifferentiated what was often multiple, protean, and highly contested.<sup>16</sup> In an attempt to deconstruct these monoliths, the book traces dynamic patterns of engagement between Hindus and Muslims over several centuries, emphasizing relations rather than essences, “routes rather than roots” to borrow an evocative phrase from the anthropologist James Clifford. Focusing on practices of circulation, displacement, and translation, it aims to demonstrate the contingent and unstable nature of premodern identity. The “Hindu-Muslim” of my subtitle is therefore framed within quotation marks, not only to suggest that sectarian categories of identity are inadequate to the task of representing the phenomena that form my subject, but to call into question the inherent stability

of these very identities. My approach is close in spirit to that of Clifford, who questions the dichotomy between “absorption by the other *or* resistance to the other” that structures many accounts of culture contact, posing a question that is central to my own undertaking: “Yet what if identity is conceived not as [a] boundary to be maintained but as a nexus of relations and transactions actively engaging a subject? The story or stories of interaction must then be more complex, less linear and teleological.”<sup>17</sup>

In fact, despite the conventional rhetoric that they employ, medieval Indic inscriptions and texts are more sensitive to ethnic, historical, and regional differences among the Muslims than is modern historiography, generally preferring ethnic or regional appellations to religious categories; it is only in the thirteenth century that one begins to find references to Persians or Turks as *Musalamāna*.<sup>18</sup>

Earlier terms range from those based on caste status and ritual impurity (the ubiquitous *Mleccha*, foreigner) to ethnic labels such as *Yavana* (Greek), *Pārasika* (Persian or Parsi), and *Tājika* (Arab or Persian), a term first applied to the Arabs of Sind in the eighth century.<sup>19</sup> However reductive, the terminology of alterity was not undifferentiated; on the contrary, it was sensitive to shifts in the constitution of military and political authority. From the tenth century, *Turuška* (Turk) became more common, reflecting the ascendancy of Turkic dynasties in the central Islamic lands and eastern Islamic world.<sup>20</sup> More specific terms found in the eleventh and twelfth centuries include *Garjaṇa* (and variants such as *garjaṇaka* and *garjaṇeśha*) or *Garjaṇikādhirāja*, and *Hammīra*, generic terms for Muslim kings derived from Ghazni and the Arabic *amīr* (commander) respectively.<sup>21</sup>

That ethnicity was constructed (at least in part) on the basis of contingencies such as custom is suggested by the use of *Turuška* to designate those who were neither Turks nor Muslims but who adopted some of their ways. The *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, a twelfth-century Kashmiri royal chronicle, refers to King Harsha (r. 1089–1111) as a *rājaturuška* (Turk king) on account of his fondness for Turkic dress and women and occasional bouts of violent image destruction.<sup>22</sup> Once again this suggests that while categories of identity were by definition relational and often oppositional; they were not necessarily immutable. As we shall see

in the final chapter, *Hammīra*, a Sanskritized Arabic term that denoted the Turko-Persian sultans who battled with the Rajput dynasties of north India could, in time, be transformed into a proper name born by the last scions of those same “Hindu” dynasties.

Even the textual sources in which the most radical assertions of alterity are inscribed provide occasional glimpses of human agents who seem curiously impervious to the absolute boundaries between “Hindu” and “Muslim” identities and polities that are axiomatic to modern frontier historiography. Among those that we will encounter in chapters 1 and 2 are Muhammad ibn Shahriyar from Siraf, a mercantile city in the Persian Gulf, who administered a port city on the Konkan coast of western India in the name of the Rashtrakuta rajahs, granting permission in his name for the construction of Hindu temples and monasteries, and Tilak, a free Hindu from Kashmir who sought his fortune as a translator at the court of the Ghaznavid sultan Mas‘ud I (r. 422–32/1031–41) and rose to become a celebrated commander of the Ghaznavid armies, infamous in South Asian historiography for pillaging northern India.

As this suggests, even the armies through which “Muslim” or “Hindu” victories were achieved were often heterogeneous congeries of different ethnicities and faiths. War is not, therefore, always inimical to the promotion of cosmopolitan identities. On the contrary, it can unite men of different ethnicities and faiths (often against their coreligionists) and engender new patterns of circulation. It follows that to emphasize the historical importance of transregional circulation and transcultural communication is to deny neither the existence nor the perception and representation of cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious difference. Recent research has in fact highlighted the importance of frontier contacts for the formation or consolidation of ethnic identities in premodern South Asia, a reminder that rather than being opposed to identity, difference may in fact be central to its construction.<sup>23</sup> The historical formation and transformation of identity through such encounters also underlines that difference was not a constant (except perhaps in the rarefied world of normative rhetoric) but rather was dynamic in its emphases, contingent in its expression, and variable in its meaning.

The entangled histories of contact, conquest, and

cosmopolitanism undermine, however, any suggestion that medieval encounters along the shifting frontier between what the Arabic and Persian sources refer to as the *dār al-Islām* (house of Islam, the lands under the control of Muslim rulers) and the *dār al-ḥarb* (house of war) led to the embrace or emergence of a medieval “multiculturalism.” With its assumption of reified (and frequently singular) identities, the concept of multiculturalism fails to do justice to the complex and fluid notions of identity that characterize the highly mobile artisans, merchants, and political elites who form the subjects of this book. Equally, however attractive they may be, romanticizing models such as *Convivencia* (cohabitation, a term that has emerged to describe the coexistence of Christians, Jews, and Muslims in medieval Spain) have a tendency to flatten the contours in what were evidently complex, dynamic, and often rapidly changing landscapes, casting premodern societies as the inverse of our own antic cosmopolitan dystopias.<sup>24</sup>

In his observations on this period, the historian Shahid Amin has rightly emphasized the dangers of emphasizing either “Turkiana (the Sword of Islam)” over “Sufiana (the gentle ways of the Islamic mystics),” or “syncretism *sans* conflict.”<sup>25</sup> I am not therefore seeking to reconstitute a “Convivencia on the Ganges.” Neither do I intend to romanticize syncretism (itself a problematic model) or to replace a dystopian narrative with a more upbeat utopian alternative. Rather, my aim is to explore and historicize the dialectic between alterity and identity, continuity and change, confrontation and co-option that shaped transcultural encounters and the ways in which these conditioned and were conditioned in their turn by diplomatic, martial, and mercantile exchange. Past studies of this period have focused on the displacements that accompanied these phenomena as forms of cultural violence. Here I want to emphasize the violence imposed on the past by our own attempts to purify and stratify it in reproduction, while foregrounding the acts of communication and cooperation that accompanied the movement of premodern subjects and objects, and the transformations that they wrought in their turn.

Of course, at one level to highlight the abundant if scattered evidence for the sorts of communicative practices and social mobility that undermine the absolutism of “Indic” and “Islamic” as oppositional cat-

egories is to make a rather banal claim, anomalous only within the highly politicized and polarized discourses of modern historiography. As Sheldon Pollock reminds us, “there exist no cultural agents who are not always-already transcultured”; consequently, “the cultural materials being transferred are *already hybrid themselves*; and like the transmitter the receiver culture too is something always in process and not a thing with an essence. ‘Transculturation,’ accordingly, turns out to be a misnomer, since it is the real and permanent condition of all cultural life.”<sup>26</sup> This is indeed true of the *longue durée*, and goes a long way toward explaining why aspects of premodern culture that seem remarkable to a modern observer often went unremarked by medieval observers, to whom they may not have been manifest in the same way, if at all.

However, while acknowledging the danger of reifying dynamic and heterogeneous cultural systems, one needs to consider not just process but event. In particular, one needs to be cognizant of the way in which sudden shifts in established sociopolitical orders can produce new patterns of circulation and contact or the preconditions for established patterns of encounter and exchange to undergo radical transformations of intensity or scale. As James Clifford notes in *Routes*, his recent book dealing with issues of travel and translation in our own era of globalization and transnationalism: “Contact approaches presuppose not sociocultural wholes subsequently brought into relationship, but rather systems already constituted relationally, entering new situations through historical processes of displacement.”<sup>27</sup> Despite its focus on the *longue durée*, much of this book is concerned with periods of cultural shift and historical displacement, moments when the rise of powerful regional dynasties or the eastward expansion of ambitious amirs, governors, and sultans reconfigured the political landscape of eastern Iran and South Asia, providing increased opportunities for transregional mobility.

To highlight the heterogeneous nature of all cultural forms and practices is, moreover, to say little about their potential commensurability. While medieval Persian is (like its modern counterpart) marked by the ubiquitous presence of Arabic loanwords, reflecting a long history of engagement between different ethnic and linguistic groups within the Islamic world, the existence of such loanwords does not erase

the significant differences between these two languages (which belong to different linguistic families) and the consequent need for translation to mediate between them in specific historical situations. In the words of one translation theorist, “the mongrelization of languages occurs because their ‘interiors’ and ‘exteriors’ are separated by porous, elastic membranes and not by rigid walls; [but] despite such a permeability of boundaries, each language heuristically retains its ‘identity’ in relation to other languages.”<sup>28</sup> The metaphor of permeability or porosity employed here has sometimes been used in analyses of Indo-Islamic cultural forms.<sup>29</sup> Its mechanistic and deterministic overtones occlude, however, questions of agency that are central to understanding the sorts of negotiations that produced these forms both materially and ontologically.

There are similar problems with the biological metaphor of hybridity, although this too has frequently been used to explain the anomalous aggregation of apparently discrete “Hindu” and “Muslim” cultural forms. Metaphors of hybridity presuppose (if not produce) “pure” original or parent cultures, betraying with their roots in nineteenth-century scientific discourses on race, within which culture was a sign or symptom and cultural mixing (like racial miscegenation) was generally frowned on as an uneasy, unnatural, and unstable state of affairs.<sup>30</sup> The alternative model of syncretism is no less redolent of an essential purity to which the syncretic acts as foil, although its genealogy is closely tied to questions of religious practice, shifting the emphasis more decisively from race to culture.<sup>31</sup> In addition, we have to recognize the inevitable privileging of hybridity in product (a tangible index) rather than facture or process, which is less immediately accessible to modern historians.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, as we shall see in chapter 5, there may be specific circumstances in which hybridity is a useful category of analysis, but they raise complex questions about artistic style and premodern visual cognition.<sup>33</sup>

#### | *Networks, Translation, and Transculturation*

Some twenty years ago, the historian Peter Hardy described the refraction of northern Indian culture through the lens of medieval Arabic and Persian histo-

ries as offering “an account of how two people from different worlds of experience were struggling to find a mutually intelligible language.” He began his remarks with an inspired choice of quotation from Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*, which neatly encapsulates the relationship between agency, power, and the construction of meaning in any intersubjective dialogue:

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”  
“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”  
“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”<sup>34</sup>

The topsy-turvy quality that Hardy evokes is exemplified in the Arabic writings of al-Biruni (d. 439/1048), who lived much of his life in what today is Afghanistan, and whose substantial work on Indian culture and religion, the *Kitāb fi taḥqīq ma li’l-Hind* (Book of Inquiry into India), is among the earliest and most remarkable testimonies to the encounter between premodern Indic and Persianate elites. Although al-Biruni’s stated intention in writing is to enable an intercultural dialogue, his text oscillates between the assertion and disavowal of alterity.<sup>35</sup> On the one hand, the Pandavas, the protagonists of the *Mahābhārata*, are compared to the heroes of the *Shāhnāma* (Book of Kings), the Persian “national” epic.<sup>36</sup> On the other, the cultural codes governing the conduct of Indians are presented as the inverse of those with which his readers were familiar. Referring, for example, to an Indian penchant for using turbans as trousers (a reference to the wound Indian loincloth or *dhoti*), al-Biruni writes:

Many Hindu customs differ from those of our country and of our time to such a degree as to appear to us simply monstrous. One might almost think that they had intentionally changed them into the opposite, for our customs do not resemble theirs, but are the very reverse; and if ever a custom of theirs resembles one of ours, it has certainly just the opposite meaning.<sup>37</sup>

This was not the whole story, however. Neither the assertion of difference nor the struggle to control or

determine meaning precluded intercultural dialogue. On the contrary, whether in the Mediterranean, Iran, or South Asia, they were often central to it. In a plea for enhanced contacts between Byzantium and the Muslim Arab rulers of Crete, for example, Nicholas I, the Christian patriarch of Constantinople (912–25), acknowledges differences “in lives, habits and religion,” even as al-Biruni insists that the Indians “differ from us in every respect, many a subject appearing intricate and obscure which would be perfectly clear if there were more connection between us.”<sup>38</sup> However, the text in which this sentiment is inscribed is itself a testimony to the construction of meaning across ethnic, linguistic, and religious boundaries: in writing what is perhaps the most empathetic and sophisticated premodern evaluation of Indian cultural and religious practices ever written by a Muslim, al-Biruni was himself dependent on translated Sanskrit texts and Indian scholars for his information.

Translation is in fact central to the content and context of one of the most popular story cycles of medieval Islam, *Kalīla wa Dimna*, a series of animal fables whose origins lie in the *Panchatantra*, a Sanskrit work on statecraft believed to have been first committed to writing by a Kashmiri scribe sometime around AD 300. The fables reached Iran in the sixth century through the medium of Pahlavi or Middle Persian, and were translated into Arabic by the eighth. From the thirteenth century onward, numerous illustrated copies survive from Egypt, Iran, and Syria, attesting to their popularity; some of the illustrations in these texts are based on those created in India more than a millennium earlier.<sup>39</sup>

The tales begin with a self-conscious celebration of the role of translation in their own dissemination through the agency of the court physician Burzuya. In the opening story, Burzuya is sent to India by the Sasanian ruler Khusrau Anushirvan (r. 531–79) to seek out and bring back to Iran works of Indian wisdom that are hidden in the library of an unnamed Indian king. With the help of a native informant, an Indian sage, Burzuya gains access to the desired texts and, laboring night and day, translates the *Panchatantra* and other manuscripts from Sanskrit into Pahlavi, the language of the Iranian world at this time.

Foregrounding translation as a mode of facilitat-

ing communication between premodern elites, the tale of the Persian physician and the Indian text can be considered paradigmatic of the encounters that form the subject of this book. The deceptively simple tale of Burzuya entails a number of paradoxes, highlighting the ambivalences and ambiguities that often characterized transcultural exchanges. In the first place, the value of the desired texts is related not only to their content but also to their foreignness, to the long and dangerous voyage that their acquisition necessitated. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the texts acquired from India and other lands by the Sasanian kings of Iran were reportedly deposited in the Royal Treasury along with more material riches.<sup>40</sup>

The value ascribed to the texts was equally a product of the chain of transmission through which they circulated westward. Writing in Spain, at the opposite end of the known world, around 1050, the Arab scholar Sa'id al-Andalusi lists the work (one of "noble purpose and great practical worth") among the many great legacies of Indian learning, explaining the circuitous chain of translation by which it circulated from pre-Islamic India to medieval al-Andalus.<sup>41</sup> Many of those who worked or wrote on the text explicitly addressed the problem of translation, taking different approaches to the transformations that it inevitably wrought. In his *Book of Inquiry into India*, for example, al-Biruni laments his lack of linguistic access to the *Panchatantra*, the Sanskrit original of *Kalila wa Dimna*, noting that "it is far spread in various languages, in Persian, Hindi, and Arabic—in translations of people who are not free from the suspicion of having altered the text."<sup>42</sup> A more expansive notion of translation is found in the *Nuh Sipih* of Amir Khusrau (718/1318), where the excellence of the *Panchatantra* is said to be reflected in its translation into Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and other languages, which have manifest it in alternative forms.<sup>43</sup>

Premodern linguistic and textual translations were generally multistage endeavors often mediated by a third language and involving not two but three or more agents. Thus, as Amir Khusrau suggests, the translations that facilitated the transmission of *Kalila wa Dimna* were themselves complex and multiple, the passage from Sanskrit to English (and other European languages) being mediated by Pahlavi, Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin.<sup>44</sup> The first Arabic translation was

commissioned by the founder of Baghdad, the 'Abbasid caliph al-Mansur (d. 158/775), one of a number of translations from Greek, Pahlavi, and (more rarely) Sanskrit undertaken at the 'Abbasid court.<sup>45</sup> Truth being stranger than fiction, around 800 the vizier of the 'Abbasid caliph, Yahya ibn Khalid al-Barmaki (whose family were Buddhist converts from north-eastern Iran), sent a scholar from Baghdad to India to gather medicinal herbs and knowledge about Indian religions. Translated and transcribed, this information served (directly or indirectly) as a source for numerous later writers on India.<sup>46</sup>

The 'Abbasid caliphs modeled much of their court culture on that of the Sasanian kings whose territories they had inherited, and the 'Abbasid mission to India may have been undertaken in imitation of Burzuya's voyage, reenacting Anushirvan's appropriation of Indian texts through translation.<sup>47</sup> The commission of translations reiterated the original patronage of the Indian king, creating a common bond rooted in the etiquette and rituals of kingship. Indeed, the preface to the greatest Persian royal epic, the *Shāhnāma* or Book of Kings (written in 346/957), explicitly invokes Anushirvan's acquisition of the *Panchatantra*, citing the commissioning of this and other texts (including the Indian epic the *Rāmāyāṇa*) by an Indian king and their later translation at the Sasanian and 'Abbasid courts as appropriate ways for royal patrons to perpetuate their memories.<sup>48</sup> Further associations between India, translation, and the self-fashioning of Persian elites are suggested by the fact that the best-known Persian translation of *Kalila wa Dimna* was undertaken at the court of the Ghaznavid sultan Bahram Shah (d. 546/1152), whose territories included parts of western India. Nasr Allah Munshi, the Ghaznavid translator, emphasizes both the Indian origins of the text and the Indian victories of his patron, whose territories are said to have extended from Isfahan in central Iran to the Ganges.<sup>49</sup>

The production of a Persian translation reflects internal developments that were reshaping the cultural and political geography of the eastern Islamic lands during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and which were to have significant implications for South Asia. These include the rise of regional courts, who sponsored the production of vernacular literatures written in New Persian (rather than the lingua franca of Arabic)

and the concomitant appearance of local (rather than universal) histories.<sup>50</sup> The rise of Persian as a court language offers interesting parallels for contemporaneous shifts in linguistic usage in South Asia, where, around the beginning of the second millennium CE, vernacular literary codes and forms began to replace the more translocal Sanskritic forms, which South Asian elites had favored from the first few centuries of the Christian era.<sup>51</sup> The simultaneous production of vernacular translations of *Kalila wa Dimna* and *Panchatantra* in both Spain and southern India in the period between 1000 and 1250 has been noted, but the more relevant appearance of the first Persian translation of the text in northwestern India around 1150 has gone largely unremarked.<sup>52</sup>

With their ability to move through and beyond the limits of political dominion or physical topography, the peregrinations of *Kalila wa Dimna* and the human agents who effected its transmission exemplify the mobility of routes and networks in contrast to the fixities of roots and territories. First applied to the history of South Asia fifty years ago, the notion of networks has gained currency in our own era of global mobility.<sup>53</sup> The sociologist Bruno Latour explains its utility in the following way: “More supple than the notion of system, more historical than the notion of structure, more empirical than the notion of complexity, the idea of network is the Ariadne’s thread of these interwoven stories.” Such a thread “would allow us to pass with continuity from the local to the global, from the human to the nonhuman. It is the thread of networks of practices and instruments, of documents and translations.” As this suggests, for Latour, networks are closely related to practices of translation and hybridization and opposed to strategies of disaggregation or purification that correspond to what he calls “the modern critical stance.”<sup>54</sup>

Latour’s interest in translation as a cultural problematic reflects a “translation turn” in the social sciences over the past decades, which has extended the purview of translation from the strictly linguistic to other fields of cultural production, embracing translation as both an explanatory metaphor and a dynamic practice through which the circulation, mediation, reception, and transformation of distinct cultural forms and practices is effected.<sup>55</sup> While acknowledging that translation is an activity that occurs not only between

but within cultures (“a mediation between two already constituting worlds”), postcolonial theorists have, for example, sought to theorize the limits and nature of cultural translation and the way in which it facilitates the emergence of new cultural forms.<sup>56</sup> In his work on postcolonial diasporas, for example, Homi Bhabha writes of a “third space” emerging from the interface between hegemonic and subordinate or marginalized cultural forms, the dialectical tensions between alterity and assimilation. This is an arena within which difference is negotiated, through the appropriation, translation, and rehistoricization of cultural signs and their associated meanings, a process that contributes to the emergence of new hybrid identities.<sup>57</sup>

These theoretical approaches have been developed in relation to modern colonial and postcolonial cultures, with the result that historians of premodernity have been slow to appreciate and exploit their implications. Nevertheless, studies of premodern South Asia have not been immune to the “translation turn” that underlies their development. The historian Richard Eaton discusses, for example, the “translation” of Islam into India, a process that necessitated “a broader conception of translation” than word-for-word rendering of Arabic sacred texts into Indian vernacular languages.<sup>58</sup> Extending the idea to material culture, Sheldon Pollock has noted that South Asian coins, monuments, and texts of the eleventh to fourteenth century “demonstrate a sustained and largely successful effort at intercultural translation.”<sup>59</sup> Working in the Deccan region of south-central India, Phillip Wagoner has adumbrated the dynamics of these processes, demonstrating the operation of a “cultural hermeneutic” not confined to the realm of spoken communication and its textual traces, but which also pervaded material, performative, and visual aspects of cultural production, and the various “languages” that they employed.<sup>60</sup>

If Bhabha’s concept of the intercultural (emblemized in his neologism the “third space,” which oscillates between process and place) has been criticized for its nominalism, for its reduction of complex social practices to textual representations,<sup>61</sup> these studies remind us of Jonathan Hay’s observation that “*contact between cultures* always brings us back to the geographical transfer of makers, objects or images.”<sup>62</sup> In an essay on objects as signs, John Dixon Hunt sees the hermeneutical or interpretive strategies associated

with such transfers as a series of translations, which include the work of the historian him- or herself:

Is it not more useful to think of teapots and other objects as signs? . . . The study of objects, like discourse, would then focus on a series of translations. And the questions would concern, first, how speakers . . . encode their messages, with certain goals, within given linguistic and other cultural contexts . . . and, second, how hearers decode (in the case of objects this could be a user or a later historian) within different schemas, in fresh contexts that involve both pragmatic and intellectual control. In both encoding and decoding there is an act of translation, finding in one “language” adequate terms to give a reliable account of something in another.<sup>63</sup>

Adopting such a framework, the book that follows also draws attention to the relationship between strategies of translation associated with the circulation of objects and processes of *transculturation*. Coined by the anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, whose work on the sugar and tobacco cultures of postcolonial Cuba is of particular significance for its insistence on the centrality of objects and the practices associated with them, the term *transculturation* denotes a complex process of transformation unfolding through extended contact between cultures. Although Ortiz clearly saw this as a unidirectional process that entailed an initial loss (a “deculturation” that prepares the ground for “neoculturation”), *transculturation* has gained currency as a term that emphasizes the multidirectional nature of exchange.<sup>64</sup> Like the medieval French *trastornée*, with its connotations of a simultaneous movement across and within, this notion of transculturation acknowledges that cultural formations are always already hybrid and in process, so that translation is a dynamic activity that takes place both *between* and *within* cultural codes, forms, and practices.

#### | *Things and Texts*

This dynamic aspect of translation confounds any attempt to draw hard-and-fast boundaries between cultural formations. The point is eloquently made by the

opening image in a fourteenth-century manuscript of *Kalila wa Dimna* probably produced in Syria (fig. 1). A rather conventional inscription of difference on the bodies of the chief protagonists, Burzuya and the anonymous Indian sage—the latter darker of skin, longer of hair, and scantier of clothing than his Persian interlocutor—is subverted by the content and context of the text itself, exemplifying the ability of translation to bridge the gap between them, to domesticate the foreign. Appreciating this depends, however, on a willingness to engage both media simultaneously, to read between and beyond text and image rather than privileging one over and above the other.<sup>65</sup> If, therefore, “routes not roots” and “networks not territories” are two fundamental themes of this book, a third, related concern might be characterized as “things not texts.”

Most previous approaches to the period have relied almost entirely on premodern inscriptions and texts for their narrative reconstructions of the past.<sup>66</sup> Over the past decades, increasingly sophisticated modes of analyzing such documents have been developed, which mitigate the dangers of taking the oppositional categories and rhetorical claims that proliferate within them at face value. Nevertheless, the dominance of a textual paradigm has obscured the semiotic potential of materials and materiality even as they relate to textual sources. For example, the premodern inscriptions that have been central to modern histories of South Asia are rarely read from the monuments on which they were placed but, instead, from modern printed compendia that reduce their communicative potential to semantic content, ignoring haptic and optic dimensions of inscription: the media in which they were carved, their scale and placement, and their precise relationship to the architectural forms on which they were inscribed.<sup>67</sup> This abstraction of semantic content from the material means of its articulation and reproduction illustrates the role traditionally ascribed to artifacts in the writing of medieval South Asian histories: that of props or supplements, wheeled onstage in a supporting role to bolster textualized mediations of the past.

While acknowledging the value of texts as historical documents, by placing an equal emphasis on material culture I seek to challenge their centrality to the writing of South Asian histories. The *material*

النفات منهم علم يكن بطيئاً إلى أحد منهم إلا إلى صديقه ذلك لما ورد عليه  
 وكيف فنش عقله حتى وثوبه وأطمان إليه أن قال له يوماً وهما جالسان في خلوة  
 يخادنان يا أخي ما مظهر أنك قد أوليتني معروفاً جسيماً واني جديراً سعادتك ان ترد  
 وفضاً ما جنتك وانه ليعرض لاني لا أمل الذي قدمت له هو غير ما يظهرك فقال  
 له برزوه ما أريد ان اكتمك من امرى شياً فوق ما كتمك وأعلمك في حيت لا أمر  
 وهو غير ما ترى فظهر منه لك والعامل يكفي من الرجل بالعلامات الظاهر منه من نظره  
 وإشارته بيده فيعلم سيرة نفسه وما مضى عليه قلبه قال له الهندي اني وان كنت لم اذكر



I  
 Burzuya and the Indian  
 sage, *Kalila wa Dimna*,  
 Syria(?), 1354 (Bodleian  
 Library, University of  
 Oxford, Pococke 400, fol.  
 13v).

*culture* of my book's title is a deliberately expansive term that includes coins, frescoes, modes of dress, texts, manuscripts, monumental architecture, and the more abstract but no less revealing realm of onomastics, royal titlature, and ritual practice. In my narrative there is a loose progression in chronology and scale, from objects and modes of dress to monumental architecture. Although my primary focus is on objects, at various points agricultural technology, taxation, and military tactics are also relevant to questions of material culture and cultural flows.<sup>68</sup> Casting the net broadly, I aim to highlight the ability of artifacts to provide fresh insights and novel perspectives when treated as potentially complementary (rather than supplementary) sources of historical information. I have avoided referring to these artifacts as "art objects," less from any imagined aesthetic inadequacy than from the (perhaps conservative) assumption that art objects are generally ends rather than means. Some of the objects that will be discussed here—among them frescoes, textiles, and temples—would no doubt gain admittance to the exclusive club of objets d'art; others intended to mediate more quotidian interactions would undoubtedly not. Both are, however, equally informative for histories of circulation and consumption.

I am aware of the paradox inherent in adopting linguistic models for a book that champions the value of material culture. I am also aware that, in doing so, I am to some extent swimming against the tide. The dominance of a linguistic model in the social sciences has sustained recent criticism from a number of scholars, among them the art historian David Summers, who has argued that whereas language is conventional, works of art "are embodied under certain *conditions*, and these are only secondarily *conventional*." Summers argues that when it comes to works of art (and by extension any artifact), "what parallels 'grammar and syntax' is the construction of real and virtual space consequent to patterns of human use."<sup>69</sup> That is, unlike the words and sentences of conventional languages, created artifacts have concrete material presence and real spatial relations.

Curiously, however, since it is embedded in what is in effect a universal history of art, Summers' critique of the inadequacy of linguistic models to account for material things is firmly rooted in a Euro-American

milieu. It ignores, for example, conceptions of the effect and meaning of Sanskrit words as substantive rather than representational, imbued with the ability to alter physical substance and thus produce radical spatial effects.<sup>70</sup> This conception of language adumbrates more complex relationships between subjects, objects, words and spaces than those imagined in the post-Enlightenment ontologies that Summers takes for granted.

This observation is directly relevant to Burzuya's own tale, and to his subsequent reception when he returned to Iran with his translated treasures. As one might expect, Anushirvan's envoy received suitable recompense for his efforts in India on behalf of his royal patron, being offered all the riches of the kingdom by his king. What happened next is, from the perspective of a modern reader at least, rather surprising: "Burzuya knelt before Nushirvan and praised his king. He said that since it was the wish of his sovereign that he choose something, he would obey. The physician went to the royal wardrobe and took one of the king's robes."<sup>71</sup> Within the context of a commodity culture, Burzuya's modest choice of reward is almost incomprehensible. In the medieval Islamic world in which this tale was written and read, however, the gifting of robes constituted a metalanguage of power. Beyond material value, the robe incorporates Burzuya into the political structures of the Sasanian court, functioning as a "transactional symbol," a device through which the ruler constituted a chosen subject as a boon companion who shared in his sovereignty. Adopted, adapted, and appropriated by medieval elites, these kinds of artifacts produced networks of affinity not bounded by religious, ethnic, or linguistic identity but by possession, consumption, and display.<sup>72</sup>

The artifacts' ability to function in this way was directly related to their possession of a physical relationship (ranging from full body contact to a passing glance) with the body of the donor. Donning the transvalued apparel (often as part of a ceremonial reclothing), the recipient not only came to act on the king's authority but functioned as a notional extension of his body, part of what a modern anthropologist would call his "distributed personhood."<sup>73</sup> Burzuya's desire for his patron's castoff above all the riches of Iran thus serves as a reminder that the post-Enlightenment view of subjects as ontologically distinct from (and

prior to) the objects that they create, circulate, and consume is the product of a specific cultural attitude and is neither universal nor natural.<sup>74</sup> This recognition brings us back to Bruno Latour's definition of modernity as a perpetual tussle between practices of translation that create hybrids (of culture and nature as much as culture and culture) and strategies of purification designed to articulate and enforce the ontological distinction between humans and nonhumans that has been naturalized in many post-Enlightenment societies. By drawing attention to the mutual imbrications of animate subjects and inanimate objects, a subsidiary aim of this book is to explore the constitutive relationships between subjects, objects, and political formations, and the ways in which these relationships were implicated in processes of transculturation.<sup>75</sup>

Investigation of these phenomena has been frustrated by sectarian taxonomies institutionalized as an academic division of labor within which Indic art, history, and languages are specializations considered distinct from their "Islamic" counterparts. Essentialist categories of "Hindu" and "Muslim" identity have been projected onto all aspects of premodern cultural production, so that in the representation of the premodern past, Indic modes of architecture, dress, epigraphy, language, and literary production are necessarily opposed to their Islamic counterparts. As the historian Barbara Metcalf noted recently, should a member of the transcultural elites that moved between the "Hindu" and "Muslim" courts of premodern South Asia visit a modern museum, he would find his possessions displayed in different rooms, divided on the basis of a sectarian taxonomy that parses and stratifies the complex products of heterogeneous cultural milieus.<sup>76</sup> The impulse is equally manifest in the practice of splitting coin hoards from South Asia into tokens bearing Arabic or Sanskrit inscriptions, which are then parted to enter different patterns of modern circulation and publication. This frustrates understanding of the heterogeneous cultural milieus in which these tokens circulated but "corrects" perceived anomalies according to modern taxonomic logic.<sup>77</sup>

The past decade has in fact seen significant attempts to combine textual and material evidence in order to develop more complex paradigms for understanding the interrelationships between Muslims and non-Muslims in South Asia. These have demonstrated

that the existence of commonalities and homologues between the cultures of elites was often central to the operation of a "cultural hermeneutic," in which the material world was deeply implicated, and which this hermeneutic implicated in its turn.<sup>78</sup> They have, however, focused primarily on architecture, on Gujarat, the Deccan, and South India, and the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries, when the Delhi sultanate expanded into these regions. Despite a heavy debt to these pioneering studies, this book is the first to deal with the crucial formative period of Indo-Islamic culture, with the northern Indian context of this formation, to consider material culture in all its manifestations, and to take a transregional approach to premodern transcultural encounters.

The chapters that follow explore the mechanisms of circulation (among them looting, gifting, and trade) through which specific classes of artifacts constructed and mediated cultural boundaries, and the ways in which meaning and value were translated and transfigured through the mobility of both people and things. Ranging across dynastic, geographic, regional, and temporal categories, the emphasis is on histories of circulation, reception, and translation rather than on strictly dynastic or political history. Histories of this kind invariably risk dehistoricizing and unifying the very protean phenomena that they seek to emphasize. Responding to this danger, Patrick Manning indicates three criteria of analysis that will minimize or obviate its impact, and these criteria have informed my own approach: consideration of a wide range of interactions across a variety of cultural forms and practices (architecture, dress, music, etc.); specificity regarding the agents and criteria of cross-cultural contact; the need to be alive to both continuities and discontinuities, to shifts in the nature of cross-cultural interaction even in the same regions through time.<sup>79</sup>

Situating "thick" synchronic analyses of a wide array of cultural artifacts, encounters, and practices within a "thin" diachronic matrix that ranges over four centuries, the discussion that follows can make no claims to be comprehensive. Nevertheless, any attempt to represent complex social realities through the linear medium of text invariably entails a selective approach, unless like Borges' infamous map it aims for a one-to-one relationship between the representation and the represented. In this sense, the fragmen-

tary nature of the material evidence is both a blessing and a curse, limiting the information available but also frustrating the totalizing approach to the past to which the fixities of “Hindu” and “Muslim” identity are integral.

Chapter 1 begins on the eastern frontier of the ‘Abbasid caliphate of Baghdad during the ninth and tenth centuries. It focuses on two of the dynasties whose emergence on the eastern frontier marked a decline in the centralized authority of the caliphate: the Saffarids of Sistan (now southern Afghanistan) and the Arab amirs of Sind (now southern Pakistan). The Saffarids originally governed in the name of the ‘Abbasid caliph in Baghdad, but between 873 and 900 the brothers Ya‘qub ibn Layth (d. 265/879) and ‘Amr ibn Layth (d. 289/902) extended their control over much of Iran and the lands of the Indo-Afghan frontier, eventually going so far as to march on Baghdad itself in 262/876.<sup>80</sup> During the same period, two quasi-independent Arab amirates emerged in Sind, a region peppered with major mercantile emporia connected by sea and land to both the central Islamic lands and India. The Saffarids and Sindi amirs used gifts of Indian exotica, including looted Buddhist and Hindu icons, to negotiate their often fractious relationships with Baghdad. Conversely, the surviving material evidence from Sind highlights that region’s role as a nexus between the central lands of the Baghdad caliphate and the neighboring “Hindu” polities of India. Artifactual and textual evidence suggest that ‘Abbasid Sind was a major center of ivory and metalworking, whose importance has been overlooked until now. One reason for this neglect is that the “hybrid” products of Sindi artisans resist categorization as Indic or Islamic, posing a significant challenge to the categorical structures on which modern understandings of the past are invariably based.

Chapter 2 focuses on the circulation of items and modes of dress, and its implications for differing conceptions of the body. It builds on the discussion of Sind in chapter 1, considering the ways in which the construction of the royal body among the Arab elites of Sind was informed by contacts with their Indian neighbors. It goes on to consider the adoption of Turko-Persian modes of dress by Buddhist elites ruling the western Himalayas in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and the gifting of robes of honor by the

Turkic sultans of Ghazni to Hindu rulers that they constituted as vassals during the same period. These exchanges involved both objects and acts, raising interesting questions about the translatability of sartorial codes and ritual practices, questions that will be addressed in varying ways throughout the course of this book.

Chapter 3 deals with the decades after 1150, when the rule of the Ghaznavid sultans was eclipsed by an obscure Persianate dynasty based in the remote mountainous region of Ghur in central Afghanistan. Previously vassals of the Ghaznavids, in the last decades of the twelfth century the Ghurids established a major transregional sultanate that conjoined the former territories of various Rajput kingdoms in northern India with some of the most important cultural centers in the eastern Iranian world for the first time. Although the Ghurid polity endured only for a few short decades, its transregional character was marked by new patterns of mobility between northern India, Afghanistan, and eastern Iran. In spite of the Ghurids’ role as the “national” dynasty of Afghanistan, analysis of the material culture of the sultanate and its ability to illuminate the cultural flows that marked the period has been precluded by the remoteness of the Afghan monuments on the one hand and the negative role ascribed to “Muhammad Ghori” (sultan Mu‘izz al-Din Muhammad of Ghur) as *the* Muslim conqueror of India in South Asian historiography on the other. Attempting to remedy this neglect, chapters 3 through 5 (that is, the greater part of this book) are concerned with the architecture, coinage, ceremonial practices, and political structures of the Ghurid sultanate, and their often complex relationships with their northern Indian counterparts.

The final chapter (6) focuses on the Delhi sultanate that emerged in the three decades following the collapse of the Ghurid sultanate around 1206. In the wake of this event, India was riven by competition between the Turkic military slaves of the Ghurid sultan, with Delhi finally emerging as the major cultural and political center under the patronage of sultan Iltutmish (d. 633/1236). Although Iltutmish built on the Ghurid legacy, demographic shifts caused by developments in the wider Islamic world between roughly 1200 and 1230 are reflected in significant changes in the content and form of the extensions that he made

to the Friday Mosque of Delhi (1192 onward). Under Iltutmish, the mosque became the locus for an agglomeration of signs that sought to project the authority of the sultanate while shaping the identity of the Muslim community of northern India. The endeavor was intended to construct a genealogy for the sultanate that addressed the dialectical nature of Indian Islamic identity (the double movement referred to above), asserting a relationship with the wider Islamic world while accommodating and appropriating the signs of an Indian past.

It will be clear by now that my own conceptual framework is a bricolage of ideas drawn not only from scholarship on other premodern frontier regions (notably Anatolia, Armenia, Spain, and Sicily) but also from a myriad of disparate disciplines, including art history, anthropology, history, postcolonial studies, and linguistics. Despite my championing of material culture and its value as a historical document, implicit in my use of contemporary theoretical work is a rejection of any notion of a “return to the object” as if it were preexistent or self-subsisting.<sup>81</sup> A subsidiary aim of the book is, therefore, to contribute to a negotiation of the (often-marked) boundaries between empirically driven and theoretically informed scholarship on premodernity, while forging a dialogue between those interested in the relationships between precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial history and historiography.<sup>82</sup>

This engagement with theories of the present in a study of the past will inevitably attract criticism for privileging etic categories of explanation (those drawn from exogenous frameworks of analysis and understanding) over emic (those that would have been recognized by the actors in a given situation): in short,

for anachronism. Like the idolatry discussed in chapter 1, anachronism is a vice located in the eye of the beholder. It is closely related to the critique of politically informed practices of history writing as “interventionist.” The charge of interventionism, like that of anachronism, obscures the historicity of history, the fact that all narrative (re)constructions of the past and the methodologies that they employ are historically constituted and thus engage a past that is at once distant and “dialectically continuous with the present,” as the anthropologist Nicholas Dirks puts it.<sup>83</sup> This occlusion generally obviates any need to analyze the *content* of such histories, while effectively championing as History the preexisting or hegemonic narratives that they challenge.<sup>84</sup>

Remaining cognizant of emic explanations, our own narrative (re)constructions of historical events must of necessity be in our (etic) terms, since they are being offered not to the participants but to our contemporaries and successors.<sup>85</sup> Moreover, historical narratives are always underdetermined by the evidence on which they depend, and therefore potentially multiple.<sup>86</sup> As the central organizing trope of this study, translation has the advantage of acknowledging this, recognizing that the task of the historian is an open-ended process of negotiating the unstable relationship between past and present.<sup>87</sup> In its appropriation of approaches and concepts from a range of fields and their deployment in contexts far from those in which they may have emerged, and for which they may have been intended, my own approach enacts the phenomenon that is its subject, acknowledging that the translator is always present in and implicated by the translation.