The Global Middle Ages, Political History, and Democracy

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> The alienization of Central Asia from European, Chinese, and South Asian familiarity thereafter is both a mark of our 'modernity' and the point at which a sense of an integrated ecumene was lost. — Pamela Crossley[1]

> Accordingly, we come to the fact that at the heart of what makes history a public discipline, what must distinguish the legitimacy of its research under public sponsorship, in contrast to mere antiquarianism, are the large-scale questions. These questions are often such as historians are hesitant of facing. They cannot necessarily be answered with a completely firsthand control of all the documents involved. Yet they are the questions for whose sakes the historical profession exists. — Marshall Hodgson[2]

While political history has consumed so much attention of the historian's profession as a whole, it is if anything *underrepresented* as a topic within global and transregional history, and of the medieval period especially. It need not be so. The validity of a connected global medieval political history is amply demonstrated by the Mongol empire, whose rise certainly constitutes a major discontinuity, but which was also anticipated by centuries of close ties and interaction between an array of Afro-Eurasian states. The bifurcation of the caliphal empire in the tenth and eleventh centuries into the Fatimid and Almoravid states in the west and the Seljuq empire that spanned Iraq and Khorasan in the east coincided with the emergence of a multi-state system in East Asia, including the Song and the Liao dynasties. The Seljuqs' Qarakhanid vassals in Transoxiana would be supplanted in the early twelfth century by the Mongolic-speaking and culturally-Sinicized Qara Khitai. Founded by Yelü Dashi, a *jinshi* (Chinese civil service examination) degree holder, the Qara Khitai was a rump state of the Liao dynasty, which in 1125 was forced out of its domains in Liaodong (northern China), Manchuria, and Mongolia. Thus did two major centers of Islamicate culture, Samarqand and Bukhara, come under the dominion of a ruler recognized in

1. Pamela Kyle Crossley, *Hammer and Anvil: Nomad Rulers at the Forge of the Modern World* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2018), 3.

2. Marshall G. S. Hodgson and Edmund Burke, *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam, and World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 255.

Al-ʿUṣūr al-Wusṭā 32 (2024): 511-516

Chinese sources as an emperor, who also used the Inner Asian title, "Gürkhan."[3] Of course, transcontinental trade and diplomacy existed even earlier, under the Tang dynasty, whose capital, Chang'an, was the last refuge of the Sasanian royal family. And—critically—the whole space of interaction extended well beyond the these states.

The global history of the medieval period is most of all characterized by interactions that were not direct ones like warfare, diplomacy, or travel between distant points, but nonetheless more direct than global phenomena of antiquity like the spread of iron metallurgy or the spice trade. The Middle Ages saw the beginning of a semi-global information order: a reader of Arabic in al-Andalus could know of the existence of Korea or the names of specific Chinese cities.[4] Much remains to be understood about the cultural and political consequences of this growth of mutual cognizance by societies across the eastern hemisphere. This, I believe, is the principal challenge for global *medieval* history specifically: not simply to identify hemisphere-spanning phenomena or chains of interactions, which existed since antiquity, but the cultural and (local) political consequences of hemispheric integration and a hemispheric information order—the sinews and nerves of a connected history.

Indirect political interaction falls mainly within four categories: reverberation, which is when one state's interaction with a second affects a third that has no direct interaction with the first—for example, the defeat of the Liao leading to Qara Khitai rule over Transoxiana, noted above. The second is the spread of politically potent technologies or practices such as paper, firearms, forms of jurisprudence, or discourses of racial or religious difference. The third is interaction of non-state political actors with states that do not interact directly with each other—for example, the spread of Islam to Southeast Asia and West Africa by Muslim merchants. The fourth is the flow of information that shapes political action, such as news about Christian Mongol rulers and the continued power of China motivating European maritime ventures.[5] Since a great deal of work is being done to document the cultural and economic integration of the medieval world, attention to the political dimension of various region-hopping phenomena and their human intermediaries can provide valuable data for global political history.[6]

Pamela Crossley's 2019 monograph, *Hammer and Anvil: Nomadic Rulers at the Forge of the Modern World* addresses all of these forms of indirect interaction, as does some of the work Crossley builds on.[7] One of her arguments is that Turkic and Chinggisid political

3. Michal Biran, *The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History: Between China and the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 20, 93–94.

4. On Arabic and Chinese geographical knowledge, see Hyunhee Park, *Mapping the Chinese and Islamic Worlds: Cross-Cultural Exchange in Pre-Modern Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

5. See Abbas Hamdani, "Columbus and the Recovery of Jerusalem," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 99, no. 1 (1979): 39–48.

6. For example, the medieval literary form of romance was embraced nearly simultaneously across a wide area. This literature had a significant political dimension. See, for example, Cameron Cross, *Love at a Crux: The New Persian Romance in a Global Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2023).

7. See, for example, Lucio Biasiori and Giuseppe Marcocci, eds., *Machiavelli, Islam and the East: Reorienting the Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); David Sneath, ed.,

culture propelled a global shift towards self-legitimating, absolutist political authority, that is, imperial rule and legal authority that did not depend on ratification by a priesthood.[8] Likewise, Ayşe Zarakol, a scholar of international relations, argues that the Westphalian world order was preceded by Chinggisid, post-Chinggisid, and post-Timurid world-orders composed of dynastic great houses (one might prefer the term "Great State") rather than nation-states.[9] These Central Eurasian steppe polities may have been absolutist, but they were not autocratic: they tended to enforce aristocratic privilege against the state.[10] This post-Mongol political order was a constitutional order.[11]

One limitation of this approach is that framing global narratives around certain subcategories of political elites creates the impression of monocausality—that the Chinggisids simply conceived of and imposed the Chinggisid world order, rather than developing it within a set of constraints imposed by their interactions with subject peoples. If there is a story to tell about how Mongols generated a Chinggisid world order, there is an equally compelling story about how diverse political cultures the Mongols ruled over and *ruled through* (Turkic, Chinese, Persian, and others) built this world order through their bureaucratic and other labor.

The framework of the Persianate faces a similar limitation.[12] Both approaches (the Persianate more obviously so, but Crossley and Zarakol's Eurasianist framework too in subtler ways) essentially involve building a scholarly field around a set of textual communities that produced court histories and other elite literature—a cosmopolis being perhaps the largest form of textual community. These medieval and early modern textual communities give rise to secondary textual communities among modern scholars who build their careers around a certain body of sources. Of course, studies of particular sets of texts are the fundamental building block of many scholarly fields. But communities that have left voluminous textual records are usually elite communities. It seems to me that the political history of the medieval Middle East is wanting of narratives that integrate elite-focused perspectives with perspectives centered on sub-elites—for example, the Christian majority population in some regions of the Abbasid Caliphate and its early successor states. How

Imperial Statecraft: Political Forms and Techniques of Governance in Inner Asia, Sixth-Twentieth Centuries (Bellingham: Western Washington University Center for East Asian Studies, 2006).

8. Crossley, *Hammer and Anvil*, 296–97.

9. Ayşe Zarakol, *Before the West: The Rise and Fall of Eastern World Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Lhamsuren Munkh-Erdene, "Where Did the Mongol Empire Come From? Medieval Mongol Ideas of People, State and Empire," *Inner Asia* 13, no. 2 (2011): 211–37, at 222.

10. Christopher P. Atwood, "Titles, Appanages, Marriages, and Officials: A Comparison of Political Forms in the Zünghar and Thirteenth-Century Mongol Empires," in *Imperial Statecraft: Political Forms and Techniques of Governance in Inner Asia, Sixth-Twentieth Centuries*, ed. David Sneath, 207–43 (Bellingham: Western Washington University Center for East Asian Studies, 2006).

11. Evrim Binbaş, "Condominial Sovereignty and Condominial Messianism in the Timurid Empire: Historiographical and Numismatic Evidence." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 61, nos. 1–2 (2018): 172–202.

12. On which, see Kaveh Hemmat, "Completing the Persianate Turn." *Iranian Studies* 54, no. 3–4 (July 4, 2021): 633–46.

then do we obtain a more inclusive image of societies for which we do not have extensive documentary sources, or even accidental collections such as the Cairo Geniza? How can we translate, for example, Zarakol's elegant and ambitious *theory* of world orders into a transregional political *history*?

Globalizing medieval political history can help ameliorate to this elite myopia. Texts that cross communal boundaries are often fragmentary or isolated (lacking a rich and voluminous body of comparable texts) and reading them requires engagement with sources and fields we are less proficient with. However, they *often represent sub-elite perspectives.*[13] Intermediaries between elite communities were often people of lower social status, a phenomenon demonstrated in different ways by studies of merchant networks, Kristina Richardson's study of medieval Roma or *Ghurabāʾ*, Reyhan Durmaz's study of stories about saintly figures exchanged between Christian and Muslim communities, Xin Wen's study of diplomatic envoys (many of whom were debtors, enslaved or otherwise from humble backgrounds), and Hannah Barker's studies of the Black Sea slave trade and the "Mamluk" sultanate.[14] Study of such mediating communities and (where applicable) their texts thus achieves a kind of "history from below" (or at least, from a bit further down). Through this, let us say, more democratic approach, we can convert more narrowly philological or textual scholarship focused on ruling elites into a more fully-realized global political history. It may even enable us to see more meaningful connections between the political action of non-elite groups in different regions of the world.

Let me drive this last point further: a global medieval political history should encompass the history of representative democracy, and *we, as scholars of the medieval Middle East should teach the history of democracy.* This is our civic duty and an essential part of decolonizing the curriculum—as any such endeavor must confront the perfidious, century-long denial of political rights to the people of the greater Middle East by imperial, colonial, and neocolonial regimes. This denial of democratic rights has been reinforced by one of the oldest doctrines of European imperialism—that the peoples of Africa and Asia had never known self-government before the modern era—implying they are suited to, and thus ought to be, ruled by others.[15] The first, historical part of this claim has received relatively few effective challenges in contemporary scholarship.[16]

13. For example, the *Khatāynāmeh* ("Book of China"), to which I have devoted much of my own scholarly labor: Ralph Kauz, "ḴEṬĀY-NĀMA," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, online ed., 2011.

14. Younger and less well-capitalized merchants tended to be the ones who traveled. Kristina Richardson, *Roma in the Medieval Islamic World: Literacy, Culture, and Migration* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2021); Reyhan Durmaz, *Stories between Christianity and Islam: Saints, Memory, and Cultural Exchange in Late Antiquity and Beyond* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022); Xin Wen, *The King's Road: Diplomacy and the Remaking of the Silk Road* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023), 43; Hannah Barker, "Reconnecting with the Homeland: Black Sea Slaves in Mamluk Biographical Dictionaries," *Medieval Prosopography* 30 (2015): 87–104.

15. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 32–33.

16. Mohammed Fadel's work is one example of a direct challenge, e.g. he argues that "the central legitimating idea of pre-modern Sunnī political thought was that the ruler, and all lesser public officials *a fortiori*, exercised their authority exclusively pursuant to delegations from the Muslim community writ large, and as such, were merely their agents in the pursuit of Muslim community's common good." See Mohammad Fadel, "Political Legitimacy, Democracy and Islamic Law: The Place of Self-Government in Islamic Political Thought," *Journal*

While it would be uncontroversial to trace the history of modern representative democracy back to the democracy of ancient Athens, it would appear (from the current state of historiography, to say nothing of textbooks and other pedagogical literature) that the medieval Islamic world is entirely disconnected from the history of modern representative democracy despite being chronologically nearer and even in some respects culturally and technologically more similar to the modern world. I posit that in our teaching and scholarship, most (and perhaps all) of us articulate *no* connection between modern representative democracy and medieval Middle Eastern political history, and that even discussion of other senses of self-governance in the premodern Islamic world is at best sparse. If we seek the origins of modern representative democracy, we might trace unbroken roots back in space and time to early modern England and other medieval monarchies; and perhaps to the city-state republics of Italy in the twelfth century, and thus to the Roman Republic and perhaps even to senates as a form of representative government in the ancient Near East.[17] But I would submit that, at some point along that trajectory, there is a rift we do not bridge, a qualitative rather than quantitative change in relevance.

Is this because the operative boundaries are spatial (and thus cultural and institutional) rather than temporal? But modern democracy does not simply descend from Athens or even from Magna Carta. Art historians are fond of advising that the term "influence" misconstrues causality because past artistic practices do not simply determine those of later generations; rather, it is later generations that choose to imitate or abandon earlier styles. Likewise, for societies distant in time and space by hundreds of years and miles to have been influenced by Magna Carta, republican Rome, or Athens required a process of active memory-making and reengagement with those symbolic, legal, and other institutional legacies. The imitative and mnemonic nature of political tradition is manifested dramatically in the labor continuously expended on familiarizing and revivifying Greco-Roman heritage in contemporary Europe and the Americas by people ranging from academic classicists, medievalists, and Renaissance scholars to popular fiction authors, Hollywood directors, and amateur podcasters. But of course, the relationship between earlier and later political systems is always a combination of constraint and choice: whatever social configurations in early modern England and medieval Italy engendered institutions that could in turn develop into political configurations that facilitated the rise of city-state republics or representative democracies, they had not only local, but also transregional political contexts that comprised the Almohad, Mongol, medieval Egyptian, Ethiopian, Timurid, and Ottoman polities as well as other more distant ones like Yemen, Late Imperial China, and the Delhi Sultanate. Of course, that these polities were important in the context in which representative democracy developed does not mean they themselves were democratic. It is nonetheless important that, by applying the Global Middle Ages framework to political history, we may

of Islamic Ethics 2, no. 1–2 (November 15, 2018): 59–75, at 61before modern bureaucratic states as "self-rule" In *An Introduction to Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 8. See also Tezcan Baki, *The Second Ottoman Empire: Political and Social Transformation in the Early Modern World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

17. On the Italian city-state republics, see Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 2:2.

obtain a connected history that places the formation of modern representative democracies in a global medieval context and also explores varieties of self-government in medieval Islamicate political history. The central geographical location of the greater Middle East within medieval networks of exchange across Afro-Eurasia, and the political power of Islamic states during most of the medieval period makes the greater Middle East *the critical component* in any *global* history of modern representative democracy that extends to its premodern origins.