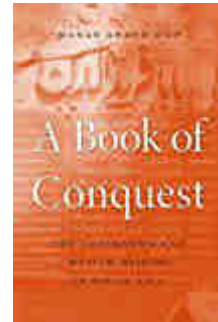


Manan Ahmed Asif. *A Book of Conquest: The Chachnama and Muslim Origins in South Asia*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016. 272 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-66011-3.



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By its own account, the *Chachnama* is a *fathnama* or “book of conquest”—more precisely, a Persian *tarjama*, a “translation” or “interpretation,” of a now lost Arabic chronicle of the history of the *jahiliya* (the pre-Islamic “age of ignorance”) and the Arab/Muslim conquest of Sind (a large part of the western borderlands of South Asia) in the late seventh and early eighth centuries AD made by one Muhammad Ali Kufi of Uch in the year AH 613/AD 1216. It is named after *Chach* (r. AD 632-671), the first king of the so-called Brahman dynasty of Sind (c. AD 632-724) who repulsed the first Arab attack—a sea attack on the now defunct port of Debal (possibly Banbhore, today an inland archaeological site).

The *Chachnama* has long been recognized as an important work for a number of reasons. While it is not lengthy, it is the lengthiest of our medieval sources on the Muslim conquest of Sind, and moreover one that gives considerable and rare attention to the Indian people subject to the conquest. It is practically our only textual source on the *jahiliya* history of the area and for this reason of unique importance, even though it is entirely couched in an anachronistic thirteenth-century Perso-Islamic idiom and replete with Seljuq and Mongol terminology. Unsurprisingly, as a capital text on the arrival of Islam in the subcontinent, the work has been endlessly

quoted by later Indo-Persian historians, by British colonial historians and officials, as well as by Indian and Pakistani nationalists, and it is still a standard source for contemporary historians and the compilers of schoolbooks used widely in Pakistan and elsewhere. V. S. Naipaul devoted an entire chapter to the *Chachnama*, summarizing its content in his travelogue *Among the Believers*, and saw its “bloody story” as an “account of the Islamic beginnings of the state” (in the subcontinent) not unlike that of *The Conquest of New Spain* by Bernal Diaz del Castillo.[1]

As regards the ostensible purpose of the work we are left in no doubt. Kufi explains in the most explicit terms how he obtained the Arabic manuscript text of his *fathnama* from an Islamic judge in the town of Alor (another defunct city of Sind) who claimed to be a descendant of the Arab tribe of the Thaqif to which Muhammad al-Qasim, the conqueror of Sind, also belonged. He meant to present his work to the Arab vizier Al-Ashari of the then Mamluk ruler Qabacha of Sind, who was based in Uch, in the expectation that the former would be proud “both as a Muslim and a person of Arab descent” of the words and deeds of his ancestors in Sind. Moreover, writes Kufi in his introduction, “since the conquests of Khurasan, and of Iraq, Fars (Persia), Rum (Anatolia), and Sham (Syria) have already been described in detail [by others], ... but as the

conquest of Hindustan by Muhammad-i-Qasim and the chiefs of Arabia and Syria and the spread of Islam in that country ... has not been made known to the world, this history had to be written.”[2]

The *Chachnama*, however, is not a text that is easy to read and its contents are not as straightforward as the above may suggest. It reads like a patchwork of several literary and historical genres—part fact, part fiction. It offers elements of a fairy tale and romance as well as straight historical narrative, anthropological and geographical information and observation, news bulletins, letters, military and strategic instructions, political and administrative advice and theory, and observations on the ideal social and political order, mixed with religious and moral propaganda, exhortations and condemnations, denunciations of idols and idolatry, pronouncements on the glory of Islam, affirmations of Islamic militancy, and a lot more.

It is also striking how the narrative becomes much more organized, detailed, chronologically precise (especially with numbers), and purposeful and historically surefooted once it gets beyond the *jahiliya* part of the history and moves on to the actual narrative of the Arab conquest and the Hijra calendar. While it credits its information to “the reciters of stories and the authors of histories” from the beginning, it becomes more profuse and detailed in its accreditation in its description of the conquest. We are thus told on almost every page of the conquest narrative how “it is related by [so and so], who heard it from [so and so], who heard it from [so and so],” and here dozens of Arab names are provided of men who informed the narrative, while the text also frequently refers to “the writers and recorders of events,” “judicious sages,” “the learned men of Hind,” “the historians of the conquest,” “venerable old men of Hind,” “old men of Sind,” “old Brahmins,” “respectable and worthy people,” and others who did the same.

Yet, assessments of the historical value and accuracy of the *Chachnāma* have varied over time. Mountstuart Elphinstone characterized the work as “containing a minute and consistent account of the transactions during Muhammad bin Qasim’s invasion [of Sind] and some of the preceding Hindu reigns,” while Henry Elliot wrote that “the work which details the usurpation of the Brahman Chach and the Arab conquest of Sind” reads “more like a romance than a history.”[3] Others threw considerable doubt on the historical authenticity of the *Chachnama* because the text justifies the incorporation of the Hindus among the *dhimmis* (protected subjects) and

to them seemed to be primarily concerned with juridical issues.

Almost forty years ago, the late Peter Hardy looked at the work in yet another way, by asking the question: Is the *Chachnama* intelligible to the historian as political theory? He concluded that indeed it is. As Hardy saw it, the *Chachnama* contains a “political theory” aiming to give a blueprint for “the accommodation between different elements in a body politic” and “the duty of men to order the world according to the will of Allah.” Military victory, according to this alleged political theory of the *Chachnama*, was not aimed at the “annihilation of all social groups formerly living under [the victorious commander’s] opponents, but rather a victory which promotes the creation (perhaps restoration) of a social order purged of a ruling and military elite devoted to false gods.” As is well known, in his other work Hardy frequently advocated a somewhat similar approach to Indo-Muslim historical writing in general. There, as in the case of the *Chachnama*, Hardy always made it explicit that this “political theory” approach is merely “one mode of approach,” and not necessarily even the most important one. Hardy merely claimed to identify “a few of the motifs to be found in the *Chachnama* which appear to make it intelligible to the historian as political theory” but at the same time to be “in no position to offer solutions to [all] the problems of intelligibility which this fascinating deposit of Sind’s history and culture poses.”[4]

The short book by Manan Ahmed Asif under review addresses the same question. Asif writes that “Hardy’s agenda” is “fully congruent” to his own (p. 76). Reading the book, however, we become increasingly aware that there is also a difference with Hardy’s approach. Unlike Hardy, Asif seems to be suggesting that the *Chachnama* can *only* be read in this way and that it is or contains *nothing but* political theory. And therein lies the problem.

Asif argues that because the *Chachnama* has been understood as “the primary account of the origins of Muslims in India which contains the history of their rise to dominance” (p. 8), it became “a foundational text for the state of Pakistan” (p. 175). For hundreds of years, he submits, the *Chachnama* has been read as a book of conquest, providing a narrative of Islam’s arrival in India, “a particular story of beginnings,” which posits “the Muslim as always distinctly an outsider” and which ultimately fueled Jinnah’s nationalism and Hindu communalism, thus prompting contemporary violence (pp. 2-4, 8). This origins narrative of the *Chachnama* was first

advanced by “the colonial historians” and “British Orientalists” and then appropriated by “postcolonial scholars,” “Indian nationalist historians,” “scholars of Islam,” and “Indian Marxist historians” (pp. 9, 11-12, 15, 21, 48, and *passim*).

Asif’s book attempts to provide “an argument against origins” (p. 5) and proposes “an unreading of *Chachnama* from the colonial and postcolonial lens” (p. 152). Its three essential claims are: 1) That the *Chachnama* is not a work of translation; 2) that it is not a book of conquest; and 3) that it is a work of “Indic political theory of governance” (p. 48) and “a prescriptive text advocating for a dialogical present for its thirteenth-century world and a political system that encompasses diversity in that present” (p. 16). Its method comprises both textual analysis and ethnography or archeo-topographic observation.

Rejecting Kufi’s (and others’) claim that the *Chachnama* is a thirteenth-century Persian translation of an earlier eighth-century Arabic history, Asif assures us that in common with other histories, biographies, and advice manuals, it is firmly rooted in Indic soil, or more broadly, the polyglot world of the “Ajam-o-Hind cosmopolis.” De-emphasizing the Indic or Hindavi context, Kufi’s claims of Arab descent of the author, the Arabic origins of the text, and the Arab patron of the text are “an assertion of the right to produce texts, to interpret them, and to present them to an elite ruling class” (p. 56). The claim of Arab descent, he writes, is frequently made in the historical and poetic writings of the thirteenth century and later. Such insistence on biological or textual ancestors in Arabia was “for the sake of prestige” (p. 60). But for Asif it is an unconvincing claim, because Kufi does not provide the name of the original Arabic text he claims to be using and does not provide any indications as to its provenance and pays no attention to citation precedence.

Rejecting Kufi’s (and others’) second claim that the *Chachnama* is a *fathnama* or “book of conquest,” Asif observes that the text is pre-occupied with the idea of “a limited kingship that insists on cooperation and negotiation with rival powers” (p. 66) and “the theme of restrained power” (p. 67).

Thus, the *Chachnama* is presented as political theory that is deeply ingrained in the physical geography and spatial constructs of the thirteenth century and includes theories of governance as well as moral and ethical advice for the political ruler. The “theoretical” ways by which kingship is acquired include consultation, alliances, treaties, relations, expenditure of wealth, under-

standing the enemy, dominance, bravery, strength, terror, and magnificence. But Asif repeats again and again that what is foregrounded in the *Chachnama* is accommodation and the building of alliances for ruling diverse communities. The context for this is a political matrix in which power is not simply inherited but must be claimed, and which emphasizes the agency of the individual ruler, in which advice is not simply accepted but a product of contestation and dialogue, and in which people operate within the framework of divine will and by political acumen. The overall strategy of Hajjaj (the governor of Iraq) for the conquest of Sind, according to Asif, is accommodation. The *Chachnama* advocates “a policy binding the king and his elites through a common goal of governance wherein retaining power is the supreme good.... The letters demonstrate the necessity of dialogue in a political world that is defined through difference.... The moral weight of the text leans in one clear direction: accommodation” (p. 90). It is also a story about political power that includes women as the ethical subjects par excellence and “full political agents” (p. 143). The *Chachnama* advocates that political power should overcome political difference, establish just rule, show responsibility towards the subjects, and underwrite the recognition of diverse sacrality, the mutual understanding of religious difference within a shared conceptual universe, the translation across sacral and political regimes, and so on.

It is good to be reminded of the social function of historical writing, and Asif provides useful background material that helps us understand, for example, what texts, intellectual traditions, and ethical frameworks the *Chachnama* draws upon in presenting its political theory. In this regard his book is a welcome contribution to *Chachnama* studies.

Does Asif convincingly demonstrate that V. S. Naipaul and virtually everyone else have been wrong in their assessment that the *Chachnama* is a “bloody story” of war and enslavement and a “book of conquest” (albeit with fictional touches)? Readers cannot make up their own minds on this question without first acquainting themselves with the actual text of the *Chachnama*. Anyone doing so will see that political theory is indeed important in this text, but that it is not only political theory.

It is in fact also what it claims to be—a “book of conquest.” This conquest, moreover, is described as a conquest achieved by military means and the brutal application of force and coercion as well as accommodation. It presents Islam as intrinsically superior to all other forms

of sacrality. Accommodation with conquered rulers and subjects is indeed advocated at times, but mostly after victory by force of arms is achieved and the opposing “fighting men” (*ahl-i-harb*) have been killed in the thousands, their dependents and families taken prisoner or enslaved, and no further resistance is offered. In short, even though the *Chachnama* has important elements of political theory, it can at the same time be read as a “book of conquest” and a historical work.

Why would it be otherwise? Empires were not governed by democratic consent. Empires throughout history were based on a mixture of political accommodation and coercion by force and other means. The Muslim empires were no exception, and ironically the political theory of the *Chachnama* admits as much. It is therefore not that Asif is entirely wrong in presenting the *Chachnama* as a political theory in which accommodation and “translation across sacral and political regimes” (p. 110) take an important place, but he is wrong in presenting it as nothing else.

The source-critical skepticism of this book, in effect, goes much too far. The *Chachnama* is not only a “book of conquest” but it is also indisputably a translation, interpretation, or compilation of earlier Arabic texts. Among others, Ibn Battuta, visiting Sind in the fourteenth century, refers to “the chroniclers of the conquest of Sind” (*al-muwarrikhun fi futuh as-sind*) who wrote in Arabic and whose writings were still extant in his time.[5] There

is a bedrock of factuality here that is widely shared and also informs the conquest narrative of the *Chachnama*. Baladhuri’s well-known *Futuh al-Buldan* of the ninth century broadly has the same prosopography and sequence of events as the *Chachnama*. There are many other layers in the text of earlier traditions—Islamic, Persian, Indian—and oral traditions and folk tales as well. To sort it all out and to assess the historical value of the work in more detail would require a different sort of book. To suggest it has no historical value at all and is just political theory is not helpful at all and unconvincing.

Notes

- [1]. V. S. Naipul, *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* (New York: Knopf, 1981), 141.
- [2]. U. M. Daudpota, ed., *Chachnāma* (Hyderabad: Deccan, 1939), 9.
- [3]. Quoted in Peter Hardy, “Is the *Chachnama* Intelligible to the Historian as Political Theory?” in *Sindh through the Centuries*, ed. H. Khuhro (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1981), 111.
- [4]. *Ibid.*, 111-117.
- [5]. Quoted in André Wink, *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World, Volume 1: Early Medieval India and the Expansion of Islam: Seventh to Eleventh Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 195.

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