Revisiting Early Muslim Civilization in Sindh using Myth, Historiography and Historical Method

[1]Adnan Mehr

[1]Ph.D. Scholar-History, Department of History and Pakistan Studies, International Islamic University Islamabad, Pakistan.

[1] adnan.phdhis38@iiu.edu.pk / adnanmehr16@gmail.com

Abstract

In the history of South Asia, the Arab conquest of Sindh in 712 CE by Muhammad ibn Qasim has long been depicted as the pivotal event in the history of Islam. This historical narrative, supported by medieval chronicles and contemporary nationalist historiography, gives preference to stories of conquest and downplays other forms of earlier and alternative processes of Islamic presence in Asia. This paper is a critical re-evaluation of the history of the early Muslim civilization in Asia through questioning the historical validity of the primary sources of narrative more specifically, the Chachnama and placing them in a wider context of memory, myth-making, and political historiography. The study challenges the narrative of the daughters of Raja Dahir, a king of Sindh, to find out that the myth of the legacy of the daughters of the king is more about how people constructed their memories after the conquest than the realities of the 7th century. The article also shows how colonial and post-colonial uses of Muhammad ibn Qasim turned an episode in the history of a region into a myth of origin of civilizations. By changing the analysis emphasis on conquest to networks, institutions and cultural negotiating, the paper suggests a more subtle interpretation of the early Muslim civilization in Asia as a process that was gradual and multi-layered.

Keywords: Islam, Sindh, Muhammad bin Qasim, Chachnama, Surya, Premal.

1. Introduction

The history of Islam in Sindh early years lies in the area between history, memory, and mythology. One of the historical facts is the 712 CE conquest of the Sindh with the fate of the Arab Muhammad ibn Qasim, the ruler who is usually described as the beginning of the Muslim civilization in Sindh. This event, especially in Pakistani nationalist discourse, is handled in most of South Asian historiography as the civilizational origin of the region, and Muhammad ibn Qasim as an iconic ancestor of Muslim political and cultural identity.[1]

Nevertheless, such historicizing brings serious historiographical questions. It is also extensively dependent on those written centuries after the events that they describe, selectively focuses on military conquest among other social and cultural processes,[2] and tends to give events of the early Middle Ages teleological interpretations.[3]

The main research question that will be used in this work is as follows: How can the history of early Muslim civilization in Sindh be rewritten when the historic accounts of conquest are brought under the scrutiny of the critical historiography. The article develops the thesis that the reading of such texts as the *Chachnamah* is not a collection of historical documents but a work of political memory, literary imagination and ethic discourse subject to the influence of the Persianate court culture.[4]

In merging textual criticism and historiography with each other, the study will:
1. Prove the credibility of primary sources in regards to the conquest of the Sindh.
2. Determine the contribution of the stories of legends, such as the legend of the daughters of Raja Dahir.
3. Place these stories into larger arguments concerning the presence of the early Muslims in Sindh.
4. Analyze some nationalist historiographical approaches of these events.[5]

2. Research Methodology

The qualitative historical approaches used in the present study is a combination of textual criticism and comparative historiography. This approach questions the manner in which history was written, passed on, and recycled unlike the more traditional narrative histories, which tend to replicate legend as fact.[6]

2.1 Review of the Literature

There are three categories of primary sources under analysis:

- **Early Arabic Chronicles**

Contemporary or near-contemporary reports of the Arab invasions of Sindh were made by works like *Futuh al-Buldan* by al-Baladhuri and *Tarikh al-Rasul wal-Muluk* by al-Tabari and are mainly administrative and military in nature.[7]

---

[1] Hugh Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests: How the Spread of Islam Changed the World We Live In* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007), pp. 267–272.

[2] H. M. Elliot and John Dowson, eds., *The History of India, as Told by Its Own Historians*, vol. 1 (London: Trübner & Co., 1867), pp, xxi–xxv.

[3] Richard M. Eaton, "Temple Desecration and Indo-Muslim States," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 11, no. 3 (2000): pp, 283–319.

[4] Manan Ahmed Asif, *A Book of Conquest: The Chachnama and Muslim Origins in South Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), pp, 88–94.

[5] André Wink, *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1990), pp,68–72.

[6] John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, 6th ed. (London: Routledge, 2015), pp, 123–129.

[7] al-Baladhuri, *Futuh al-Buldan*, trans. Philip K. Hitti (New York: Columbia University Press, 1916), pp, 431–435.

- **Persian historical-literary literature**

The *Chachnama*, written in the early thirteenth century by Ali bin Hamid al-Kufi, is an expression of a mixture of historical account and Persian courtly literature. Its temporal remoteness of the events, rhetoric and moralistic framing require close critique of its sources.[8]

- **Subsequent narrative traditions and folklore**

Oral traditions, popular retellings, and subsequent literary retellings, including the Anarkali comparison, can help light up the rework of historical memory into cultural myth.[9]

2.2 Analytical Framework

The research is based on three theoretical views, which are interconnected:

- **Historical Memory**:

Historical texts are conceptualized after Maurice Halbwachs, as influenced by the collective memory and socio-political contexts under which they were created.[10]

- **Myth and Moral Narrative**:

According to Roland Barthes, myth has been understood as a system of meaning-making and not as a mere falsehood. Legendary stories, such as those of the daughters of Raja Dahir, are discussed as the moral and ethical allegories in the historical texts.[11]

- **Critical Historiography**

This means to separate between the evidence available in the present, and the elaboration, underlining an author intent, genre, and audience.[12] The work, working through this multi-layered structure, attempts to transcend the notion of a simplistic conquest story, and develops a more fluid perspective on early Islamic processes in Asia, such as trade, cultural exchange and government.

3. Historiographical Debate and The Presence of the Muslims in Sindh Before 712 CE

The historiography of the Sindh conquest is quite contentious involving colonial, post-colonial and contemporary scholarly work. Historians and historiographers of early British colonialism, including H. M. Elliot and John Dowson, regarded the expedition of Muhammad bin Qasim as a break in between Hindu India and Muslim rule, which strengthened communal binarism.[13]

This framing was increased through post-colonial Pakistani historiography. Muhammad bin Qasim is often discussed as a founder of the civilization and 712 CE is symbolically depicted as the time when the Muslim political and cultural presence in South Asia began.[14]

The revisionist scholarship serves as a remedy to the approaches. According to Richard Eaton Islam in South Asia became widespread not only by force but also through the social, economic, and spiritual networks of people.[15] Manan Ahmed Asif considers the *Chachnama* to be the piece of political memory and makes emphasis on the moral and ethical issues and not on historical accuracy.[16]

---

[8] Ali bin Hamid al-Kufi, *Chachnama*, trans. Mirza Kalichbeg and Fredunbeg (Karachi: Sindhi Adabi Board, 1959), pp, 161–170.

[9] Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp, 191–195.

[10] Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp, 38–45.

[11] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 1972), pp,109–114.

[12] Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (New York: Knopf, 1953), pp, 61–68.

[13] Elliot and Dowson, *History of India*, pp, xx–xxv.

[14] Ayesha Jalal, *The Struggle for Pakistan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), pp,12–15.

[15] Dirk Collier, *The Great Mughals and Their India* (New Delhi: Hay House, 2012), pp, 17–21.

[16] Eaton, "Temple Desecration and Indo-Muslim States," pp,301–305.

Arab merchants and colonists were involved in the west coast of India, the Indus delta, and the Malabar coast since the beginning of the seventh century.[17] Arab traders who engaged in the spice trade settled in the Malabar coast in specific, and it introduced the Islamic practices in the social and cultural life of the local population.[18] The fact that Arab settlements existed in Sindh also suggests that Islam had existed there earlier before the military campaign of Muhammad bin Qasim.[19]

The Islamic influence was transferred in different ways other than in war. The Arab settlers were able to communicate with the native elites and artisans as well as the agriculturally based communities through the trade networks. The matrimonial relationship between the Arabs and the natives led to social connections that would in the future be used to spread the Islamic practices, norms, and customs.[20]

Although it was not yet an entirely institutionalized tradition in the seventh century, the Sufi tradition offered a spiritual and social structure that supplemented the practical interrelationships of traders and settlers. Sufi networks were based on the ideals of egalitarianism and morality, addressed the needs of lower caste and social outcasts, which subsequently contributed to the increased tolerance to Islam.[21]

These processes upset the conservative view of the traditional model of invasion that only considers military conquest. Islam in South Asia, particularly in Sindh and in the Malabar coast, was chiefly a result of commerce, migration and social assimilation as of political and military extension.[22]

Sindh had become an important strategic location to the Umayyad Dynasty by the early eighth century,[23] due to its location along trade routes, and its closeness to Arabian and Central Asian regions, and partly as a reaction to piracy along the Sindh coast to Arab ships.[24] The administrative and military aspects of the expedition of Qasim are given in early Arabic chronicles, especially at the hands of al-Baladhuri and al-Tabari. These histories are focused on the structure of the army, negotiation of tribute with local rulers, and the development of governmental mechanisms after conquest.[25]

It is noteworthy that modern Arab sources contain no mention of such sensational episodes attributed to the *Chachnamah* as the melodramatic intervention of the daughters of Raja Dahir, or the miraculous execution of Muhammad bin Qasim.[26] This lack of such episodes in early sources suggests that they are additions to the record later made in a literary style to teach a moral or ethical lesson, and are not recorded history.

Once the military control was established, Muhammad bin Qasim introduced the policies that were to assimilate the local populations into the new administration. Al-Baladhuri observes

---

[17] Asif, *A Book of Conquest*, pp,88–94.

[18] Wink, *Al-Hind*, pp,110–112.

[19] K. N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp, 45–49.

[20] Ibid,

[21] Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp.41–44.

[22] Eaton, *Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*, pp. 45–48.

[23] Hugh Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests: How the Spread of Islam Changed the World We Live In* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007), pp, 267–272.

[24] al-Baladhuri, *Futuh al-Buldan*, trans. Philip K. Hitti (New York: Columbia University Press, 1916), pp,431–435.

[25] al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, vol. 23, trans. Martin Hinds (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), pp,201–204.

[26] Manan Ahmed Asif, *A Book of Conquest: The Chachnamah and Muslim Origins in South Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), pp, 6–9.

that some groups were exempted from tax and the local elites were integrated into administrative activities,[27] this shows a pragmatic approach to run governments, and it is a multi-layered and complex process of state-building.

Although the subjugation of Sindh has been popularly conceived through the prism of a single episode of Islamic conquests, the facts indicate that it was a much more gradual and a negotiated process. Conversion to Islam was not uniform or regionally unified over the long-term, determined by the social inequalities and trade relationships existing prior to Islam, and culturally specific to a region.[28] Placing the campaign of Muhammad bin Qasim into the context of Arab presence in South Asia, historians will be able to review the myths according to which military superiority was paramount whereas the economic, social, and cultural process were overlooked.

4. The Chachnamah: The Conquest of Sindh

The most specific example of a narrative account of the Arab conquest of Sindh is the *Chachnama* of Ali bin Hamid al-Kufi, written in the early twelfth century. In contrast to previous Arabic chronicles, the *Chachnama* is written in Persian prose with literary ornamentation, oratory, and moralizing.[29] As the text explains, the campaign of Muhammad ibn Qasim ends with the defeat of Raja Dahir, the local Hindu king and the formation of Umayyad rule in Sindh. Both leadership and military prowess as well as administrative organization are promoted in the *Chachnama*, presenting Qasim as a fair and practical governor who is able to reconcile conquest and administration.[30]

The heterogenous nature of the text also incorporates the classic elements of the Persianate literary tradition, whereby historical texts were frequently influenced to educate and advance a political agenda in the year twelve and thirteenth centuries.

According to the narration that was given in the *Chachnamah*, the two sisters were sent to the Umayyad Dynasty following the defeat of their father. The story also shows Surya lying to the Ruler that Muhammad ibn Qasim had sought his shelter with him and this is what allegedly causes Qasim to be in jail and then be killed.[31] This story has various functions:

- **Ethical Allusive Moral Allegory:**

It depicts the moral duty of the rulers, which focused on discovering, wisdom, and the ability to assess evidence. According to Surya in his speech, the wise king must put to the test whatever he hears presented by his friend or an enemy upon the scale of reason and weigh it with the decision made by his heart.[32]

- **Political Commentary:**

The episode highlights the risks of hasty actions in the ruling of empires, which actually express the worry of Persianate courts concerning justice and governance.[33]

---

[27]al-Baladhuri, *Futuh al-Buldan*, pp,436–438.

[28] Eaton, *Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*, pp,46–50.

[29] Ali bin Hamid al-Kufi, *Chachnamah*, trans. Mirza Kalichbeg Fredunbeg (Karachi: Sindhi Adabi Board, 1959), pp,161–170.

[30] Manan Ahmed Asif, *A Book of Conquest: The Chachnamah and Muslim Origins in South Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), pp,88–94.

[31] *Ibid.* pp.99–102.

[32] Ali bin Hamid al-Kufi, *Chachnamah*, pp,170–172.

[33] Asif, *A Book of Conquest*, pp,102–105.

- **Cultural Memory:**

The tale maintains the cultural memory of resistance and moral agency, with the defeated not being passive or villainous.[34]

Historians like Manan Ahmed Asif believe that these ornaments are literary creations and not reportages. The story of the daughters can be discussed as an ethical and political fantasy, as it demonstrates the manner with which the *Chachnamah* is a bridge between history and moral education.[35]

5. Historical Credibility of the Story of the Raja Dahir's Daughters

There are a number of reasons to believe that the tale of Surya and Premal is historically unprovable for various reasons:

Firstly, the *Chachnamah* was written some several hundred years after the events of 712 CE, a time when Persianate literature often merged history and moralistic narrative.[36] Secondly, there is nothing in the earlier sources, such as those of al-Baladhuri or those of al-Tabari, to show that there was such an episode.[37] Thirdly, the narrative bears a similarity to the other Persian courtly stories, e.g. the moralized dealings with the rulers, suggesting its allegorical, but not documentary, nature.[38]

The survival of this myth, though, is an example of the potency of storytelling in the formation of the communal memory. According to Roland Barthes, myth is a tool used to naturalize cultural and moral values, the story of daughters in this instance is used to maintain ideals of justice, rationality and moral responsibility within the context of early Muslim memory in South Asia.[39]

The *Chachnamah* also focuses on the administrative reforms of Muhammad Bin Qasim, particularly his inclusion of the local elites and use of taxation policies that did not overshadow the prevailing constructions but instead consolidated and negotiated with the locals.[40]These pieces of evidence refute the simplistic perspective on the conquest as a military or coercive action. Instead, early Islamic civilization in Sindh evolved in terms of military and administrative as well as cultural approaches, which was based on the gradual adjustment to the local social realities.[41]

The narrative levels in the *Chachnamah* show the way in which the early history of the Muslims in South Asia was based on myth. The narrative of the daughters of Raja Dahir based on several levels: Memories of local and regional conquest, gives ethical advice to leaders and administrators and strengthens Umayyad rule through the depiction of government as fair, even during the conquering.[42] This is a multidimensional role, which highlights the fact that early Islamic texts are viewed as cultural artifacts, and not as clear historical texts.

6. Death of Muhammad bin Qasim: Myth and Reality.

The death of Muhammad bin Qasim is the very mysterious issue of historical and mythical elaboration. The *Chachnamah* states that when the Raja Dahir was defeated, his two daughters of the ruler supposedly cheated the Umayyad Dynasty Walid ibn Abdul Malik, who

---

[34] Romila Thapar, *The Past as Present* (New Delhi: Aleph, 2014), pp,89–92.

[35] Asif, *A Book of Conquest*, pp,103–104.

[36] Sunil Kumar, "Courts, Kings, and Chronicles," *Studies in History* 9, no. 2 (1993): pp,211–213.

[37] al-Baladhuri, *Futuh al-Buldan*, pp,431–435.

[38] Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World*, pp,191–195.

[39] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 1972), pp,109–114.

[40] al-Baladhuri, *Futuh al-Buldan*, pp, 436–438.

[41] Wink, *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World*, pp,115–118.

[42] Eaton, *Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*, pp,46–50.

consequently imprisoned the youthful general and executed him on his way back to the capital.[43] This story is however doubted by modern historians.

Hugh Kennedy and Andre Wink both assume that the death of Muhammad bin Qasim was caused by political intrigues at the Umayyad court and perhaps about rivalries with Hajjaj ibn Yusuf and not the melodramatic narrative of the princesses.[44] The fact that the later al-Baladhuri and al-Tabari, who are nearer to the events, do not mention the intervention of the daughters, further weakens the historicity of the legend,[45] as it is these traditions of the Persianate historical narrative which are reasserted over the other.[46]

The Raja Dahir daughters' story is similar to other subsequent South Asian cultural narratives such as the Anarkali story under Emperor Akbar,[47] which then indicates that such narratives are not necessarily attempts to record history, but rather as an ethical and pedagogical teaching.[48] According to the theory of myth by Roland Barthes, these tales normalize values of this kind in this case; justice, loyalty and prudence into the memories of Muslim communities in South Asia.[49]

During the twentieth century, the histories of Muhammad bin Qasim had come to form a part of Pakistani national historical writing. His arrival at Sindh has been discussed in textbooks and popular history as a breakthrough of civilization, where early Islamic conquests are attributed to the subsequent establishment of Pakistan.[50] Although these interpretations have nation-building functions, they face the danger of softening historical complexity, of reducing centuries of social, economic, and religious interactions to singular military action, of overlooking centuries of local processes of adaptation to Islamic norms, along with military conquests.[51]

7. Conclusion

A historiographical analysis of the early Muslim civilization in Sindh is a complex, multi dimensional process. Military conquest as the example of the expedition of Muhammad ibn Qasim was merely one of the parts of the larger historical trend of commerce, social integration, and cultural negotiation. Mythical histories, like the tale of the daughters of Raja Dahir, serve as moral, ethical, and mnemonic tools, which are based upon Persianate literary and political traditions, and no longer bear much relation to actual events. In the meantime, contemporary nationalist historiography tends to rewrite these histories into the myths of origins of civilizations. Through differentiating historical material, literature enhancement, and collective memory, readers get a better idea of the dynamics of early Muslim civilization in Asia, not as a one-time conquest, but as a gradual, multifaceted, and socially negotiated process, which still influences historical imagination.

References

al-Baladhuri. *Futuh al-Buldan*. Translated by Philip K. Hitti. New York: Columbia University Press, 1916.

---

[43] Ali bin Hamid al-Kufi, *Chachnamah*, pp,170–172.

[44] Kennedy, *Great Arab Conquests*, pp,273–275.

[45] al-Baladhuri, *Futuh al-Buldan*, pp, 431–435; al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, pp,201–204.

[46] Asif, *A Book of Conquest*, pp,103–105.

[47] Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World*, pp,191–195.

[48] Thapar, *The Past as Present*, pp, 89–92.

[49] Barthes, *Mythologies*, pp, 109–114.

[50] Ayesha Jalal, *The Struggle for Pakistan*, pp,12–15; Rubina Saigal, "History Textbooks and National Identity," pp,52–56.

[51] Collier, *The Great Mughals and Their India*, pp,17–24.

Ali bin Hamid al-Kufi. *Chachnamah*. Translated by Mirza Kalichbeg Fredunbeg. Karachi: Sindhi Adabi Board, 1959.

al-Tabari. *The History of al-Tabari*. Vol. 23. Translated by Martin Hinds. Albany: SUNY Press, 1990.

Asif, Manan Ahmed. *A Book of Conquest: The Chachnama and Muslim Origins in South Asia*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017.

Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers. London: Vintage, 1972.

Chaudhuri, K. N. *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

Collier, Dirk. *The Great Mughals and Their India*. New Delhi: Hay House, 2012.

Eaton, Richard M. *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

Elliot, H. M., and John Dowson, eds. *The History of India, as Told by Its Own Historians*. Vol. 1. London: Trübner & Co., 1867.

Jalal, Ayesha. *The Struggle for Pakistan*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014.

Kennedy, Hugh. *The Great Arab Conquests: How the Spread of Islam Changed the World We Live In*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007.

Kumar, Sunil. "Courts, Kings, and Chronicles." *Studies in History* 9, no. 2 (1993): 211–215.

Lal, Ruby. *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Saigal, Rubina. "History Textbooks and National Identity." *Comparative Studies of South Asia* 18, no. 2 (1998): 52–56.

Thapar, Romila. *The Past as Present*. New Delhi: Aleph, 2014.

Wink, André. *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World*. Vol. 1. Leiden: Brill, 1990.