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in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Cynthia Talbot. *The Last Hindu Emperor: Prithviraj Chauhan and the Indian Past, 1200-2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 325 pp. \$99.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-107-11856-0.

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Published on H-Asia (February, 2017)

Commissioned by Sumit Guha

Those looking for the true story of Prithviraj Chauhan, an Indian king famous today for his failed stand against the invading Ghurid army in late twelfth-century North India, will not find it in Cynthia Talbot's *The Last Hindu Emperor*. At the outset Talbot states that her interest lies not in the hard history of Prithviraj but in the idea of him. Indeed, even the title of Talbot's book invokes a misleading characterization of Prithviraj. As Talbot tells us, the appellation "the last Hindu emperor," first applied to Prithviraj by colonial scholar James Tod, is a patently false descriptor.

Talbot argues that what is most interesting and compelling about Prithviraj is not his true story (which we know little about anyway) but rather memories of him and their development over the centuries. She is right, and her book takes the reader on a compelling journey through the shifting sands of stories told about Prithviraj. Prithviraj is one of India's longest remembered kings, and Talbot traces remembrances of the ruler over the better part of a millennium, from the late twelfth century until the 1940s.

The Last Hindu Emperor proceeds chronologically. Talbot begins in chapter 2 with early mentions of Prithviraj in texts and inscriptions, written in both Sanskrit and Persian, in the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries. She devotes chapters 3 to 5 to Rajput memories of Prithviraj from the late sixteenth through the early eighteenth centuries, largely accessed through the early modern Hindi work, the *Prithviraj Raso*. Chapters 6 and 7 narrate the colonial treatment of Prithviraj's tale, especially the *Raso*, and the epilogue provides some thoughts

on memories of the king in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Talbot gives a succinct overview of her book by chapter in the introduction, and so rather than repeat that structure here I will draw out some of the many striking features and threads that run throughout Talbot's thought-provoking work.

Talbot's sources are almost entirely textual and yet she does an admirable job reconstructing the social world in which those texts were written and consumed. She discusses Sanskrit and Persian texts, especially in chapters 2 and 3 (she also discusses, in a more limited manner elsewhere in the book, images produced in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries). But most of all she is preoccupied in the book with the *Raso*, a Braj Bhasha telling of Prithviraj Chauhan's life, probably first written in the late sixteenth century for the Rajput elite of Mughal India. It is difficult to get a grip on the *Raso*. Readers will find some information about the *Raso* scattered throughout the book, and the rest is outlined in an appendix on the *Raso*'s textual history. The text exists in roughly 170 manuscripts, which can be roughly divided into four recensions that vary considerably from one another in terms of their content and length. Part of Talbot's project of reconstructing how Prithviraj came to be remembered as a hero involves tracing the development of certain recensions of the *Raso*, especially the long recension produced in the Mewar between 1635 and 1703. At other times, the work of reimagining Prithviraj took place outside of the *Raso* and can be detected by reading texts in other traditions or, later, by reading scholarly articles.

While Talbot's archive is almost entirely restricted to the written word, she executes a sensitive reading that allows her to furnish a nuanced picture of the communities that wrote and read such works. Especially rich is Talbot's description of the Rajput elites for whom the *Raso* was a central text beginning in the late sixteenth century. Talbot underscores that these elites lived in Mughal India, and accordingly she turns to Mughal court texts, especially Abu al-Fazl's *A'in-i Akbari*, to help understand the value that Rajput elites found in remembering Prithviraj (chapter 3). In chapters 3 and 4, she offers some close readings of sections of the *Raso* in order to delve into its Rajput martial ethos. She discusses, for example, how the text focuses on Prithviraj's many *samants* (military subordinates) who came from different Rajput lineages and thereby consolidated an aristocratic Rajput identity. The Rajput community was neither uniform nor stable, however, and Talbot gives attention to such nuance especially in her discussion of how the *Raso* was rewritten in Mewar in the early eighteenth century to showcase Sisodiya superiority.

While overall Talbot traces the development of the historical memory of Prithviraj from the twelfth century to the *Raso* to Tod and to the present, she also allows herself tangents at times, and these are some of the most interesting tidbits in the book. Talbot emphasizes that there were competing images of Prithviraj at any given moment in history, and she recognizes that some images fell away as time went on. She pauses to describe some of the failed visions of Prithviraj, such as fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Sanskrit texts that envision him as an incompetent, even a lazy, king (chapter 2). In chapter 6, she details Sufi hagiographical memories about Prithviraj interfering with Chishti religious activities and oral Alha legends that portray Prithviraj as an oppressor, rather than as a savior. Such passages—almost asides in the grand narrative arc of the book—are rich in detail and well worth the reader's full attention.

Talbot stresses identity shifts throughout the nearly eight-hundred-year period that she covers in the book. Often she talks about how the memory of Prithviraj changed. He began as king of Ajmer and later became remembered as king of Delhi, for example. Given the importance of Delhi from the thirteenth century onward as a political center in North India, this shift was critical to Prithviraj's longevity as a site of memory. Talbot is at her best when she discusses how the identity of those who found it valuable to remember Prithviraj changed over time. She traces, for example, how the *Raso* morphed from being a text for elite Rajputs in the Mughal Empire

to being relevant across Rajasthan through the work of Tod, an early nineteenth-century colonial figure who was quite taken with Rajput culture. Other British thinkers in the nineteenth century treated the *Raso* as the first work written in Hindi (as opposed to Hindustani or Urdu), which made the *Raso* an important work of cultural heritage for Hindi-speaking Hindus, an even broader community. Starting in the late nineteenth century, Prithviraj's tale became coopted into a religious patriotism and was recast, largely in vernacular Indian languages, as a story for all Hindus that crystallized Hindu identity in opposition to a common Muslim enemy. Talbot argues that these shifts were man-made, and she identifies the relevant historical actors where possible. But she also tells parts of the tale where the historical causality remains murky, and thereby she allows her readers to glimpse the evolution of historical memory even when we cannot see who was operating behind the scenes.

Talbot offers an insightful discussion of colonial-era views on Prithviraj, espoused by both British colonialists and Indians from a range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds, that challenges some common assumptions about the nature of colonial knowledge. As Talbot points out, basic identity markers do not indicate what a given nineteenth- or twentieth-century individual thought about Prithviraj and the *Raso*. Tod, a British agent, understood the *Raso* as a genuine historical account of Prithviraj that dated to the late twelfth century (chapter 6). Tod's views held sway for fifty years until they were repudiated by Kaviraj Shyamaldas, an Indian with no formal historical training who could not even write in English (chapter 7). Yet Shyamaldas used the tools of Western historiography to make a case that most historians still accept today: the *Raso* dates to the sixteenth century and is not a reliable resource on Prithviraj's life. Many Indians (and some Westerners) cried foul at Shyamaldas's revelations, and today, as Talbot points out, English-medium and Indian vernacular histories of Prithviraj tend to treat the *Raso* in distinct ways. One larger point that comes out of this discussion is that crude ideas about colonial agents misunderstanding Indian texts and Indians protecting their cultural heritage do not help us understand the historical memory of Prithviraj. Talbot uses a complicated historical toolset to make sense of this delightfully convoluted historiographical tale.

One of Talbot's strongest and more far-reaching arguments in *The Last Hindu Emperor* is that older historical memories make claims on invocations in the present. For instance, for hundreds of years, people have remembered

that Prithviraj ruled Delhi, and yet the older memory that he ruled Ajmer thrives still. Talbot opens the book by discussing a statue of Prithviraj in a memorial park in Ajmer. Prithviraj has been cast into the unlikely role of a hero over time, but the basic story that he was in fact killed by the Ghurids has not been altered much throughout time (although the details have shifted in various retellings). In fact, some versions of the *Raso* dwell on the costly military conflict between the Chauhans and Jaychand's kingdom of Kanauj—the major military confrontation of the Hindi text according to Talbot and an all-Hindu conflict, to use modern terms—in order to explain why such a great warrior was weak enough to later be killed by Muhammad Ghuri. Many modern South Asianists work with ideas about historical memory, and Talbot usefully outlines how new memories do not unfold against a blank

slate but rather carry the weight and, sometimes, the details of prior reiterations with them.

My criticisms of Talbot's *The Last Hindu Emperor* are few and far between. One wonders if she sells short modern visions of Prithviraj. She says explicitly at several points that memories of Prithviraj are never singular but rather always varied, even today. Yet in the epilogue she seems to flatten the modern-day Prithviraj, going so far as to say, speaking of the long recension version of the *Raso*, that "its complex meanings have been muted and mutated" in nationalist visions of the king (p. 275). Such nit-picking criticisms are a testament to a great book that is rich in detail and even richer in its overarching arguments about historical memory and the relationship between social identities and texts.

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Citation: Audrey Truschke. Review of Talbot, Cynthia, *The Last Hindu Emperor: Prithviraj Chauhan and the Indian Past, 1200-2000*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. February, 2017.

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