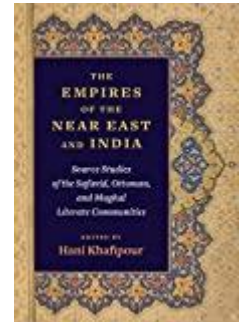


Hani Khafipour, ed. *The Empires of the Near East and India: Source Studies of the Safavid, Ottoman, and Mughal Literate Communities*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. Illustrations. xiv + 656 pp. \$150.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-17436-7.



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The grouping of the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal Empires has been applied as a common unit in Islamic history since 1974 when Marshall G. S. Hodgson coined the phrase “Gunpowder Empires” in *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*. This concept has helped historians measure the Islamic powers against themselves and find common ground, as well as facilitate a useful framing device for the teaching and discussion of Islamic civilization. Despite more recent criticisms of the “Gunpowder Empires” concept, the phrase remains prevalent in current scholarship.

The Empires of the Near East and India: Source Studies of the Safavid, Ottoman, and Mughal Literate Communities applies this grouping of empires without explicitly using the debatable phrase. In the introduction, Hani Khafipour acknowledges the silences currently present in scholarship on literate communities as well as both the benefits and limitations of using manuscript sources in such studies. With this grouping, the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal Empires can be

compared, which allows students and researchers alike a somewhat compact overview of historical Islamic civilization.

This volume not only brings together a staggering amount of primary source material across a variety of languages and countries but also tackles what, to many younger students, remains more abstract within historical study. These more material parts of history—military, social, and economic history—are often more readily accessible to readers of history than the more complex ideas of philosophy, theology, and theory. This volume brings together resources on the literate communities of the Islamic empires, covering religion, politics, and intellectual life, as well as art and literature. The book is divided along these themes, with each section containing three subcategories with an example from each empire. This makes the volume efficient to navigate. The textbook-like structure makes the volume accessible to teachers, researchers, and students. The book provides solid outlines and explanations of each source, making

it useful for beginners and more advanced scholars.

The inclusion of primary sources with explanatory essays renders this book invaluable to scholars preparing and teaching classes on Islamic history; the volume could easily be used as a whole textbook or instructors could pull references and class material at will. Furthermore, the choice of sources reflects a diverse range of the type of sources scholars will be using and students will encounter as they progress through their studies, from *fatwas* and mirrors for princes to historical chronicles, poems, and diplomatic correspondence. This variety helps students learn the protocols, styles, and vocabulary for each type of source. Furthermore, many contributors choose to insert breaks in the translations to expand on an explanation for some point raised in the source. Each source is thoroughly contextualized and the provenance of each piece explained, such as in Ahab Bdaiwi's chapter on Ottoman philosophy where the work of Divani is introduced in relation to its place in Ottoman intellectual history. Several of the chapters give concise summaries of the development of the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal Empires and contextualize the sources, which further facilitates the introduction of the topic to newer students.

The sources come from a wide range of document types and are perhaps some of the least commonly translated and studied in classrooms. The original primary sources make this volume valuable to all scholars by bringing to their attention potential new avenues of research. One section that stands out includes the three chapters devoted to the occult sciences in the three empires. These studies are comprehensive, and for an area of scholarship that is often considered niche, it is gratifying to see its appearance in a more mainstream textbook. In fact, the range of subjects covered demonstrates a shift toward a currently popular style of a more holistic and interconnected style of writing history. Many of the chapters

tackle broad questions of imperial history, such as the traditional narrative of empire (origin, rise, peak, golden age, decline, fall). Jane Mikkelson, in her chapter on Mughal sovereignty, highlights the blame of the ruler in the so-called decline phase. Berat Açil also addresses the decline paradigm by challenging the conventional acceptance thereof with a revisionist perspective. However, the citing of Baki Tezcan's controversial work in support of this may deter some scholars from pursuing this line of thought. That being said, the traditionally accepted narratives of empire are generic and problematic and do need to be both challenged and reframed.

The inclusion of art history in this volume is another introduction to the diverse sources available for the study of Islamic history. Of special note is Keelan Overton and Jake Benson's chapter on deccani seals and scribal notations, which contains many images of the seals to aid in their study and decoding. Sheila Blair's chapter on "Reading a Painting" unfortunately does not include images. Despite offering a complete breakdown and analysis of *The Court of Gayumars* (1522-25), the chapter does not reproduce the painting. This omission would be understandable if there was a copyright issue in reproducing the image but Blair admits in the notes that it is a commonly used image in textbooks. The painting's lack of inclusion is a puzzling omission that weakens the overall effectiveness of Blair's contribution. The section on literature and the arts gives the general impression of political and poetical careers often going hand in hand in the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal Empires. This can be supported by the salon culture of early modern Islam, which is addressed, for the Ottoman case, in the work of Helen Pfeifer. [1]

Overall, while the volume is structured with uniform efficiency, there is enough range in the topics to showcase historiographical shifts and the specialisms of the contributors. That being said, the essays flow smoothly into each other and cross

reference on several occasions, which allows for a fluid ease of reading; the collection is not disjointed, as is often the case with other volumes involving similarly lengthy author lists. In conclusion, this is an invaluable book for anyone studying, teaching, and/or researching the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal Empires and will definitely find its way onto many university reading lists as a core text.

Note

[1]. Helen Pfeifer, "Encounter after the Conquest: Scholarly Gatherings in 16th-Century Ottoman Damascus," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 47, no. 2 (2015): 219-39.

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