

Time in Early Modern Islam: Calendar, Ceremony, and Chronology in the Safavid, Mughal and Ottoman Empires, by Stephen P. Blake, Cambridge/New York, Cambridge University Press, 2013, xiii + 209 pp., £55.00/US\$90.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-110703-0237

An engaging and sympathetic account of a mostly neglected but fascinating dimension of Muslim history, this is an entertaining and highly informative book. The author makes excellent use of primary and artefactual material and explains his central thesis at the outset: “an early aim of the new [Islamic] community was to distinguish itself from the beliefs and practices of its neighbors. And one of its most radical departures was a thoroughgoing redefinition of the concept of time” (vii). Conceptualizations of time and the management of time are, after all, social constructs and to some degree intellectual abstracts. In particular, Blake explores the learned manner in which important Muslim astronomers and astrologers (and related scholars) energetically employed ancient learning and precepts, spiritual directives and narratives, alongside new and evolving social values in order to represent claims to temporal and religious hegemony. In doing so, he elucidates the theological and political priorities and perspectives of the three main Muslim monarchies in the medieval period – the Ottoman, the Safavid and the Mughal – their empires and their fluctuating aristocracies.

The central question here is how much did the changing temporal power structures really change ideas about time management? What are the intrinsic links between assertions to (or manifestations of) institutional and autonomous power networks and schema of indigeneity? “Whereas each empire inherited the four ceremonies of the early [Islamic] community, the expanded cycle that finally emerged reflected both the local variant of Islam as well as the indigenous demands for legitimacy and authority” (20). Discussions, debates and final resolutions on various calendar conundra by the *munajjimūn* (time experts) are all carefully expounded here, and Blake's tome swims through the sea of ethno-religiously syncretic India, Persia and the Ottoman dominions in a way that is simultaneously absorbing and difficult to refute.

The book starts well with St Augustine's well-known question: “What is time?” It has six chapters, the last of which summarizes the contents, deductions and main points of this book. The author leaves the reader wondering whether the differing Imperial conceptualizations of time were not some sort of parietal fissure holding these three countries together (and rather successfully). Blake usually focuses on the cultural historical dimensions of Islamic societies (especially pre-modern South Asia) and has a penchant for the Max Weber school of thought regarding the evolution and organization of social structures. Over the past few decades a burgeoning corpus has scrutinized the three big empires of the late Islamic period – Ottoman, Persian and Mogul – and standard histories for this era invariably contrast and emphasize polarized religious communities at each other's throats at the drop of a hat. The reality of the racial hybridization and demographic amalgamation, and the associated intellectual or scholarly assimilation of information, is usually acknowledged to be fluid but acidic. Blake perceives and carefully infers a much more nuanced and paradoxical impression of these societies – subtly demonstrating one of almost infinitely complex and shifting paradigms of thought. In doing so, he situates these three Muslim empires and their associated leadership circles in a much broader socio-political context, and identifies significant continuities and departures. The study, absorption, amalgamation and diffusion of ancient Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Persian and Indian knowledge of mathematics and science by the early Arabs is fairly well known. Less understood are the ramifications on politics and calendars of the early modern era within Muslim societies. The political transformations were of course enormous – raising serious theological implications and conceptual

shifts, overt ontological contradictions among the hierarchy and real questions about political legitimacy.

A Glossary would have been useful for non-experts, and some further elucidation on the changing meanings of certain roles and titles. Also, an illustration of the much discussed *clepsydras* or water clocks would equally have aided further comprehension. Blake extrapolates well how and why the caustic decline of the centrifugal Caliphal regime in Baghdad altered, eroded and/or consolidated the elementary hegemonies of regional politics and their social strictures, but I would like to have read a little more about the impact of the calendrical developments in other more peripheral Muslim societies (South East Asia, for example, or the east African coastline). On the other hand, there are three excellent maps to help flesh out some of the more obscure geographical imagery and the extensive footnotes are exemplary – these thorough and sensitive pointers alone will serve students with an interest in the unfolding and complicated inner dynamics of the three historical empires very well indeed.

A compelling read, this work could quite easily serve as a primer for readers new to the field of modern Islamic history. Blake has a natural and beguiling gift for transforming otherwise deadly dull data, numerological obscurantism, opaque eschatological debates, natal astrology (or Genethliology), and dry-as-dust documents about the “arts of prognostication – the cabalistic interpretation of letters and names” (167) into fairly riveting and exuberant stories articulating extraordinary depths of perception. Thankfully, this book focuses on social and cultural perspectives and issues rather than on the exact details of the mathematical quandaries, and is sustained by a profound knowledge of both the subject matter and the theory behind historical literature – then and now. Representations of past collective religious identities and historiographies often involve assessments and processes that can be contentious. Blake clearly has a rare talent for wise observation and deft construction. This work of his is marked by its assiduous scholarship, entertaining interpolations and interpretations, and an adroit conceptualization of an important subject.

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