

The Last Hindu Emperor

This fascinating new study traces traditions and memories relating to the twelfth-century Indian ruler Prithviraj Chauhan: a Hindu King who was defeated and overthrown during the conquest of Northern India by Muslim armies from Afghanistan. Surveying a wealth of narratives that span more than 800 years, Cynthia Talbot explores the reasons why he is remembered and by whom. In modern times, the Chauhan King has been referred to as “the last Hindu emperor,” because Muslim rule prevailed for centuries following his defeat. Despite being overthrown, however, his name and story have evolved over time into a historical symbol of India’s martial valor. *The Last Hindu Emperor* sheds new light on the enduring importance of heroic histories in Indian culture and the extraordinary ability of historical memory to transform the hero of a clan into the hero of a community, and finally a nation.

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The Last Hindu Emperor

*Prithviraj Chauhan and the Indian Past,
1200–2000*

Cynthia Talbot

University of Texas at Austin



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Note on transliteration and citation

In order to increase readability, I have kept diacritical marks to a minimum. I retain the typical English spellings for place names and for Indian words that can be found in English dictionaries (e.g., Brahmin). For personal names and other proper nouns, I use “sh” for the Indic letters more formally transcribed as ś and ś, as well as “ch/chh” instead of c/ch. Diacritics have been applied primarily in the titles of texts and for occasional words in South Asian languages, usually set off in italics. In those instances, I have followed the general system of transliteration for Sanskrit and Hindi found in scholarly works such as the *Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary* by R. S. McGregor. When authors of Sanskrit works are cited, I leave in the inherent vowel “a” at the end, but not in the case of those who composed in Brajbhasha, Rajasthani, or modern Hindi; I have followed a similar practice in regards to words that typically appear in Sanskrit contexts (for instance, svayamvara instead of svayanvar; or the dynastic name Chahamana rather than Chahaman).

Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own. When verses from a Sanskrit or Hindi text are cited, the first number indicates the canto/chapter/book, while the second number identifies the verse; the two numbers are separated by a period and no comma precedes them – thus, “Surjanacarita 10.128–130” refers to verses 128 through 130 in the tenth canto or chapter of the text *Surjanacarita*. I adopt a slightly different system in the case of books with multiple volumes: the volume number is separated from the page number by a colon, and the numbers are preceded by a comma – thus, “Ā’īn-i Akbarī, 2:302–4” refers to pages 302 through 304 in the second volume of the text *Ā’īn-i Akbarī*.

Abbreviations

Bora <i>Rāso</i>	Rajmal Bora, ed. <i>Candvardāikṛt Prithīrājrāsau</i> .
Gupta <i>Rāso</i>	<i>Prthvīrāj Rāsau</i> , ed. Mataprasad Gupta.
JASB	<i>Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal</i> .
Mohansimha <i>Rāso</i>	<i>Prthvīrāj Rāso</i> , ed. Kavirav Mohansimha.
Pandya <i>Rāso</i>	<i>Prthvīrāj Rāso</i> , eds. Mohanlal Vishnulal Pandya and Shyamsundar Das.
<i>Rajasthan</i>	James Tod, <i>Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan</i> , ed. William Crooke.

1 Introduction: layers of memory

Emperor Prithviraj Chauhan prevented foreign invaders opposed to our way of life from realizing their dream of overwhelming Hindustan, unto death. Salute with reverence that embodiment of fame, Prithviraj . . . an archer able to hit (the source of) a sound unerringly, who made the ultimate sacrifice in defense of the motherland.¹

Prithviraj Chauhan Smarak, Ajmer, 1996

Prithviraj Chauhan as site of memory

The sentiments quoted above are expressed, in Hindi, on the plinth of a bronze statue of Prithviraj Chauhan in a memorial park honoring him at Ajmer.² The phrases “defense of the motherland” and “foreign invaders opposed to our way of life” identify Prithviraj as a patriot, one who put the concerns of the nation above his own interests to the extent of making “the ultimate sacrifice” of his life. Readers of this inscription would understand that the foreigners alluded to were Muslims; visitors to the park might also know that Prithviraj was defeated in battle by (Shihab al-Din) Muhammad Ghuri, a warlord from Afghanistan. The victory over Prithviraj in 1192 CE was the first in a series of successes for Muhammad Ghuri’s armies that culminated in the founding of the Delhi Sultanate in 1206. In turn, this ushered in almost six centuries of political domination in North India by Muslims of Central Asian and Afghan origin.

Prithviraj has been cast as a representative of the Hindu people in their age-old struggle against foreign oppression since the late nineteenth century, when Indians first began to conceive of themselves as a nation under colonial rule. In their struggle for freedom from the British, nationalists frequently cited martial figures from the past such as Prithviraj as a counterweight to the British

¹ *Samrāṭ prthvīrāj cauhān ne hindustān ko padākrānt karne ke videsī vidharmī ākrāmkoṁ ke svapna ko jīvan paryant sākār nahīṁ hone diyā digdīgant kīrtivān ṣaḍbhāṣāvid acūk śabd vedhī tirandājī dharma mātṛbhūmi rakṣārth sarvasva nyauchāvar kartā yaśomūrti prthvīrāj ko saśrad-dha naman.*

² I am grateful to David Ludden and to Lloyd I. Rudolph for making me aware of this park.

construction of (non-Muslim) Indians as effeminate and cowardly. The militant form of Hindu nationalism that has gained ground in India over the past several decades similarly appropriates medieval warrior heroes, but its message is aimed at South Asian Muslims rather than the British. It is no coincidence that Prithviraj's memorial park was created at a time when the government of Rajasthan state, where Ajmer is located, was controlled by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the political party supported by Hindu nationalists. The BJP's frequent recourse to India's pre-Muslim past is well known and is even acknowledged in its constitution, which states: "The BJP is pledged to build up India as a strong and prosperous nation, which is modern, progressive and enlightened in outlook and which *proudly draws inspiration from India's ancient culture and values*" [emphasis added].³

I have chosen the Ajmer memorial park as the entry point into my study of Prithviraj Chauhan's cultural significance because it both demonstrates his continuing importance today and exemplifies the ways in which earlier imaginings of the king have been appropriated and redeployed for newer purposes. While the use of Prithviraj as a nationalist icon is obviously a modern practice, the king's current meaning as a symbol contains residues of older conceptions. This is evident in the Ajmer park inscription's description of Prithviraj as "an archer able to hit (the source of) a sound unerringly," a reference to a famous episode from *Prithvirāj Rāso*.⁴ In this epic, which first appears in writing some 400 years after Prithviraj's death, the king does not simply die soon after his defeat, as modern history books would have it.⁵ Instead, the *Rāso* tells us that Prithviraj was taken captive and blinded. Prithviraj's loyal court poet, Chand Bardai, hears of his lord's imprisonment in Ghazni, the enemy's capital, and makes the long journey to Afghanistan. There he tricks Shihab al-Din (later, Mu'izz al-Din) Muhammad bin Sam of Ghur, popularly known in India as Muhammad Gori, into permitting an exhibition of Prithviraj's legendary skill at archery.⁶ The blind Prithviraj, who is supposed to shoot an arrow through seven metal gongs thrown up in the air, instead aims at the sultan's voice and

³ Bharatiya Janata Party, "Constitution and Rules: Bharatiya Janata Party," www.bjp.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=135&Itemid=444; accessed June 4, 2012.

⁴ The Hindi phrase is *acūk śabd vedhī tīrandāz*.

⁵ Historians often report that Prithviraj was "captured and killed" at the second battle of Tarain in 1192, in accordance with the thirteenth-century text *Tabaqāt-i Nāṣirī* (e.g., K. M. Panikkar, *A Survey of Indian History*, 4th edn. [Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1977], p. 130). Other scholars follow the earliest account of the battle, from *Tāj al-Ma'āṣir*, in saying that Prithviraj Chauhan was reinstated as king of Ajmer for a short while but was later executed for his continuing opposition to Ghurid rule (e.g., S. A. A. Rizvi, *The Wonder That was India*, vol. 2 [Calcutta: Rupa & Co., 1987], p. 20). Both of these Persian accounts are described in Chapter 2.

⁶ Nowadays, Muhammad Ghuri is often referred to as *gorī* in Hindi, but in *Prithvirāj Rāso* he is generally known as *sāh* (Shah), *suratān* (Sultan), *sāhi-sāhāb*, or *sāhābdīm*. Shihab al-Din, the Perso-Arabic equivalent of the latter name, is what I most often use in referring to this king.

instantly kills him. Although many scholars have denied this fanciful ending to Prithviraj's life, the inscription here testifies to its persistent hold on the popular memory of Prithviraj.⁷

Past imaginings of Prithviraj Chauhan inflect the Ajmer memorial's representation of him in yet another readily visible way. On a second inscription on the statue's plinth, he is called "the last Hindu emperor," a label used repeatedly by James Tod in *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* (published in 1829–32), the first work of Western scholarship on the region where Prithviraj was based.⁸ Yet this designation is manifestly untrue: another Hindu king from Prithviraj's own era was at least as powerful,⁹ and numerous other Hindu rulers flourished in South India and elsewhere subsequent to Prithviraj's time. Nonetheless, since James Tod's time, Prithviraj has routinely been described as the last Hindu emperor, as he is at Ajmer and in many modern narratives. Tod, in turn, was influenced by medieval Indo-Persian historiography, which treated Prithviraj's defeat as a major milestone in the Turkic/Muslim conquest of North India.¹⁰ The Ajmer statue's inscriptions are a vivid illustration that Prithviraj, as a site of cultural meaning, comprises multiple layers of significance that have accrued over the centuries. The objective of this book, therefore, is to excavate the various layers of Prithviraj's meanings, tracing the genealogy of his history as a symbolic figure from the medieval era to the present time.

In approaching Prithviraj Chauhan as a "site of memory," I am inspired in part by Pierre Nora's multi-volume editorial project *Les Lieux de mémoire* (1984–92).¹¹ The *lieux de mémoire* examined in this pioneering series of

⁷ Even the eminent scholar of Rajasthan, Dasharatha Sharma, who accepted some aspects of *Prithvīrāj Rāso*'s account such as Prithviraj's abduction of the Kanauj princess, is explicit in stating that the king was not taken to Ghazni after his defeat in battle "as averred by some Hindu writers" (*Early Chauhan Dynasties*, 2nd edn. [Delhi: Motilal BanarsiDass, 1975], p. 96).

⁸ I refer throughout this book to the 1920 edition prepared by William Crooke, who updated the erratic spellings of Indian proper names in Tod's original edition: James Tod, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*, ed. William Crooke (Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1990) [henceforth *Rajasthan*].

⁹ E.g., Satis Chandra, *Medieval India from Sultanat to Mughal, Part 1: Delhi Sultanate (1205–1526)* (Delhi: Har-anand Publications, 1997), p. 24.

¹⁰ While Indo-Persian histories typically started their account of India's conquest with Mahmud of Ghazni's father, Sebuktigin (d. 997 CE), they also devoted considerable attention to Muhammad of Ghur and his victories. In some cases, as in the mid fifteenth-century *Tārīkh-i Mubārakshāhī*, the narrative begins with Muhammad of Ghur, by whom "Islam was established in Delhi and the countries of Hindustan" (Yahya ibn Ahmad Sirhindi, *Tārīkh-i Mubārakshāhī*, trans. K. K. Basu [Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1932], p. 4).

¹¹ *Les Lieux de mémoire*, 7 vols., ed. Pierre Nora (Paris: Gallimard, 1984–92). They have been translated into English in two separate sets: *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, 3 vols., ed. Lawrence B. Kritzman and trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Columbia University Press, 1996–8); and *Rethinking France*, 4 vols., ed. David P. Jordan and trans. Mary Trouille (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001–10).

books did not consist only of places or monuments that were meaningful to French society and culture, such as Versailles or Verdun, although initially Nora had intended to focus on a narrow range of memorials “in which the collective heritage of France was crystallized.”¹² Over time, however, his interpretation of the word *lieux* broadened, so that he preferred the word “realms” to “sites” when it came to the English translation of his project’s title. The symbolic realms he identified were far-ranging, including clusters of meaning around the tricolor French flag, the Museum of the Desert devoted to the history of French Protestants, and the village cafe. “Sites of memory,” in Nora’s usage, could refer to “any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the material heritage of any community.”¹³ For Nora, it is how these sites relate to the present, how the past is remembered today, that is first and foremost.¹⁴

Like the many sites of memory examined by Nora and his associates, Prithviraj Chauhan has become implicated in a sense of identity revolving around the modern nation-state. His significance as a patriotic symbol accounts for much of his appeal today, and is what may most intrigue scholars of the modern era. As a precolonial historian, however, my interest extends beyond Prithviraj Chauhan’s recent significance. In a departure from the overall thrust of Nora’s project, with its concentration on the modern meanings of “realms of memory” related to the nation-state, I wish to review the major stages of Prithviraj’s development as a heroic figure, both before and during the advent of the modern. While I have framed this book with discussions of two public memorials of the Chauhan king from the present time – the Ajmer park in this introductory chapter and a Delhi park in the epilogue – the rest of the book deals with the long span of time from Prithviraj’s late twelfth-century reign up to the last days of colonial rule in the 1940s. Uearing how Prithviraj was thought of *before* he was appropriated for nationalist causes is just as important, to my mind, as understanding how nationalism transformed his meaning. As earlier imaginings of Prithviraj provided a resilient pool of symbolic possibilities that were reconfigured time and again for varying purposes, the full resonances of his current significance cannot be appreciated without knowledge of the range of his previous meanings. In addition, I wish to demonstrate in this book that the past – that is, history – was indeed important

¹² Pierre Nora, “From *Lieux de mémoire* to *Realms of Memory*,” in *Realms of Memory*, vol. 1, p. xv.

¹³ Nora, “From *Lieux de mémoire* to *Realms of Memory*,” p. xvii.

¹⁴ His colleague David P. Jordan says of Nora, “He is obsessed by how the past is remembered in the present, the way it entwines itself, inextricably, around contemporary thought” (David P. Jordan, “Introduction,” in Nora, *Rethinking France*, vol. 1, *The State* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001], p. xxv).

to the peoples of precolonial India, who resorted to it actively and creatively in making sense of their present circumstances.

Although questions about how and why medieval kings have been repeatedly recollected in later times have rarely been broached in Indian historiography, recent scholarship on European kings who became sites of memory illustrates the utility of such an approach. The greatest concentration of texts, images, and representations cluster around the figure of Charlemagne, the Carolingian emperor who reigned from 786 to 814. The remarkable range of literary genres and patronage contexts in which this large mass of material was produced resulted in an “extraordinary plasticity” in how Charlemagne was depicted,¹⁵ from forceful conqueror to wise saint to passive king countermanded by his vassals. Yet, despite the diversity in remembrances, some recurrent themes can also be identified: of Charlemagne’s reign as a Golden Age, of him as an exemplary just king, and most especially the notion that “he stands in some sense as the originator and legitimator of the contemporary world.”¹⁶ Charlemagne was regarded as a foundational figure, a king who ushered in a new age and could thus be evoked in later times in order to authenticate the legitimacy of a person, practice, or institution. Because of these associations, Charlemagne was an important component of the French nation’s sense of its self until the late nineteenth century. After France was defeated by Prussia in 1870, Charlemagne was abandoned as a symbol of French identity, partly due to his link to Germany.

Prithviraj Chauhan too is often remembered as standing at the cusp of two ages. But rather than being the founder of a new era in the manner of Charlemagne, Prithviraj represents the waning of an earlier epoch, for he died fighting against warriors who brought with them ideas and practices that were new to the region. In that sense, he might be better compared to King Arthur, the Celtic (British) king who was engaged in fighting the newly arrived Saxons, in a futile effort to stem the forces of historical change. Prithviraj and Arthur were both regarded, by later generations, as valiant and tragic warrior heroes whose lives marked the end of an epoch. Furthermore, although Prithviraj’s historicity is not in doubt, we have little information from his own time period and so have little idea of what was unique and particular about this king. Thus, in the haziness of his historical contours, Prithviraj more resembles the legendary Arthur than the well-documented Charlemagne. Even if we cannot sketch a full picture of the historical Prithviraj or be certain that King Arthur ever existed, an analysis of how they were imagined by subsequent

¹⁵ Robert Morrissey, *Charlemagne & France: A Thousand Years of Mythology*, trans. Catherine Tihanyi (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), p. 8.

¹⁶ James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (Oxford, UK, Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), p. 156.

generations can help us in understanding those later periods of time. In the case of Arthur, scholars have remarked on the proliferation of narratives about him during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. This was a period of conquest and colonization that brought the foreign Normans in contact with Britain's existing Saxon and Celtic peoples, suggesting that King Arthur was "a social signifier, whose function was to smooth over the ideological conflicts."¹⁷

The examples of Charlemagne and Arthur demonstrate that past rulers often served as a means of unifying or defining communities, especially in moments of crisis. This was as true in the pre-modern period as in the more recent era of nation-states and applies equally to the non-European world. Much was made in earlier scholarship about India's alleged lack of historical consciousness and the dominance of society over the state, which has led to an assumption that narratives about pre-modern kings were either scarce and/or sociologically irrelevant. In his analysis of modern history-writing in India, for instance, Partha Chatterjee dismisses the importance of what he calls "puranic history"—that is, accounts of the past which involve divine intervention, apply norms of righteousness as explanatory factors, and focus on the deeds of kings. Since this older type of history did not relate to the people as a whole nor accord them any participation in the business of ruling, it was merely "a history of kings," rather than "the history of this country."¹⁸ Here Chatterjee is disingenuous, however, in implying that political leaders cannot serve as symbolic representatives of their citizens in the modern age, and that kings were never signifiers for large-scale communities (whether of region, caste, or religion) in the age before nations. This book shows that, to the contrary, ideas about kings could circulate widely at certain times and places because they were meaningful for specific segments of the society. Furthermore, precolonial narratives about kings must be recognized as political in character (and not quasi-religious, as Chatterjee's designation of "puranic" suggests): not only because they concerned power, but also because of the notions that they conveyed concerning the right to rule, political ethics, and allegiance.

In line with the recent work on Charlemagne and King Arthur, I proceed with the assumption that there is a certain logic to the changing conceptions of kings such as Prithviraj Chauhan. Whether done consciously or not, transformations in a king's career were attempts to make the past more comprehensible to the audience of the present. So, for example, by the sixteenth century Prithviraj was described in texts as the lord of Delhi rather than of Ajmer, in

¹⁷ Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman, *King Arthur and the Myth of History* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004), p. 38. For a study of the Arthur narrative in the early Middle Ages, see N. J. Higham, *King Arthur: Myth-making and History* (London and NY: Routledge, 2002).

¹⁸ Partha Chatterjee, *A Nation and Its Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 76–115.

a response to Delhi's long tenure as North India's premier political center. Another well-known adjustment in historical realities concerns Charlemagne's enemies in the battle of Roncevaux in 778: said to be Basques in the ninth century, they had been converted into Saracens by the time of the Crusades in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.¹⁹ As in Charlemagne's case, alterations in Prithviraj's life story were not made arbitrarily, but in order to make him more relevant to new communities, new places, and new occasions. Integral to this study of Prithviraj Chauhan, then, is the pinpointing of the critical junctures in time at which memories of the king were reformulated in novel ways.

When representations of the past are adjusted to make sense in the present, they can be deployed for contemporary objectives. As Gabrielle Spiegel puts it:

The prescriptive authority of the past made it a privileged locus for working through the ideological implications of social changes in the present and the repository of contemporary concerns and desires. As a locus of value, a revised past held out for contemporaries the promise of a perfectible present.²⁰

In her influential monograph on the rise of vernacular historiography in thirteenth-century France, Spiegel argues that anxiety over their deteriorating economic and political status led the Flemish aristocracy to commission historical texts that cast a spotlight on their superior social antecedents in the new genre of vernacular prose. Through recollection of a past in which their social class, and forebears, had been even more privileged, the Flemish aristocracy could obscure and deny their declining power in the present day.

Following the example of Spiegel and other scholars of medieval Europe such as Patrick Geary, I attend to the “social logic” of texts about the Indian past: who commissioned them and for what purpose.²¹ As a historian, I am more interested in the social spaces occupied by texts than in their literary or aesthetic character. Among the most important functions of historical narratives was the consolidation of collective identities, because the presence of a shared past provided solidarity to social groups in the present. Without audiences to whom that vision of the past was meaningful, historical accounts – particularly in the pre-modern period – would not have been preserved and transmitted into the future, where they might be reconfigured to suit new identities being articulated in different contexts.

¹⁹ Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory*, p. 59.

²⁰ Gabrielle M. Spiegel, *Romancing the Past: The Rise of Vernacular Prose Historiography in Thirteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 5.

²¹ On “social logic,” see Spiegel, *Romancing the Past*, p. 9. Also, Patrick J. Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

While the *idea* of Prithviraj Chauhan was repeatedly adapted to changing conditions (and employed for a variety of functions) over the king's long career as a cultural hero, I believe there were constraints on the extent of modification that could occur. Each time Prithviraj was imagined anew, it was never from scratch but always in relation to – whether in contestation, elaboration, or affirmation of – existing formulations, which limited the range of possible permutations. As Geoffrey Cubitt writes, “The past is flexible, but its flexibility at any particular moment is significantly conditioned by its previous history of use.”²² There was continuity in the *process* of remembering the Chauhan king, and some elements of his biography were typically reworked and carried forward, although in new contexts and new configurations they might have another significance. I emphasize this point, as it is relevant to the ongoing debate on the extent to which precolonial knowledge and practices continued into India’s colonial era.²³ The use of the past to derive meaning for the present was an activity that Indians engaged in long before the advent of colonialism, and earlier conceptions could have resonances that endured for centuries.

Almost all of the material relating to Prithviraj Chauhan that I consider in this book is now found in written form, although it may have earlier had a performative dimension. The reader might ask why I do not frame my study as an exercise in historiography, as Spiegel did in reference to her thirteenth-century texts, rife though they are with improbable occurrences and unlikely continuities. Spiegel utilizes an expansive notion of history, one that is informed by the ideas of Northrop Frye and Hayden White, among others, and is therefore fully cognizant of the constructed nature of all historical narratives.²⁴ In a somewhat similar vein, Romila Thapar eschews the memory-studies approach in favor of a broad definition of what constitutes history in *The Past Before Us*, her ambitious new book on historical perspectives in ancient and medieval Indian literature. However, Thapar prefers the term “historical tradition” to designate texts which reflect a historical consciousness that might not qualify as history writing, strictly defined. An analysis of historical traditions is justified, she claims, since “irrespective of the question of the presence or absence of historical writing as such, an

²² Geoffrey Cubitt, *History and Memory* (Manchester and NY: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 203.

²³ For an overview of the debate, see Indira Sengupta and Daud Ali, “Introduction,” in *Knowledge Production, Pedagogy, and Institutions in Colonial India*, eds. I. Sengupta and D. Ali (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), pp. 3–7. See also, William R. Pinch, “Same Difference in India and Europe,” *History and Theory* 38.3 (1999): 389–407.

²⁴ Gabrielle Spiegel, *The Past as Text: The Theory and Practice of Medieval Historiography* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1997), p. xiii.

understanding of the way in which the past is perceived, recorded, and used affords insights into early Indian society.”²⁵

Although I too occasionally apply the label “history” to the texts I analyze here, the use of that word for the rather fanciful literary narratives about Prithviraj might be contested by some scholars. Sharp distinctions between history and memory have often been drawn going as far back as Maurice Halbwachs, who initiated the scholarly analysis of memory in the early twentieth century. Halbwachs did not compare history and memory in a sustained or systematic fashion, yet his occasional comments make it clear that he held what Patrick H. Hutton describes as “a narrow and old-fashioned definition of history as a field of study, one close to the positivist-inspired narrative historiography of the nineteenth century.”²⁶ In contrast to memory, which he characterized as prone to distortion, Halbwachs implies that history was more accurate and objective. He writes, for example, that: “For history the real past is that which is no longer incorporated into the thoughts of existing groups. It seems that history must wait until the old groups disappear, along with their thoughts and memories, so that it can busy itself with fixing the image and the sequence of facts which it alone is capable of preserving.”²⁷ The sense of a rupture between memory and history found in Halbwachs’ statement is even stronger in the work of Pierre Nora, who regards memory nostalgically as a phenomenon that is no longer truly living.²⁸

Despite the disparaging attitudes toward memory, which has too often been dismissed as an informal, subjective, and popular sphere of mental activity, there are clear advantages to a memory-oriented approach. One is its greater stress on the collective nature of the creation and transmission of conceptions of the past, first formulated by Halbwachs. In his words, “No memory is possible outside frameworks used by people living in society to determine and retrieve their recollections.”²⁹ A person’s family setting, religious affiliation, and social class all played a part in shaping memories of the past, in Halbwachs’ view, and thus memories are fundamentally social phenomena even if they appear to manifest at an individual level. Indeed, Halbwachs’

²⁵ Romila Thapar, *The Past Before Us: Historical Traditions of Early North India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

²⁶ Patrick H. Hutton, *History as an Art of Memory* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1993), p. 75.

²⁷ Quote of Halbwachs from Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 30.

²⁸ Pierre Nora, “General Introduction: Between Memory and History,” in *Realms of Memory* vol. 1, pp. 1–20. For a discussion of this aspect of Nora’s thinking, see Anne Whitehead, *Memory* (London and NY: Routledge, 2009), pp. 139–46.

²⁹ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 43.

emphasis on the collective character of memory is so strong that it has been criticized as a “determined anti-individualism” which refuses to give any role to the individual as agent.³⁰ As a result, some scholars have adopted the label “social memory” in preference to Halbwachs’ “collective memory,” since it still signifies the impact of social settings on the shaping of memories without positing the existence of a monolithic collective entity.³¹ A second advantage of a memory-oriented approach, which can also be traced back to Halbwachs, is its recognition that ideas of the past exist only in the present. Halbwachs insisted that memories did not actually capture the past, but reconstituted it according to the collective frames of references of the present moment, saying: “in reality the past does not recur as such . . . everything seems to indicate that the past is not preserved but is reconstructed on the basis of the present.”³²

These two premises that are integral to the field of memory studies – that the present shapes our notions of the past and does so within a group context – underlie my decision to define this study not simply as a historiographic endeavor but rather as an exercise in excavating memory. In doing so, however, I go against the current trend in memory studies, which is hugely skewed toward the modern age and especially the traumatic events of the past century. Indeed, one scholar has proposed that the designation “memory” should be restricted to recollections of events that an individual has personally experienced, and not to those beyond an individual’s lifetime.³³ Certainly, it is valid to question if we can lump short-term memories – whether collected as oral testimonies or in the form of written memoirs – together with centuries-old conceptions of the past, under the same analytical and methodological rubric.

The distinction made by Jan Assmann between communicative and cultural memory is useful in this regard. “Communicative” refers to memories passed on orally among family and friends for three to four generations or not more than a period of approximately a hundred years. These memories can be called “communicative” since “they are based exclusively on everyday communications,” in Jan Assmann’s words.³⁴ Contrasted to this type of short-term recollection is “cultural memory,” which encompasses more formal and institutionalized ways of remembering, including fixed symbols, rituals, monuments, and written texts. Cultural memory can extend back to the alleged

³⁰ Wulf Kansteiner, “Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies,” *History and Theory* 41 (May 2002): 181.

³¹ Bernd Steinbock, *Social Memory in Athenian Public Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), pp. 8–9.

³² Halbwachs, *Collective Memory*, pp. 39–40.

³³ Mary Fulbrook, “History-Writing and ‘Collective Memory’,” in *Writing the History of Memory*, eds. Stefan Berger and Bill Niven (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 78–83.

³⁴ Jan Assmann, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” *New German Critique* 65 (1995): 126.

origins of a society and is generally retained in the hands of trained specialists.³⁵ Aleida Assmann has also described it as “commemorated history,” due to the ceremonial and public quality of this kind of past, as versus the “remembered history” derived from shared personal experiences.³⁶ The classification of memories into “communicative” and “cultural” on the basis of their differing durations reveals other notable differences in their modes of transmission and basic character, and suggests that they should be treated as two separate, if related, fields of study.

Writing is one mode by which cultural memory is propagated, according to Jan Assmann’s influential ideas, and so my references to textual narratives about Prithviraj Chauhan as “memories,” “remembrances,” or “recollections” is by no means anomalous. I could, and occasionally do, substitute other phrasing such as “construction” or “imagining” of the past, which also highlights the creativity of these literary texts that are made for and shared among a group of people. In contrast to the implication that what is constructed or imagined is blatantly artificial and even intentionally falsified, however, the word “memory” suggests a belief in some semblance to what really happened, and that is what interests me. I recognize that so-called memories are not always relics of information passed on from the past; instead, they may originate at a later date. But it does not matter for my purposes whether an audience regarded a story about Prithviraj to be *factual* as long as they regarded it to be *true*, in a more profound sense.³⁷ I am interested in knowing what people thought they knew about Prithviraj, more than whether it was accurate. Perhaps the best way to describe my approach is “mnemohistory,” a term coined by Jan Assmann for his study of later traditions about Moses. As he puts it, “unlike history proper, mnemohistory is concerned not with the past as such, but only with the past as it is remembered,” and thus “mnemohistory analyzes the importance which a present ascribes to the past.”³⁸

Since I do not draw sharp boundaries between memory and history, I spend little effort on determining whether a specific narrative about the past can be categorized as historical, in the manner of V. Narayana Rao, David Shulman,

³⁵ J. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, pp. 34–44.

³⁶ Aleida Assmann, “History and Memory,” in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, eds. Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2001), pp. 6822–3.

³⁷ After writing this sentence, I discovered that Jan Assmann had used similar phrasing: “for a historian of memory, the ‘truth’ of a given memory lies not so much in its ‘factuality’ as in its ‘actuality’” (*Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997], p. 9). The authors of *Textures of Time* agree that “the factual is not isomorphic with the true” (Velchuru Narayana Rao, David Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India 1600–1800* [NY: Other Press, 2003], p. 11).

³⁸ J. Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, pp. 9–10.

and Sanjay Subrahmanyam. Their pioneering book, *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India 1600–1800*, has advanced our understanding of historical consciousness in the subcontinent by persuasively demonstrating that history could be written in a variety of genres in late medieval and early modern India, not only in the matter-of-fact prose format that we identify with historiography in the West. They also argue that it is possible to “trace, in all its subtleties, the distinction, *internal* to the literary culture, between works of ‘history’ . . . and other texts treating of the past in other modes,” though not all of us can conduct such an exercise with their level of skill.³⁹ Because my aim is to unravel the historical circumstances leading to Prithviraj’s current significance as a symbol, my chief concern is not with the texture of a narrative, but with what it tells me about Prithviraj’s meaning for a certain community at a given time.

I do not mean to suggest that I am entirely disinterested in the historical evidence of Prithviraj’s life and career. Although my main focus is on the *idea* of Prithviraj Chauhan over the ages, a good part of the next chapter deals with the primary sources close in time to the king’s reign that historians have consulted in reconstructing his life. I survey, with a skeptical eye, the textual and other remains from Prithviraj’s era that historians of India since the nineteenth century have deemed most reliable, for two reasons. The first is to show the reader the foundations of the modern scholarly account of the king’s career, for I am fully aware that our understanding of the past is always constructed in and always conditioned by the present.⁴⁰ Yet I believe that some descriptions of the past are more plausible than others, both inherently and also in their ability to explain the remnants of the past that survive into the present. Thus, a second reason for reviewing the original sources from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is to provide a minimal outline of Prithviraj’s career, to serve as a kind of baseline for comparison. In a similar positivist fashion, elsewhere in the book I probe the issues of Prithviraj’s alleged residence in Delhi and the likely date of *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*. Without some sense of “what really happened” or when a text was composed, we can appreciate neither how subsequent retellings of the past take divergent paths nor the causes for changing representations.⁴¹

³⁹ Narayana Rao, Shulman, Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time*, p. 21.

⁴⁰ Hayden White, “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” in *The Writing of History: Literary Form and Historical Understanding*, eds. Robert H. Canary and Henry Kozicki (University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), pp. 81–100; Roger Chartier, “Introduction,” in *On the Edge of the Cliff: History, Language, and Practices* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 1–10.

⁴¹ My overall position is similar to that of Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob: “A democratic practice of history encourages skepticism about dominant views. At the same time, belief in the reality of the past and its knowability is essential to a practice of history” (“Introduction,” *Telling the Truth about History* [NY: Norton, 1995], p. 10).

Within the many layers of stories, images, and impressions that constitute Prithviraj as a site of memory, some key texts and individuals stand out. These are occasions when characterizations of Prithviraj or emplotments of his biography that had long-lasting repercussions were first formulated or vigorously propagated. Rather than exhaustively surveying all the multiple representations of the Chauhan king that still survive, I direct much of my attention to the conceptions of Prithviraj promoted by these key texts and individuals, for they have been the most widely disseminated and the most influential in shaping later developments. Foremost among these is the *Prthvīrāj Rāso* epic, several versions of which flourished among the Rajput elite of early modern India; followed by Colonel James Tod, who introduced Prithviraj to the Western world and validated the *Rāso* epic for later generations of Indians. The layers of memory that have accrued within the cluster of meaning that is Prithviraj Chauhan can only be properly recognized if one has some familiarity with *Prthvīrāj Rāso* and James Tod's writing. I therefore provide a short introduction to both the epic and the man here, at the outset of the book, although more will be said about them in later chapters. I then briefly revisit the topic of the memorial park at Ajmer. Following that, I turn to this book's place in the historiography on South Asia and explain how it is organized.

Embedded strata: *Prthvīrāj Rāso* and James Tod

Prthvīrāj Rāso is a long narrative poem that is first attested in the late sixteenth century and which now exists in four major manuscript traditions or recensions.⁴² Composed in an early form of Hindi (specifically, Brajbhasha with some Rajasthani regional peculiarities), it was transmitted largely within a courtly setting and received its patronage mainly from the Rajput warrior class. It is easy to see why this epic became popular, for it is a rousing good story containing the elements of romance, heroic exploits in the face of overwhelming odds, and vengeance for the righteous. A quick summary of Prithviraj Chauhan's tale illustrates the dramatic nature of the *Rāso* epic.⁴³

In *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, Prithviraj is said to be the son of the ruler of Ajmer and the daughter of the Delhi king, Anangpal Tomar. Because Anangpal has no

⁴² On the epic's probable sixteenth-century date, see Namwar Singh, *Prthvīrāj Rāso, Bhāṣā aur Sāhitya*, 2nd edn. (Delhi: Radhakrishna Prakashan, 1997), pp. 246–7; Narottamdas Swami, *Rāso-sāhitya aur Prthvīrāj Rāso* (Bikaner: Bharatiya Vidyamandir Sodh Pratishthan, 1962), pp. 50–2. For more on the *Rāso*'s dating and transmission, see Chapter 2 and the appendix.

⁴³ This is a summary of the shortest (*laghutam*) version of the epic. It has been published in three parts by Rajmal Bora, *Candvardāikrt Prithīrājṛāsau*, vol. 1, *Ādi Parv se Kaimās Vadh tak* (Hyderabad: Milind Prakashan, 2004), pp. 105–91; *Candvardāikrt Prithīrājṛāsau*, vol. 2, *Kanavajj Samay* (Hyderabad: Milind Prakashan, 2005), pp. 55–197; *Candvardāikrt Prithīrājṛāsau*, vol. 3, *Bārī Larātī Samay tathā Bān Bedh Samay* (Hyderabad: Milind Prakashan, 2006), pp. 55–127; henceforth Bora *Rāso*.

male offspring, he chooses his grandson Prithviraj to succeed him on the Delhi throne. Sometime later, King Jaychand of Kanauj desires to hold a *rājasūya* or royal consecration ceremony to demonstrate his sovereignty over all other kings.⁴⁴ However, Prithviraj, now of Delhi, refuses to participate and thus repudiates Jaychand's claim to greatness. Meanwhile, Jaychand continues with plans to hold a *svayamvara* or bridegroom-choice for his daughter Samyogita, but she has fallen in love with Prithviraj and insists she will marry only him. Hearing of her love, Prithviraj gathers together one hundred Rajput heroes and rides off to his rival's capital, Kanauj. There he encounters the languishing Samyogita on the banks of the Ganges, and the two declare their love for each other.

They must now face the formidable might of the Kanauj army, which far outnumbers Prithviraj's brave companions-at-arms. The battle between Prithviraj's gallant war-band and Jaychand's huge army is described in detail next. For two days, Prithviraj's noble warriors manage to hold the Kanauj forces at bay, albeit with severe losses on their side. Prithviraj's men eventually persuade him to flee toward Delhi with Samyogita, while they protect his rear. By the time the king reaches Delhi, two-thirds of the war-band have given up their lives for his sake. While he has successfully defied his rival and obtained the rival's daughter as a prize, Prithviraj has lost many of his best warriors in the process.

In Delhi, the months pass by blissfully for Prithviraj and Samyogita, who experience the raptures of true love. Indeed, Prithviraj is so infatuated with his new wife that he ignores all affairs of state, despite the danger posed to his realm by the aggressive designs of Shihab al-Din Muhammad Ghuri. Only the intervention of Prithviraj's priest, along with the bard Chand, finally brings Prithviraj to his senses. Although Prithviraj quickly prepares for battle, the small number of fighters he can muster in a short time is soon overwhelmed by the much larger army of Shihab al-Din.

In the aftermath, Shihab al-Din returns to his capital, Ghazni, where he has Prithviraj imprisoned and blinded. Prithviraj's bard, Chand, gets wind of this appalling deed and travels to Ghazni; there he talks Shihab al-Din into allowing Prithviraj to perform a daring feat of archery. But when Shihab al-Din commands Prithviraj to pierce seven metal gongs with an arrow, the blind Prithviraj instead aims his arrow at the voice of Shihab al-Din and kills him; Prithviraj and Chand die soon thereafter. In the *Rāso*'s narrative, Prithviraj Chauhan thus regains his honor, although not his kingdom, by avenging himself upon Shihab al-Din.

⁴⁴ I use Kanauj rather than the spelling that is more common today, Kannauj, because it is closer to the epic's name for the city, Kanavaja.

Colonel James Tod emphasized the political rupture that followed the fall of Prithviraj, “whose defeat and death introduced the Muhammadans.”⁴⁵ Tod occasionally referred to Prithviraj more specifically as the “last Chauhan king of India,” or the “last imperial Rajput sovereign of India,” thereby acknowledging that he was a member of the Rajput warrior community belonging to the Chauhan clan, a more circumscribed identity.⁴⁶ But it was as a Hindu ruler that Tod most often described Prithviraj, implying that he was a representative of all Indian communities in the pre-Muslim past. Tod’s frequent use of the adjective “last” in reference to Prithviraj reflects the widespread division of Indian history into Hindu, Muslim, and British periods in nineteenth-century Western scholarship. *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* presents Prithviraj Chauhan as an exemplary figure, whose lifestyle and character revealed the Rajput in a pristine state.

It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of James Tod in shaping modern views of the Rajputs and their region. His influence derived partly from the fact that he was one of the earliest East India Company officials to reside in Rajasthan, a frontier region that was still on the margins of the East India Company’s expanding domain in the beginning of the nineteenth century. Tod first went to Rajasthan in 1806, as a junior member of a Company delegation attached to the mobile court of the Maratha lord Daulat Rao Scindia.⁴⁷ In 1818, after the East India Company’s final campaign against the dispersed Maratha armies that had seized control of much of Central and Western India during the previous half century, Tod was appointed as the Company’s first Political Agent to the various kingdoms of Rajasthan. He remained in that position until 1822, and then returned to England, where he resided until his death in 1835.⁴⁸

Drawing on his studies in Udaipur and the manuscripts, drawings, and other material that he had collected, Tod prepared a pioneering work on the Rajputs and their territory. Tod’s *Rajasthan* quickly attained an almost canonical status in the field of historical scholarship on India, as the first effort to present a complete – and notably sympathetic – picture of Rajasthan’s past from a Western perspective. Because Chand Bardai, the putative author of *Prthvirāj Rāso*, appears as an active participant in the events narrated, Tod considered the epic to be a valuable eyewitness account of Prithviraj’s twelfth-century

⁴⁵ Tod, *Rajasthan*, p. 38. For an excellent analysis of Tod, see Jason Freitag, *Serving Empire, Serving Nation: James Tod and the Rajputs of Rajasthan* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2009).

⁴⁶ For example, Tod, *Rajasthan*, pp. 1454 n2, 38.

⁴⁷ For biographical details, see the account published in 1839, shortly after Tod’s death: Anonymous, “Memoir of the Author,” in *Travels in Western India*, pp. xvii–lx (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1997); and the anonymously authored obituary, “Lieutenant-Colonel Tod,” *Asiatic Journal* n.s.18 (Sept.-Dec. 1835): 240–4.

⁴⁸ A first-hand account of Tod’s last journey, from Udaipur to the western coast during the second half of 1822, is contained in *Travels in Western India*.

reign. He also accepted as fact much of the epic's romanticized portrayal of Rajput culture and history. The stamp of Western approval provided by Tod facilitated the appropriation of this stirring image of Rajputs by Indian nationalists of the late nineteenth century, who sought the inspiration of authentic martial heroes from the Hindu past in their contemporary struggles for respect and representation. Thanks in part to Tod, Prithviraj – “the last Hindu emperor” – continues to occupy a prominent place in popular memory.

Commemorating Prithviraj at Ajmer, 1996

Keeping these brief introductions to the *Rāśo* and Tod in mind, let us return to the memorial park at Ajmer for a lengthier analysis. I have already noted that layers of memory are visible at the Ajmer memorial (*smārak*) to Prithviraj, where inscriptions honor the Chauhan king as the “last Hindu emperor” (following Tod) and “an archer able to hit (the source of) a sound unerringly” (following the *Rāśo*). Other residues of earlier conceptions of Prithviraj can easily be detected at the site, so much so that they sometimes have the effect of undermining the park’s ambition of reclaiming this hero for the city that was his dynasty’s capital.

The initiative behind the commemoration of Prithviraj at Ajmer was entirely locally based, spearheaded by the Ajmer Urban Improvement Trust or Nagar Vikas Nyas Ajmer. Members of this municipal organization, along with several local officials, are listed on a plaque providing details on the opening ceremony held on January 25, 1996. The most prominent person in attendance was the well-known politician L. K. Advani, then president of the BJP party.⁴⁹ Other luminaries present at the park’s inauguration included the deputy chief minister and the ministers for the Public Works and Forest & Environment departments of the BJP-controlled state government, who no doubt attended as a courtesy to Onkar Singh Lakhawat, then chair of the Ajmer Urban Improvement Trust.⁵⁰ Lakhawat is a long time member of the BJP, who has subsequently represented Rajasthan in the Rajya Sabha (Upper House of Parliament) and been on the party’s national executive committee; in May 2014 he was appointed to head the Rajasthan Heritage Preservation and Promotion Authority.

The political clout of Lakhawat in the 1990s, and of the BJP in Rajasthan, can be gauged not only by the high profile of the politicians present at the

⁴⁹ Advani is identified only as “national leader” (*rāṣṭrīya netā*) on the dedicatory plaque.

⁵⁰ The details on the size of the Ajmer park and statue are taken from a small pamphlet printed for the opening ceremony, which was available at the site for a few years afterwards. The information on the opening ceremony and the Ajmer Urban Improvement Trust is provided on a plaque placed near the statue.

park's opening, but also by its size and location. This public park commemorating a king from the twelfth century covers an area close to three acres in extent, situated about midway up a tall hill leading to Taragarh fort, providing it with panoramic vistas of Ajmer city. The centerpiece, appearing in Figure 1.1, is the bronze statue of Prithviraj seated on a horse, which is approximately life-sized but elevated on an 11.6 foot-high stone plinth. Paved walkways meander through the garden-like grounds below the statue, amidst which are scattered several small stone pavilions or "galleries" (*dīrghā*) containing visual depictions of Prithviraj's career. We are informed on another inscribed section on the plinth describing the opening ceremony that "this memorial was created so that the sacrifices made by the last Hindu emperor Prithviraj Chauhan for the preservation of Hindustan would remain an inspiration for ages to come."⁵¹

The language of this inscription establishes Prithviraj as a hero for all Hindus and for all of Hindustan, and not just for the city of Ajmer. Yet the creators of the park made sure in a number of ways that the Chauhan king's link with Ajmer would not be overlooked. One example comes from the biographical details supplied on the plinth of his statue. The names of the king's father and mother, the date and place of his birth (in Gujarat), and the year of his death are listed, followed by the location of his capital – Ajmer – set slightly apart to render it more visible. Furthermore, the geography of Prithviraj's empire is made explicit in a rather unusual feature of the park: a three dimensional map that identifies the main cities he controlled including Delhi, Bhatinda, Nagaur, and Ranthambhor, in addition to Ajmer. While Prithviraj's connection with Ajmer is often overshadowed in popular memory by his alleged residence in Delhi, the founders of the Ajmer memorial clearly wanted to emphasize the king's local ties.

The Ajmer roots of Prithviraj's Chauhan lineage are amply publicized elsewhere, as well. The park contains a number of pavilions, or stone structures about 10 feet tall, placed alongside the walkways. Each pavilion has a locked metal door with a plastic window inset that allows a glimpse into the dark interior, in which visual depictions of Prithviraj's career are housed. The pavilion closest to the park entrance, which appears in Figure 1.2, features Ajmer city and the Chauhan (Sanskrit, Chahamana) king who founded it in the early 1100s. A second pavilion is devoted to another of Prithviraj's ancestors who dwelt in Ajmer, Visaldev (i.e., Vigraharaja IV) of the mid twelfth century, the greatest conqueror of this lineage. Prithviraj and his predecessors belonged to the Shakambhari branch of the Chauhans, whose history will be covered in Chapter 2. It was a dynasty that reached its greatest strength while based in

⁵¹ *Antim hindū samṛāt prthvīrāj cauhān dvārā hindustān kī aksunñatā ke liye kiye gaye tyāg va balidān ko cir sthāyī preraṇādāyī banāne ke liye is smārak kā nirmāṇ huā hai.*



Figure 1.1. Statue at Prithviraj Smarak park, Ajmer, established 1996
photograph by Eric Schenk



Figure 1.2. View of pavilion and walkway inside Prithviraj Smarak, Ajmer

Ajmer during the twelfth century, the only time when the city was the capital of a large kingdom. Prithviraj's famous ancestors are lauded in inscriptions and literary works from the twelfth century, as well as in the later *Prithvirāj Rāso*.

Surprisingly, a number of the pavilions at the Ajmer park commemorate aspects of Prithviraj's life that are only recorded in the *Rāso* and not in earlier texts or epigraphs. Inside each of the pavilions are cheaply made poster-type paintings with several lines of explanatory text, propped up against the interior walls. One structure bears the label "Prithviraj Chauhan, sound-piercing-archer," and contains a picture of Prithviraj shooting at Muhammad Ghuri.⁵² The sign on a second structure reads "Chand Bardai," naming the man who is traditionally considered to be the author of *Prithvirāj Rāso*. The poster inside that pavilion refers not to the poet but rather to his epic text, described as an authentic or authoritative (*prāmaṇik*) book. Since prominent literary scholars have generally regarded the *Rāso* as a text composed (or at least written down) several centuries after the king's death, its categorization as authentic or

⁵² The phrase is *śabd-bhedī-dhanurdhar*, "the archer who could pierce by sound (alone)" or "the archer who could pierce (the source of) a sound." One occasionally witnesses some slippage between the words *vedhī* (penetrating, piercing, hitting [the mark]) and *bhedī* (piercing, boring).

authoritative here is noteworthy. Samyogita, the princess of Kanauj whom Prithviraj abducted according to the *Rāso* narrative, also has a pavilion dedicated to her, with one painting showing the princess at her bridegroom-choice (*svayamvara*) ceremony and another depicting her clasping Prithviraj's neck as they ride off together on a horse.

Although the longest inscription on the plinth, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, only mentions Prithviraj's defense of Hindustan from foreign invaders, these pavilions allude instead to the author of the *Rāso* epic and some of that work's most celebrated episodes. By shining the spotlight on Prithviraj's ancestors in Ajmer, on the poet who made him immortal in verse, and on the bride whom he obtained through his martial prowess, these pavilions evoke the image of Prithviraj as the dashing hero of an epic adventure. The rhetoric of martyrdom for the nation that pervades the statue's inscriptions is eclipsed here by a more lively casting of the king, drawn from *Prthvīrāj Rāso*. Despite the dissonance in tone, therefore, the park sponsors felt it necessary to acknowledge the epic narrative; the fact that Onkar Singh Lakhawat, head of the municipal committee that established the park, belongs to the same Charan bardic community as Chand Bardai is probably another reason for this recourse to the *Rāso*.⁵³ That earlier historical memories can put constraints on the possible shapes taken by later imaginings of a person or event is evident from this instance.

The urge to conform to *Prthvīrāj Rāso*'s presentation of the Chauhan king was strong enough that it undercut one of the main objectives of the park: to publicize Prithviraj's link with the city of Ajmer, often overshadowed by the epic's focus on Delhi. The pavilion pertaining to the king's empire is a case in point, for it houses a picture of Delhi's Iron Pillar and not a monument from Ajmer. In a well-known tale from *Prthvīrāj Rāso* (described at length in Chapter 3), the king of Delhi meddles with the Iron Pillar, is therefore cursed to have no sons, and so has to pass on his throne to Prithviraj Chauhan, his daughter's son. A caption accompanying the Iron Pillar picture in the Ajmer pavilion explains that the Chauhans had a secondary capital in Delhi, but this written information could easily be overlooked in the pavilion's visual emphasis on Delhi. Visitors to the memorial who saw this pavilion would be reminded of the sequence of events that led to Prithviraj's sovereignty over Delhi, his primary base of operations in the *Rāso*. Even when trying to present Prithviraj as a ruler belonging to Ajmer, the creators of the park were thus seemingly compelled to recognize the *Rāso*'s conflicting testimony, in a clear illustration of the resilience of earlier conceptions.

⁵³ Lakhawat's Charan identity was mentioned to me by several people in Rajasthan; see also, "Rajasthan BJP May Be Keeping Najma at Bay," *Daily Pioneer*, May 28, 2010; www.lexisnexis.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/hottopics/lnacademic/

The message of the last pavilion at the park is quite unlike the others, since it does not relate to any episode or attribute associated with *Pr̥thyvīrāj Rāśo*. Instead it returns to the image of the king as a nationalist hero, in the same fashion as the inscriptions on the Prithviraj statue. It pays homage to him as an exemplary patriot who inspired others to follow his example of selflessness in service of the motherland. The signboard inside the pavilion sets forth a pledge (*sankalp*), an act of devotion to the nation, that all who visit the park should be inspired to take:

We take a pledge, at this memorial for the last Hindu emperor located in Ajmer, that we will offer our bodies, minds, and wealth for the sake of the nation's unity, territorial integrity, continuity, and sovereignty, carrying on in the thriving and glorious tradition of the last Hindu emperor Prithviraj Chauhan, who sacrificed his own life for the defense of the motherland and nation.⁵⁴

Prithviraj is described yet again as the “last Hindu emperor” and the “motherland” too is explicitly invoked in this patriotic pledge. The park’s sponsors thereby made it amply clear why they utilized this heroic symbol, which had been made more powerful and more resonant by centuries of past use.

Situating this book

Prithviraj Chauhan is not the only historically attested king from the past whose memory has been continuously transmitted in Indian society, but he is among the oldest. As is well known, even rulers in India’s ancient past as powerful as the Mauryan emperor Ashoka were forgotten in later times, only to be “discovered” by nineteenth-century scholars.⁵⁵ The two Hindu kings who are most admired in India today – Maharana Pratap (r. 1572–97) and Chhatrapati Shivaji (r. 1674–80) – are, in contrast, from a relatively more recent past.⁵⁶ They are both abundantly documented in Indic-language as well as Persian texts and represent martial castes that are still powerful in their respective regions of Rajasthan and Maharashtra. Prithviraj Chauhan has lagged somewhat behind them in national significance during the modern period: both Pratap and Shivaji were commemorated with bronze equestrian

⁵⁴ *Mārbhūmi aur rāṣṭrarakṣā ke liye apnā jīvan nyauchāvar kar dene vāle antīm hindū samrāt pr̥thyvīrāj cauhān ke ajaymeru menī sthit is smārak par ham saṅkalp lete hain ki samrāt pr̥thyvīrāj cauhān kī samṛddh evam yaśasvī paramparā kā nirvāhan kar, rāṣṭra kī ekta akhaṇḍtā-akṣuṇatā-samprabhutā ke lie ham apnā tan-man-dhan arpit kareinge.*

⁵⁵ Charles Allen, *Ashoka: The Search for India’s Lost Emperor* (NY: The Overlook Press, 2012).

⁵⁶ Also notable is the Vijayanagara emperor, Krishnadeva Raya (r. 1509–29), who is widely remembered in South India and the Deccan. See Phillip B. Wagoner, *Tidings of the King: A Translation and Ethnohistorical Analysis of the Rāyavācakamu* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993); and Sumit Guha, “The Frontiers of Memory: What the Marathas Remembered of Vijayanagara,” *Modern Asian Studies* 43, no. 1 (2009): 269–88.

statues in the early 1960s, for instance, decades before Prithviraj's Ajmer statue was installed. Yet, due to the nationalist deployment of him, Prithviraj is better known nowadays than any other ruler from the pre-Islamic period who continued to be remembered in subsequent centuries.⁵⁷

Given his fame in both the past and present, the corpus of academic writing on Prithviraj is strikingly small. This is particularly true of scholarship in the English language over the past century, for reasons that will be discussed at length in Chapter 7. Only one monograph in English covers his biography, although accounts of his career sometimes appear in books covering longer periods of history.⁵⁸ Similarly, in the last hundred years only a handful of academic articles or essays have been published in English that deal exclusively with the Chauhan king.⁵⁹ The situation is slightly better in Hindi, due to the continuing interest in *Prithvirāj Rāso* on the part of literary scholars, although the majority of what has been published is aimed at a popular, rather than academic, audience.⁶⁰ While Prithviraj's importance is generally acknowledged, there is little in the way of detailed study of this king, especially in regard to historicizing the various narratives about him from diverse times and places.

This book joins a growing body of historical scholarship on India that tracks changing meanings, conceptions, and representations over a period of centuries – what we might describe as longitudinal studies of cultural significance. The

⁵⁷ Another famous king from the pre-Delhi Sultanate era is the Paramara lord Bhoja of Malwa, often conflated with the legendary emperor Vikramaditya. See Michael Willis, "Dhar, Bhoja and Sarasvati: From Indology to Political Mythology and Back," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 22.1 (2012): 129–31; and Daud Ali, "Temporality, Narration, and the Problem of History: A View from Western India c. 1100–1400," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 50, no. 2 (2013): 254–5.

⁵⁸ Ram Vallabh Soman, *Prithviraj Chauhan and His Times* (Jaipur: Publication Scheme, 1981). An additional monograph in English concerns the alleged author of *Prithvirāj Rāso* (Shanta Singh, *Chandbardai* [Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2000]). Sections on Prithviraj can be found in D. Sharma, *Early Chauhan Dynasties*, pp. 80–114; D. C. Ganguly, "The Age of Prithvirāja III," in *The Struggle for Empire*, ed. R. C. Majumdar (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1957), pp. 104–15.

⁵⁹ Most recently, in English: John McLeod & Kunwar P. Bhatnagar, "The Deaths of Prithviraj," *South Asia* 24, no. 2 (2001): 91–105. Prithviraj is also covered in: "A Poetics of Resistance: Investigating the Rhetoric of the Bardic Historians of Rajasthan" by Rashmi Dube Bhatnagar, Renu Dube, and Reena Dube (in *Muslims, Dalits, and the Fabrications of History [Subaltern Studies XIII]*, eds. Shail Mayaram, M. S. S. Pandian, and Ajay Skaria, pp. 224–79 [Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005]); and Shail Mayaram, *The Magic of Prithviraj, Padmini and Pratap in the Vernacular Imaginaire: Revisiting the Interface of Colonialism, Orientalism, and Nationalism* (Delhi: India International Centre, 2009).

⁶⁰ Literary studies in Hindi are cited in subsequent chapters of this book. Popular studies include Devisingh Mandava's *Bhārataśvar Prithvirāj Cauhān* (Delhi: Akhil Bharatiya Kshatriya Mahasabha, 1990). Two works for younger readers are: Tejpal Singh Dhama, *Prithvirāj Cauhān: Ek Parājīt Vijetā* (Delhi: Hindi Sahitya Sadan, 2006) and M. A. Rajsvi, *Prithvirāj Cauhān*, 3rd edn. (Delhi: Manoj Publications, 2008).

trend began with *The Lives of Indian Images* (1997), which takes a biographical approach to physical objects, mostly Hindu religious images, as they came “to be animated with new significances by persons holding different conceptions in altered historical situations.”⁶¹ This book by Richard H. Davis follows the “lives” of objects such as a bronze Shiva statue from medieval Tamilnadu and the early eighteenth-century mechanical toy known as Tipu Sultan’s Tiger, as they entered the modern world in the guise of art objects or trophies of war; it also examines medieval narratives of the looting and destruction of Hindu temple images. Romila Thapar continued to explore narratives of Hindu-Muslim conflict in *Somanatha: The Many Voices of a History* (2004), focusing on accounts of Mahmud of Ghazni’s raid on the Somanatha temple in 1026 CE that were composed down to the twentieth century. She demonstrates the existence of multiple perspectives, varying mainly according to the language and genre in which they are recorded (Persian, Sanskrit, Hindi, English), which she uses in order “to question the received version of the event: a version that has remained unquestioned for almost a century and a half.”⁶² By illustrating the wide range of meanings and interpretations, the scholarship of both Davis and Thapar has been instrumental in challenging our sense of certainty about the significance of past objects and past events.

Like this study, a few recent books have focused on the construction, transmission, and transformation over time of ideas about *people* from the precolonial past, rather than about objects or events.⁶³ The most notable new trend is an interest in changing conceptions of earlier rulers, for previous scholarship on how specific gods and goddesses have been conceived differently in various times and places is not entirely unknown. Unlike religious mythology, which has always attracted considerable scholarly attention, however, the allegedly unreliable narratives about Indian royalty led to their almost total neglect in former times.⁶⁴ Instead, in *Shivaji: Hindu King in Islamic India*,⁶⁵ James W. Laine, a scholar of religious studies, was interested in how

⁶¹ Richard H. Davis, *Lives of Indian Images* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 11.

⁶² Romila Thapar, *Somanatha: The Many Voices of a History* (NY: Penguin Viking, 2004), p. xi. A fascinating study of the ways in which Deccan societies remembered the past through forms of architectural re-use – that is, through the relocation, renovation, or replication of earlier monuments – has recently been carried out by Richard M. Eaton and Phillip B. Wagoner (*Power, Memory, Architecture: Contested Sites on India’s Deccan Plateau, 1300–1600* [Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014]).

⁶³ Also noteworthy is Christian Novetzke’s *History, Bhakti, and Public Memory: Namdev in Religious and Secular Traditions* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2008), unusual for its focus on performative practices as a basis of collective remembrance. While Novetzke’s analysis has important implications for our understanding of Hindu devotionalism, it is not particularly relevant to studies of political culture such as mine.

⁶⁴ An important exception that predates the works discussed here is Wagoner’s *Tidings of the King*.

⁶⁵ NY: Oxford University Press, 2003.

the growth of Shivaji's "legend" contributed to the formation of a Maharashtrian Hindu identity over the past 350 years. The growing association in popular memory of Shivaji and certain religious figures and places is thus one of Laine's main concerns, rather than the changing political circumstances in which Shivaji was commemorated. The unfortunate controversy that followed his book's publication attests to the continuing symbolic importance of historical figures such as Shivaji and the paucity of critical investigation into their historiography.⁶⁶

Ramya Sreenivasan's *The Many Lives of a Rajput Queen* (2007) also explores multiple narratives about a single figure and highlights their changing content over time, as had Laine's *Shivaji*. However, the focus of Sreenivasan's study, Padmini/Padmavati, is a woman who most probably never existed but whose beauty was reputedly the cause of Delhi sultan Ala al-Din Khalji's attack on the famous Chittor fort in 1303.⁶⁷ As in the case of Prithviraj Chauhan, the story of Padmini was retold by James Tod and subsequently taken up by Indian nationalists; and Sreenivasan attends closely to the evolving political contexts. In that respect, Sreenivasan's book most closely approximates mine, although with less emphasis on the heroic ethos and social identities of the Rajput community, and correspondingly more on gender relations.

In understanding why Prithviraj was considered a memorable figure for such a long duration, his role as a Hindu warrior who fought against a Muslim foe is especially salient. Much of the interest today in India's precolonial past revolves around the fraught issue of Hindu–Muslim relations, which explains why so many sites of memory – like Prithviraj, or Somanatha, or Padmini – entail narratives of military conflict between Hindu and Muslim polities. Analysis of how representations of such events vary depending on period and audience is critical to a more nuanced perspective on what has too often been cast as an inherently hostile relationship. The simplistic portrayal of a primordial Hindu–Muslim opposition cannot be sustained in the face of abundant evidence that narratives of past hostilities have repeatedly been appropriated and adapted for new uses. Pride in a Hindu identity of resistance to Muslim power may have pervaded many colonial-era retellings of Prithviraj's story, while medieval Sanskrit and Persian texts relating to the Chauhan king could contain insulting language about patrons of the other literary tradition.⁶⁸ Yet seldom do we find negative characterizations of Muslims in

⁶⁶ On the controversy over Laine's book, see Christian Lee Novetzke, "The Laine Controversy and the Study of Hinduism," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 8, no. 1 (2004): 183–201.

⁶⁷ Ramya Sreenivasan, *The Many Lives of a Rajput Queen: Heroic Pasts in India c. 1500–1900* (Delhi: Permanent Black; and Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007).

⁶⁸ This is the case with *Pr̥thvīrāja Vijaya* and *Tāj al-Ma'āṣir*, discussed in the beginning of the next chapter.

Prithvirāj Rāso, the Mughal-era epic composed in an early form of Hindi. In this best known rendition of Prithviraj's life story, Muhammad Ghuri joins two Hindu kings in his armed opposition to our Chauhan hero. Although the Ghuri lord is the most successful in the end, I argue here that the *Rāso* epic originally dedicated far more attention to Prithviraj's rival Jaychand, from the neighboring region of the western Gangetic plain. The primary focus is on competition and hostility within the ranks of the Rajput community, rather than against a foreign foe.

Prithviraj Chauhan differs from other cultural icons of South Asia's medieval past in the dominance acquired by a single narrative in shaping modern conceptions about him. More commonly, as we witness in reference to Shivaji or Padmini, there are multiple, and often conflicting, accounts. In contrast, *Prithvirāj Rāso*'s negative portrayal of the Kanauj king Jaychand – not found in other stories about the Chauhan king – has been so influential that the word *jaycandi*, meaning “treacherous,” has entered the vocabulary of modern Hindi.⁶⁹ The *Rāso* was never the only way that Prithviraj was recalled, of course, and ethnographic data from the nineteenth century suggest that a variety of folk memories of him flourished at one time. But *Prithvirāj Rāso* was a written tradition that gained considerable popularity within the elite Rajput community of warriors from the late sixteenth century onward, eclipsing other imaginings of the Chauhan king in prominence. After it was embraced for its historical authenticity by James Tod, the epic went on to become virtually hegemonic throughout North India by the late nineteenth century.

This book stands out from the other longitudinal studies just described in its detailed exploration of the impact of a single text, as well as in its greater focus on the heroic ethos of a warrior community and the political uses to which a heroic symbol was put. Another hallmark of this work is its insistence that older configurations of cultural symbols continue to seep into and color newer meanings, explaining why certain purported elements of Prithviraj's life from the *Rāso* – such as his killing of Shihab al-Din even while blind – persist in popular memories of the king, regardless of scholarly naysaying. A third notable feature is my recurrent effort to situate memories of Prithviraj in their appropriate social, political, and geographical contexts. The penchant of memory studies scholars for examining representations of the past alone, in social isolation, has occasioned considerable criticism;⁷⁰ mindful of that problem, I try to identify the social groups engaged in remembering Prithviraj at any given time and place, to the extent possible with the existing evidence.

⁶⁹ R. S. McGregor, *The Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary*, s. v. “*jaycandi*.”

⁷⁰ Alon Confino, “Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method,” *American Historical Review* 102, no. 5 (1997): 1388–91.

The chapters that come after this introduction follow a broadly chronological sequence of presentation. Chapter 2, “Literary trajectories of the historic king,” presents a reconstruction of Prithviraj’s life and times according to modern historical scholarship, and then moves on to examine the earliest literary accounts of his career in both Persian and Sanskrit. Inscriptions and Sanskrit texts tell us relatively little about Prithviraj and his immediate predecessors, and instead historians have drawn heavily on thirteenth-century Indo-Persian texts that relate Muhammad Ghuri’s victory over Prithviraj in the second Battle of Tarain (1192). After this excursion into standard historiography and historical methodology, I shift course to engage in a more literary analysis of the few Indic-language narratives about the Chauhan king that survive from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. These are strikingly different from *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, whose textual history I briefly introduce at the end of the chapter.

The next three chapters explore different aspects of Prithviraj’s appeal during the early modern or Mughal era, primarily through analysis of the patronage, audiences, and martial ethos of *Prthvīrāj Rāso*. Developments during the Mughal era – that is, roughly the late sixteenth through early eighteenth centuries – are key to any explanation of Prithviraj Chauhan’s longevity as a cultural symbol, for it is in this period that he is first cast as a heroic figure. Each chapter from 3 to 5 looks at a separate development in the idea of Prithviraj that contributed to his ongoing popularity, and so ensured that Prithviraj would be present as a relevant cultural icon at the outset of the colonial era.

The focal point of Chapter 3, “Delhi in the making of the last Hindu emperor,” is the city of Delhi, to which the Chauhan king increasingly became linked from the fifteenth century on, in Indo-Persian as well as Indic-language texts. I argue that it is the association with Delhi, North India’s premier political center since the early 1200s, which helped elevate Prithviraj to his symbolic status as the (final) representative of pre-Islamic power. The chapter begins and ends at the Mughal court of Emperor Akbar’s reign (r. 1556–1605), where we can situate the earliest summaries of the *Rāso* story and the earliest patrons of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* manuscripts. The heroic figure of Prithviraj thus developed within a cultural milieu of interchange between Indic and Islamicate historical traditions.

Chapter 4, “The heroic vision of a regional epic,” looks at how *Prthvīrāj Rāso* mobilized the martial sentiments of a regional warrior society, the elite Rajputs from Delhi, Haryana, and Rajasthan. The martial content of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* lends itself to comparison with India’s premier heroic epic, the *Mahābhārata*, and so too does its glorification of kshatriya warrior status. I interpret *Prthvīrāj Rāso* as a text that helped constitute a sense of region both spatially and sociologically by imagining a shared past for elite Rajput warriors (the

community of those descended from Prithviraj's champions) of the greater Rajasthan region (the territory bounded by Prithviraj's enemies).

Prthvīrāj Rāso achieved its longest and best known form in the Mewar kingdom, due to the patronage of the royal court in the late seventeenth century. Chapter 5, "Imagining the Rajput past in Mughal-era Mewar," explores the distinctive contents of this version of the epic along with the socio-political context that led the Mewar court to embrace it enthusiastically. The redaction of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* produced in Mewar, in a milieu of intense cultural competition, highlighted the role of a royal ancestor in the climactic events of the late twelfth century. Another noteworthy characteristic of the Mewar *Rāso* is its insertion of additional battle scenes with Muhammad Ghuri, which had the effect of casting him as the implacable foe of Rajasthan's warriors.

The fate of the *Rāso* epic in the new discursive regime of colonial India is the topic of Chapter 6, "Validating *Prthvīrāj Rāso* in colonial India, 1820–70s." I begin with James Tod, who introduced Prithviraj to the world of Western scholarship. Tod's esteem for the *Rāso* helped it achieve a dominant position as an authentic historical source, overshadowing other traditions about the Chauhan king such as the popular Alha oral epic from Bundelkhand and the Gangetic region. *Prthvīrāj Rāso*'s alleged status as the oldest specimen of Hindi literature elevated it even further during the second half of the nineteenth century, as the movement to use Hindi language and Nagari script intensified. In this way, the *Rāso*, in its Mewar version, came to be well known throughout North India, outgrowing its early modern significance as a regional epic aimed primarily at Rajputs.

The consensus on the value of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* started to break down in the late nineteenth century, as discussed in Chapter 7, "Contested meanings in a nationalist age, 1880s–1940s." Serious doubts about the *Rāso*'s historicity were first raised in 1886, but they met with considerable resistance from those who preferred this "indigenous" version of the past over what could be found in Indo-Persian histories. While little attention was given to *Prthvīrāj Rāso* in English-language scholarship after the late nineteenth century, simplified versions of its basic narrative were told repeatedly in the new genres of modern Hindi literature that emerged from 1900 on. A reflection on the bifurcation between scholarly and more popular understandings of India's precolonial history, an increasingly noticeable feature of India's current culture that poses a challenge to the professional historian, ends the chapter.

The epilogue, "The postcolonial Prithviraj," moves ahead in time to the founding of Qila Rai Pithora park in Delhi in 2002. The park offers a minimalist representation of Prithviraj as a king who is memorable because of his link to Delhi, in a continuation of twentieth-century trends in which Prithviraj's warriors, his Hindu adversaries, and even, in this case, his nemesis

Muhammad Ghuri drop out of sight. An analysis of several new media renditions of Prithviraj's story, produced between 1950 and 2009, shows that they too proceed more or less along these minimalist or reductionist lines. I finish with a summation of this case-study of Prithviraj and the conclusions that can be drawn from it about the processes by which cultural symbols and historical memories are constructed, transmitted, and transformed over the ages.

2 Literary trajectories of the historic king

Now, every king in the northwest is as powerful as the wind; but the Lord of Horses had true courage to boot, and so surpassed all others. But even such a king as this had been robbed of rule in Ghazni, and rendered empty and light as an autumn cloud by the evil Gori [Muhammad Ghuri] – him who was given to eating foul foods, the enemy [*ari*] of cows [*go-*], from whence he got his very name. They say Gori strove to become Eclipse itself, to darken the royal fortune of the entire circle of kings . . . What more to say? Heedless that King Prithviraja in Ajayameru [Ajmer] had vowed to exterminate all demon-men, Gori sent an ambassador into the presence of this lion in his den.

Jayanaka, *Pr̥thvīrāja Vijaya*, c. 1191¹

The king decided to depute as his envoy to Ajmer, his Chief Judge, Qiwan-ul Mulk Ruknud Din Hamza . . . His object was to see, if, without wielding the sword, the Raja of that territory could be persuaded to abandon belligerence and pursue the path of rectitude . . . But, it seems, the language of reproof and threat produced no impact on the mind of the ill-advised ruler . . . [Therefore, Muhammad Ghuri] set forth on the campaign of Ajmer so that he could dye the sharp edge of his dagger with the blood of the wicked Raja, and with the tongue of the lance-like spear proclaim to the Raja the holy text, “Now surely the party of Allah is the successful one.”

Taj al-Din Hasan Nizami, *Taj al-Ma'āsir*, c. 1217²

Introduction: vilifying the enemy

I deliberately begin with two passages written from opposing viewpoints, in order to illustrate the problems of using literary texts in understanding Prithviraj Chauhan's significance in Indian history and culture. The first quote comes from the only surviving poetic work produced at Prithviraj's court in Ajmer, and the second is taken from the earliest Persian text composed at Delhi

¹ Based on the translation of Sheldon Pollock, “Ramayana and Political Imagination in India,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 52, no. 2 (1993): 276. From Jayanaka, *Pr̥thvīrājavijaya Mahākāvyam*, eds. C. S. Gulati and G. H. Ojha (Jodhpur: Rajasthan Granthagar, 1997 [1939]), vv. 10.39–42.

² Translation of Bhagwat Saroop from Taj al-Din Hasan Nizami, *Taj ul Ma'athir (The Crown of Glorious Deeds)* (Delhi: Saud Ahmad Dehlavi, 1998), pp. 53–5.

that covers the Chauhan king's defeat. Each passage expresses hostility toward the ruler of the rival court, coupled with a conviction in the righteousness of its own cause. Thus, in *Prthvīrāja Vijaya*, Prithviraj is sworn to "exterminate" demons (*rakṣasas*) in human form such as Gori, who is evil, an eater of foul foods such as beef, and deprives other kings of their luster; while in *Tāj al-Ma'āsir*, Shihab al-Din's purpose in attacking Ajmer was to "dye the sharp edge of his dagger with the blood of the wicked Raja," who is elsewhere said to have "chosen the path of arrogance and . . . girded up the loins of hostility" by refusing to convert to Islam and submit to the Ghurids.³ At first glance, it would seem impossible to reconcile the animosity between the two rivals represented in these passages.

Yet, at the same time, both texts tell us that an ambassador was sent from Shihab al-Din's encampment in Lahore to Prithviraj's court in Ajmer to carry out diplomatic negotiations. The two accounts do, admittedly, describe the diplomat in quite conflicting terms. The Persian poem reports that this envoy was "a prominent dignitary of the state" and "conveyed the message of the king to the Raja in a refined and graceful manner, putting subtle ideas in an elegant language."⁴ The Sanskrit poem denigrates the ambassador's speech, which was "like the cry of wild birds," and also his appearance, which is described as extremely ugly because of his bald head, broad forehead, light-colored hair, and "ghastly white" complexion that made him appear to be suffering from a skin disease.⁵ Despite the hostile rhetoric between courts who patronized Sanskrit versus Persian literature, they clearly sent representatives back and forth and sought to avert warfare through diplomatic means whenever possible. In other words, the Chahamanas and Ghurids were in fact operating within a tense but nonetheless mutually comprehensible system of political relations.

I point this out in order to sound a cautionary note as I embark on an investigation that relies almost exclusively on material that is literary in nature, whether it be inscribed on stone or written on paper and palm-leaf. While the texts I explore describe men and events from their recent or distant pasts – what we would broadly label as biography and history today – their primary intent was not to faithfully document what happened. Instead, literature that focused on kings and their activities was largely produced in a courtly context

³ Translation by Bhagwat Saroop; Hasan Nizami, *Taj ul Ma'athir*, p. 60.

⁴ Ibid., p. 53. See the discussion of these two passages in Finbarr B. Flood (*Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval "Hindu-Muslim" Encounter* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009], p. 109).

⁵ After this description of the envoy from Muhammad Ghuri which Sheldon Pollock has called "almost a paradigm on xenophobic differentiation," more negative comments are made about the cruelty, violence, and destructiveness of the "Goris" ("Ramayana and Political Imagination," pp. 276–7).

and sought to cast their patron-lords in the best possible light. The tendency to regard medieval texts, and especially Indo-Persian chronicles, as straightforward reports on an objective reality has led to much misunderstanding.⁶ Since literature patronized by medieval courts was fundamentally propagandistic in its aims, one cannot assume that textual descriptions and assertions reflected the actual beliefs or attitudes of the author, much less any observable physical facts. This is not to deny that literature conveys a truth of its own, or that it offers rich insights into rhetorical strategies and conceptions of kingship, among other issues.

As I trace the trajectory of literary representations of Prithviraj Chauhan over time, I wish to be mindful of the limited and skewed lens through which we view the past. This calls for constant contextualization and historicization of the literary sources, a particularly critical need in the case of texts that deal with what is conventionally known as the Muslim conquest of North India. Here we have two sets of literary traditions, the Persian and the Sanskrit, that are highly distinct in their aesthetic styles, conventions of form, and figures of speech. The existence of separate literary spheres can create the impression of separation in other spheres of life as well, leading to an exaggerated sense of opposition. An examination of material culture, on the other hand, can cast into light the “dynamic patterns of engagement between Hindus and Muslims,” as Finbarr B. Flood has demonstrated so vividly.⁷ Coinage, modes of dress, figural carving, and the styles of monuments are among the material dimensions of transcultural exchange and circulation that Flood identifies, providing tangible evidence of interactions that are not visible in the written record.⁸ Reliance on courtly literature may therefore result in a perspective that obscures the commonalities and accentuates the differences between polities and peoples in this era.

The title of this chapter, “Literary Trajectories of the Historic King,” could in fact be applied to the entirety of this book, which seeks to follow the various literary pathways through which imaginings of Prithviraj Chauhan passed on their way to the present. The most complete and most influential of these trajectories of memory, the epic tradition of *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, does not make an appearance until 400 years after Prithviraj’s death. Since recollections of him

⁶ This point has been made previously by a number of scholars including Carl W. Ernst, *Eternal Garden: Mysticism, History and Politics at a South Asian Sufi Center* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), pp. 18–37; and Sunil Kumar, “Qutb and Modern Memory,” in *The Present in Delhi’s Past* (Delhi: Three Essays, 2002), pp. 1–61.

⁷ Flood, *Objects of Translation*, p. 3.

⁸ In a related vein, Alka Patel has shown that the Maru-Gurjara style of architecture from the twelfth through fourteenth centuries encompassed both Hindu temples and Islamic ritual buildings (*Building Communities in Gujarat: Architecture and Society during the Twelfth through Fourteenth Centuries* [Leiden: Brill, 2004], pp. 76–164).

had obviously been in circulation for centuries previously, the *Rāso* cannot serve as a baseline for analyzing remembrances of the Chauhan king as they developed over time. This means that I must offer a reconstruction of the circumstances of Prithviraj's life, even though my primary interest is *not* in "what really happened" to him. In addition to serving as a reference point from which to measure variations and changes in how Prithviraj was remembered by later generations, the process of reconstructing Prithviraj's career forces us to be conscious of our own historiographic practices and principles. Just as our literary sources need to be historicized and contextualized, so too do we need to be aware of our evidentiary biases and disciplinary premises.

Accordingly, the first half of this chapter presents an overview of Prithviraj Chauhan and his times as understood by mainstream historiography in the modern era. The standard account of the king's career is based on both the small pool of inscriptions and literary texts that were produced during his reign and also on two Indo-Persian texts composed some decades afterwards, *Tāj al-Ma'āsir* and *Tabaqāt-i Nāṣirī*. Epigraphy and Indo-Persian historiography have been the two most privileged types of information on India's medieval period ever since the nineteenth century, and have displaced Indian-language narratives about kings that circulated in later times – such as *Prthvīrāj Rāso* – as authoritative sources in the historical discipline. One reason for the discounting of Indian-language narratives about the Chauhan king is their relatively late date, for it is not until the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that we get a few short descriptions of him in Sanskrit. These late medieval stories portray him as an unsuccessful king who was memorable solely for his defeat in battle to an alien king – in this they resemble the modern reconstruction of Prithviraj's life, according to which he was a mediocre king of few accomplishments. In marked contrast, *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, which cannot be definitively dated before the late sixteenth century, lauds him as a great, if tragic, hero. The second half of this chapter covers the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Sanskrit accounts of the Chauhan king and also introduces the literary history of the *Rāso*. I therefore, at the outset of the chapter, start with a consideration of how the historical figure of Prithviraj has been constructed in modern scholarship and then move on to begin exploring the book's central focus: the history of Prithviraj as a site of memory; or, to put it another way, to trace the literary pathways by which the Chauhan king came to be remembered as an admirable figure rather than as a failed ruler.

Geopolitical setting of an age of conflict

In the fragmented political conditions of North India between 1000 to 1200, Prithviraj's lineage faced numerous contenders for power: most local rivals were later regarded as Rajputs, while other competitors were Turks and Tajiks

based in Afghanistan. Ajayameru or Ajmer, the site of Prithviraj's court and the destination of the envoy sent by Gori (Muhammad of Ghur), was founded early in the twelfth century by one of Prithviraj's ancestors, and soon emerged as a major political center.⁹ Located on the southern flank of the Aravalli range, Ajmer sits in a valley surrounded by hills. With the creation of Anasagar, a large lake with a circumference of eight miles, Ajmer became a fertile oasis in a hilly, dry, and sparsely populated area. Adding to Ajmer's appeal was its proximity to Pushkar, a natural lake located seven miles away that has been regarded as sacred since ancient times. Ajmer is well situated within the larger Rajasthan region, for the Aravalli hills diminish considerably in height to its north. The city is also adjacent to the watershed of the subcontinent – that is, the highest point of the North Indian plain on either side of which water flows in different directions – giving it easy access to both eastern and western Rajasthan. The fact that the Mughals, and later the British, retained direct control over Ajmer in their own hands underscores its geo-political importance within the region.¹⁰

Prior to the founding of Ajmer, Prithviraj's lineage had been based at the salt lake now called Sambhar, approximately 60 miles to the north. The territory they controlled is sometimes known as Shakhambari, after the salt lake; an alternative name is the Sapadalaksha country or Siwalikh (i.e., Sawalakh, one and a quarter lakhs), alluding to the large number of villages it contained. The Chahamanas of Shakhambari are first attested epigraphically in 973 CE, and were among a number of warrior lineages – including the Chalukyas or Solankis of Gujarat, the Paramaras of Malwa, and the Chandellas of Bundelkhand – that arose out of the ruins of the Imperial Pratihara empire.¹¹ They were joined in the late eleventh century by the Gahadavala dynasty, which took over the former capital of the Imperial Pratiharas, Kanauj.¹²

The leading martial lineages of the eleventh and twelfth centuries were classified in later times as aristocratic Rajput clans, an identity that did not yet exist in the lifetime of Prithviraj Chauhan. Their own epigraphic and literary texts define the Chahamanas of Shakhambari, the Chalukya/Solankis of Anahillapataka (modern Patan) in northern Gujarat, the Paramaras of Dhar in Madhya Pradesh, and the Pratiharas of Mandore in Marwar as the

⁹ For details on Prithviraj and his predecessors, see D. Sharma, *Early Chauhan Dynasties*.

¹⁰ Har Bilas Sarda, *Ajmer: Historical and Descriptive* (Ajmer: Fine Art Printing Press, 1941), pp. 17–18, 60.

¹¹ The earliest inscription of the Chahamanas of Shakhambari is: F. Kielhorn, "Harsha Stone Inscription of the Chahamana Vigraharaja," *Epigraphia Indica* 2 (1894), pp. 116–30.

¹² For overviews of political history, see Dasharatha Sharma, ed., *Rajasthan through the Ages*, vol. 1 (Bikaner: Rajasthan State Archives, 1966); and R. C. Majumdar, ed., *The History and Culture of the Indian People*, vol. 5, *The Struggle for Empire* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1966).



Figure 2.1. Map of Prithviraj Chauhan's world

descendants of Brahmins and/or ancient kshatriya warriors of the solar and lunar races. Yet by the sixteenth century, the large clan groupings that called themselves Chauhan (after the Chahamanas), Chalukya, Pamar or Pramar (Paramara), and Parihar (Pratihara) were categorized rather as *agnikula* or born in the pit of a sacrificial fire on Mt. Abu.¹³ This late legend served to

¹³ The Mughal-era version of the *agnikula* legend claimed that the progenitors of the four clans were created by the sage Vishvamitra in order to get rid of the demons (*daitya*) who were disturbing the great sacrifice being conducted on Mt. Abu. Whereas the myth of origin in a firepit originally applied only to the Paramaras, it was extended to cover four clans in the Mughal period (D. Sharma, *Early Chauhan Dynasties*, pp. 3–4).

establish the Chahamanas and their *agnikula* peers as different from, and superior to, other kshatriya groups.¹⁴ These various lineages that would later be regarded as Rajput jostled for power in North India between 1000 and 1200, in the vacuum left by the decline of the Imperial Pratiharas.

The most persistent competitors for territory coveted by the Chahamanas were the powerful Chalukya kings of Gujarat.¹⁵ The rivalry became fiercer during the twelfth century, particularly after the capture of Nagaur by Jayasimha Siddharaja of Gujarat in 1137; his successor, Kumarapala (r. ca. 1143–72), was also a strong ruler.¹⁶ Several Chahamana–Chalukya intermarriages occurred in this era, as part of peace settlements no doubt; as a result, Someshvara, our hero Prithviraj III's father, was born of a Chalukya princess, and both he and Prithviraj spent much of their early lives in Gujarat.

The kings from the northwest with whom the Chahamanas also contended for power were “as powerful as the wind,” in the words of *Prthvīrāja Vijaya*. Among them, “the Lord of Horses had true courage to boot, and so surpassed all others.” This is an early occurrence of the title Lord of the Horses (here, Hayapati), referring to a ruler who not only had command over an ample supply of horses but also a large force of horse-riding fighters.¹⁷ In Indic language texts, it typically referred to a king of Turkic or Central Asian background, whose men were especially skilled in cavalry warfare and had high-caliber mounts, when compared to the armies of Indian kingdoms.¹⁸ Here it most probably refers to the Ghaznavid dynasty, which reached its zenith under Mahmud (r. 998–1030), whose armies campaigned over a large area extending from western Persia well into India. Their Indian possessions became even more important after the Ghaznavids lost western Khurasan to the Seljuq Turks in the 1040s and were forced to retreat to Lahore and the Punjab.¹⁹ This last remnant of Mahmud of Ghazni's empire was seized in 1186 by Shihab al-Din Muhammad of Ghur. Hence, despite his greatness,

¹⁴ Alf Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking India's Oral and Classical Epics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 455.

¹⁵ Although historians often call this dynasty the Chaulukyas, to differentiate them from the Chalukyas of the western Deccan, I use Chalukya here because it is closer to the term used in *Prthvīrāj Rāso*: *cāluka* or *cālukka* (e.g. verses 19.26–28 & 19.24 in Chand Bardai, *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, ed. Kaviray Mohansimha [Udaipur: Sahitya Sansthan, Rajasthan Vishvavidyalay, 1954]). This edition of the *Rāso* is henceforth referred to as Mohansimha *Rāso*.

¹⁶ D. Sharma, *Early Chauhan Dynasties*, pp. 52–61, 64.

¹⁷ Cynthia Talbot, “Inscribing the Other, Inscribing the Self: Hindu-Muslim Identities in Pre-Colonial India,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37, no. 4 [1995]: 708–10.

¹⁸ For a discussion of the Turkish edge in cavalry warfare as compared to the Indian use of war-elephants, see André Wink, *Al-Hind, the Making of the Indo-Islamic World*, vol. 2, *The Slave Kings and the Islamic Conquest, 11th–13th Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. 79–110.

¹⁹ Clifford Edmund Bosworth, *The Later Ghaznavids: Splendour and Decay* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), pp. 8–9.

Pr̥thvīrāja Vijaya tells us that the Lord of Horses “had been robbed of rule in Ghazni” by the evil Gori, Shihab al-Din of Ghur.

The contrast drawn between the Ghaznavids and the Ghurids in the quoted passage is instructive: while the Lord of Horses was a powerful and courageous neighbor, the Gori (Ghuri, Ghauri) was an evil eater of foul foods and an enemy of cows. In this age of constant competition for tribute and territory, the Chahamanas had engaged in intermittent battle with the Ghaznavids for generations, just as they had with “Rajput” warriors to the east and south of their kingdom.²⁰ The Ghaznavids were clearly a familiar presence in the northern and western regions of the subcontinent, whereas the Ghurids were a destructive force that had only recently emerged on the geo-political horizon of the Chahamanas.

Ghur was a mountainous area in central Afghanistan whose people were not Turks like the Ghaznavids, but most probably of Tajik or Persian origin; the remoteness of their region meant that they were latecomers to Islam, however, beginning the process of conversion only in the eleventh century. In 1173, Ghazni was taken over by the Ghurid leader Ghiyath al-Din, who concentrated his energies on conquering territories to the west, while his brother Shihab al-Din (known as Mu’izz al-Din in Persian texts) focused instead on expansion into the Indian subcontinent. Initially, Shihab al-Din took a more southerly route, beginning with the capture of Multan in 1175, followed by an expedition into northern Gujarat in 1178 that ended with defeat at the hands of the Chalukyas. Soon thereafter, the Ghurids began pressing against the Ghaznavids in the Punjab, culminating in the seizure of Lahore in 1186. Shihab al-Din’s armies, which included many Turkish warriors, went on to seize the fort of Tabarhind in modern Haryana. The fort was retaken by Chahamana troops and a defeat inflicted on the Ghurids in the first battle of Tarain in 1191.²¹

This first battle of Tarain is surely the military triumph commemorated in *Pr̥thvīrāja Vijaya*, or “Prithviraj’s Victory.” The existing text is incomplete and ends well before the victorious battle with which it would have originally culminated, so we cannot be absolutely certain who the king’s opponent was on this occasion. Given the denigration of Shihab al-Din and his men, however, it is almost certain that the poem celebrated his defeat in a conflict with Prithviraj. We learn from Persian chronicles composed some decades later (and discussed shortly) that Prithviraj’s army trounced Shihab al-Din and the

²⁰ Judging from the list of accomplishments attributed to Prithviraj’s predecessors in *Pr̥thvīrāja Vijaya*, the Chahamanas had major conflicts with the Ghaznavids in 1079, in 1118, and again in 1133, when their capital Ajmer itself was threatened (Jayanaka, *Pr̥thvīrāja Vijaya* 5.70, 5.113, 6.1–20; D. Sharma, *Early Chauhan Dynasties*, pp. 41, 45, 49).

²¹ Peter Jackson, *The Delhi Sultanate: A Political and Military History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 5–10; Wink, *Al-Hind*, pp. 135–45.

Ghurids in 1191 at the site of Tarain. They fought again at the same place the following year, but in this second battle Shihab al-Din was successful rather than Prithviraj. Hence, *Prthvīrāja Vijaya* must have been written in the short interval of time between the two encounters at Tarain.²²

Seeing Prithviraj through contemporary sources

In the last few pages I have repeatedly referred to *Prthvīrāja Vijaya*, the only surviving literary text from the king's reign.²³ Much of what we know about Prithviraj's predecessors comes from *Prthvīrāja Vijaya*, whose more detailed genealogy agrees quite closely with the genealogies contained in Chahamana inscriptions.²⁴ Among the deeds narrated are the founding of Ajmer and the construction of various temples and tanks there. The text repeatedly situates the royal family in Ajmer and praises the city's beauty, as well as nearby Pushkar's holiness.

While historians have resorted to *Prthvīrāja Vijaya* for details not available elsewhere, they have preferred to rely on inscriptions whenever possible in reconstructing the history of Prithviraj's era. This has been the typical practice since the early nineteenth century, partly because inscriptions are more often dated than texts. Stone inscriptions have another advantage, in that they are generally found where they were originally placed and thereby make it possible to map a dynasty's sphere of influence or a cultural practice's geographic extent. The Delhi Siwalik Pillar Inscription is a case in point, for it is one of the reasons that historians consider Prithviraj's uncle Vigraharaja IV to be the greatest of the Chahamana kings. Also known in the vernacular as Visaldev, he ruled from ca. 1152 to 1164 or 1167 CE, having been victorious in battle all the way from the Vindhya mountains in the south to the Himalayas in the north, according to his inscription. This boastful claim is not as much of an exaggeration as it might first seem, for the Ashokan pillar on which the inscription is recorded was once situated about 400 miles away from Ajmer in the Himalayan foothills.²⁵ This confirms that

²² Adding to the likelihood that *Prthvīrāja Vijaya* was composed during the king's lifetime is the fact that it is quoted in a text dating from approximately 1200 (Har Bilas Sarda, *Prithviraja Vijaya: The Great Epic Poem on Prithviraja, the Last Chauhan Emperor of India* [Ajmer: Vedic Yantralaya, 1935], p. 5).

²³ For summaries of the text, see Sarda, *Prithviraja Vijaya*, pp. 6–25; and Chandra Prabha, "Prthvīrājavijaya," in *Historical Mahakavyas in Sanskrit* (Delhi: Shri Bharat Bharati, 1976), pp. 148–58.

²⁴ James Morison, "Some Account of the Genealogies in the Pr̥thvīrāja-Vijaya," *Vienna Oriental Journal* 7 (1893): 188–92.

²⁵ F. Kielhorn, "Delhi Siwalik Pillar Inscriptions of Visaladeva: The Vikrama Year 1220," *Indian Antiquary* 20 (1890): 216, 219. This Ashokan pillar from Topra was relocated by Firuz Shah Tughluq in the late fourteenth century to Delhi, where it still stands.

the Chahamanas did extend their control as far north as the Himalayas, even if it was just for a short span of time.

Vigraharaja is also said to have captured both Delhi and Hansi, a strong fort on the plain between the Sutlej and Yamuna rivers, in an inscription issued by Prithviraj's father in 1170 CE; another Chahamana inscription from 1168 is found at Hansi itself, corroborating that this fort was truly once in Chahamana hands.²⁶ It is likely, therefore, that Vigraharaja's sovereignty was acknowledged over much of Haryana and the Delhi territory, as well as a large expanse of Rajasthan. In addition to his military successes, Vigraharaja is known for his patronage of the arts. He was most probably responsible for the construction of the building in Ajmer that was later transformed into the Adhai-din-ka-jhompra mosque, where the play about him titled *Lalita Vigraharāja* was inscribed.²⁷ Prithviraj ascended to the Ajmer throne soon after the Chahamanas reached the apex of their power under Vigraharaja IV and may have controlled an equally large territory. He had become king by 1178 CE, when he is cited as the ruler in an epigraph, although he appears to have still been a minor.²⁸

Unfortunately, inscriptions from Prithviraj's reign are relatively short in length, few in number, and were not issued by the king himself. Only seven inscriptions both mention Prithviraj and provide a date that can be assigned to this specific Chahamana ruler, rather than one of the two earlier Prithvirajs.²⁹ These records were found in five locations, ranging from the vicinity of Ajmer to sites in Mewar and western Marwar. The most useful inscriptions for historical purposes were found outside Rajasthan, in Madanpur village on

²⁶ Akshaya Keerty Vyas, "Bijholi Rock Inscription of Chahamana Somesvara: V.S. 1226," *Epigraphia Indica* 26 (1940–41): 95, 105; D. R. Bhandarkar, "Hansi Stone Inscription of Prithviraja [Vikram] Samvat 1224," *Indian Antiquary* 41 (1912): 17–19.

²⁷ Another Sanskrit play – composed by the king rather than a court poet – is also recorded on the walls of that structure. For a description of both works, see F. Kielhorn, "Sanskrit Plays, Partly Preserved as Inscriptions at Ajmere," *Indian Antiquary* 20 (1891): 203.

²⁸ Dasharatha Sharma believes that Prithviraj was born in 1166/67 CE (*Early Chauhan Dynasties*, p. 80), while Somanji suggests a wider window of time from 1162 to 1168 (*Prithviraj Chauhan and His Times*, p. 28).

²⁹ In chronological order, they are: D. C. Sircar, "The Barla Inscription of the Time of Prithviraja III, V.S. 1234" (*Epigraphia Indica* 32 [1957–58]: 299–304); the Phalodhi Inscription of v. s. 1236 (L. P. Tessitori, "A Progress Report on the Preliminary Work done during the year 1915," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* n.s. 12 [1916]: 85–93); three inscriptions from Madanpur, one dated v.s. 1239 (Alexander Cunningham, *Report of Tours in Bundelkhand and Malwa in 1874–75 & 1876–77* [Varanasi: Indological Book House, 1966], pp. 98–100; and Alexander Cunningham, *Reports of a Tour in Bundelkhand and Rewa in 1883–84; and of a Tour in Rewa, Bundelkhand, Malwa, and Gwalior, in 1884–85* [Varanasi: Indological Book House, 1969], pp. 171–5); the Udaipur Victoria Hall Museum Inscription dated v.s. 1244 (*Archaeological Survey of India, Western Circle, Progress Report, 1906*, p. 62); and the Visalpur Inscription of v.s. 1244 (A. C. L. Carley, *Report of a Tour in Eastern Rajputana in 1871–72 and 1872–73* [Varanasi: Indological Book House, 1966], pp. 154–6).

the border of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh states. Madanpur is not far from Mahoba or Khajuraho, two places associated with the Chandella dynasty, and its three short inscriptions mention the defeat of Chandella king Paramardi by Chahamana Prithviraja in 1182/83.³⁰ This war between Paramardi and Prithviraj was immortalized in the oral traditions of the Gangetic plain in the form of the Alha epic, whose main heroes are warrior-subordinates of the Chandella ruler. Despite its literary fame, Prithviraj's success over the Chandellas was ephemeral and did not lead to any annexation of territory in the Bundelkhand region.

Scholars have therefore had to turn to literature to fill in the picture of Prithviraj's career. He is referred to tangentially in *Kharataragaccha-paṭṭāvalī*, a Sanskrit text containing biographies of the Kharatara lineage of Jain monks. It devotes considerable attention to a debate between two Jain leaders conducted in 1182 CE, which took place at Prithviraj's temporary encampment at Narain. Upon his return to the capital, Ajmer, Prithviraj issued a *jaya-patra* or certificate of victory to the winner Jinapati Suri, who was welcomed to Ajmer with a lavish celebration paid for by a Jain merchant.³¹ While *Kharataragaccha-paṭṭāvalī* as a whole was not completed until 1336, the portion dealing with the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries was written down ca. 1250.³² Historians view this text as reliable in its details, even though it was written sometime after the events described, due to the Jain tradition's interest in historical matters.³³ We learn from *Kharataragaccha-paṭṭāvalī* that Prithviraj defeated the Bhadanakas, a little-known dynasty who controlled the area around Bayana in northeastern Rajasthan, and that a peace treaty between Prithviraj and Gujarat's king Bhima was negotiated in the 1180s, suggesting that the two kingdoms had been at war previously.³⁴

It is in this context of a paucity of epigraphic and literary material from Prithviraj Chauhan's era that historians of Rajasthan have tried to mine *Prithvīrāja Vijaya* for its factual evidence, a notoriously difficult task when dealing with works in the highly formulaic *mahākāvya* genre. Furthermore, the

³⁰ Prithviraj's victory over a Paramardin is also mentioned in Merutunga's *Prabandha Cintāmaṇi*, a Sanskrit text from Gujarat dated 1304 CE.

³¹ Muni Jinavijaya, ed., *Kharataragaccha Brhadgurvāvalī* (Bombay: Singhji Jain Shastra Sikshapith, 1956), pp. 25–34; also Mahopadhyay Vinayasagar, ed. and Hindi trans., *Kharataragaccha kā Itihās*, vol. 1 (Ajmer: Dada Jinadattasuri Ashtam Shatabdi Mahotsav Svagatkarini Samiti, 1959), pp. 55–75.

³² Dasharatha Sharma, "Gleanings from the Kharataragacchapaṭṭāvalī," *Indian Historical Quarterly* 26 (1950): 223, 226–7; Dasharatha Sharma, "The Kharataragaccha Paṭṭāvalī, Compiled by Jinapāla," *Indian Historical Quarterly* 11 (1935): 779–81.

³³ On Jain historical consciousness, see John E. Cort, "Genres of Jain History," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 23 (1995): 469–506. For more on *paṭṭāvalis*, see Phyllis Granoff, "Religious Biography and Clan History among the Svetambara Jains in North India," *East and West* 39, no. 1–4 (1989): 195–215.

³⁴ Jinavijaya, *Kharataragaccha*, p. 43; Vinayasagar, *Kharataragaccha*, p. 97.

existence of only one manuscript, obtained from Kashmir, suggests that *Prthvīrāja Vijaya* had a limited circulation. Since the sole reference to *Prthvīrāja Vijaya* in medieval literature comes in the work of another Kashmiri poet ca. 1200, the poem seems to have only circulated within the Kashmir region.³⁵ *Prthvīrāja Vijaya*'s multiple connections with Kashmir explain why its authorship is usually attributed to Jayanaka, a poet mentioned in the poem's last chapter as arriving at Prithviraj's court from that region.

Since the single surviving manuscript of *Prthvīrāja Vijaya* ends abruptly in the middle of the twelfth chapter, we are not sure how the narrative would have ended. In a typical courtly poem of its *mahākāvya* genre, the hero achieves a major success in battle and marries a human princess who is homologous to the Goddess of Royal Fortune. (Shihab al-Din) Ghuri figures in the tenth chapter as a major adversary of Prithviraj, while we learn that the Gujarat ruler was another opponent in the text's eleventh chapter, when Prithviraj's advisors are pleased at news of hostilities between Gujarat and the Ghurids.³⁶ Gujarat is said to have successfully repulsed a Ghurid incursion on this occasion, most probably in 1178 CE.

Prthvīrāja Vijaya's eleventh chapter introduces another unfinished theme, that of Prithviraj's love for an unnamed woman residing on the banks of the Ganges, said to be an incarnation of the celestial nymph Tilottama. The poem's geographic placement of this queen-to-be has led Dasharatha Sharma, among others, to equate her with *Prthvīrāj Rāso*'s Samyogita, whose home was in Kanauj city along the Ganges river.³⁷ It is possible that both texts allude to the same queen, but that is no reason to accept as accurate the *Rāso*'s story of how Prithviraj came to marry the Kanauj princess – through an armed abduction entailing much violence. A stronger correspondence between *Prthvīrāja Vijaya* and *Prthvīrāj Rāso* is found in Prithviraj's minister Kadambavasa, who plays a prominent role in both texts; his *Rāso* equivalent is called Kaymas.

These few points, plus some details on Prithviraj's ancestors, are the main political facts to be gleaned from *Prthvīrāja Vijaya*, but the text is more interesting and informative when it comes to cultural attitudes towards the Muslim enemies of the Chahamanas. We have already seen that it describes Shihab al-Din as a wicked eater of cows, portrays his ambassador as alien in appearance to the point of extreme ugliness, and castigates the "Goris" for their destructive nature. At the outset of the poem, Brahma makes a plea to Vishnu

³⁵ Sarda, "Prithviraja Vijaya," pp. 3–6. The extant copy includes a commentary by Jonaraja, a Kashmiri scholar who also wrote a continuation of Kalhana's *Rājataranginī*, the chronicle of Kashmiri history. Several manuscripts were available to Jonaraja in the mid fifteenth century, for he mentions variant readings.

³⁶ Jayanaka, *Prthvīrāja Vijaya* 11.4–23.

³⁷ D. Sharma, *Early Chauhan Dynasties*, pp. 110–14.

to be born on earth in order to rectify the Muslim desecration of Pushkar, the holy site dedicated to Brahma that is near Ajmer – the answer to his prayer is our hero Prithviraj, frequently identified in the text as a form of Vishnu. Subsequently, we are told that King Arnoraja had a lake created in order to cleanse the earth of impurity from the many Muslim deaths that occurred during the course of an assault on the Chahamana capital.³⁸ The Chahamana kings are hence firmly placed on the side of the gods, fighting against the forces of evil, in these flattering scenarios.

The perception of the Chahamanas' Muslim foes as social deviants or "others" is emphasized by the use of labels such as ogre (*rakṣasa*), demon (*asura*), and ghoul (*piśāca*), as well as names denoting various untouchable groups (*mātaṅga*, *cāṇḍāla*, *janaṅgama*).³⁹ *Prthvīrāja Vijaya* also employs the ethnic terms *turuṣka* (Turk) and *yavana* (Ionian or westerner), in addition to the generic *mleccha* or barbarian, although less commonly than elsewhere in medieval Indian literature.⁴⁰ These words are used interchangeably, suggesting that all manner of groups considered marginal in this court poet's mind were conceptually equated. This does not mean that the twelfth-century elites of North India failed to differentiate the various types of Muslims with whom they had political or commercial relations.⁴¹ For the composer of a courtly text about a royal patron, however, the point was not to report on the particularities of lived experience but rather to highlight the patron's proximity to the ideal of the exemplary ruler. Accordingly, in literary discourse the Muslim opponents of the king or his ancestor were typically lumped together with other groups who represented disorder and aberration, such as the demonic enemies of the gods and the unclean fringe elements of settled agrarian society.

The epitome of the ideal ruler in the Sanskrit tradition was none other than the divine king Rama, with whom *Prthvīrāja Vijaya* often compares and even equates its hero, a pattern that Sheldon Pollock drew our attention to some years ago. Aside from Prithviraj, whose natal horoscope is identical to Rama's, his brother Hariraja is said to be Lakshmana, and his minister Kadambavasa is identified as a form of Hanuman.⁴² Furthermore, the poet inserts a detailed summary of the *Rāmāyaṇa* into the narrative by having the king visit a picture

³⁸ Verses 10.39–46 & 10.49–50 pertain to the Ghurids; 1.49–54 contain Brahma's pleas to Vishnu; 6.1–27 tell the story of Arnoraja's defeat of a Muslim army and creation of Anasagar.

³⁹ For example, 10.42, 10.50, 1.75, 1.49, 6.13, and 6.11, respectively.

⁴⁰ For example, 6.4, 6.9, 1.50, respectively.

⁴¹ Brajadulal Chattopadhyaya, *Representing the Other? Sanskrit Sources and the Muslims* (Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1998), p. 89.

⁴² Also the king's maternal uncle Bhuvanaikamalla is said to be another Garuda, and his beloved Tilottama in human guise is also Sita (V. S. Pathak, *Ancient Historians of India: A Study in Historical Biographies* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1966), pp. 131–3; Pollock, "Ramayana and Political Imagination," pp. 275–6).

gallery illustrating Rama's exploits.⁴³ Thus, *Prthvīrāja Vijaya* is the key literary text on which Pollock bases his larger argument that “the period of some two hundred years starting around the mid-twelfth century witnessed a coding of political reality via *Rāmāyaṇa* themes such as did not exist – or at least not to anywhere near the same degree – in any previous era.”⁴⁴ According to Pollock's well-known thesis, the homology with Rama was useful to poets not only because it elevated a patron-king's stature, but also because it vilified the patron's opponents who were akin to the *rakṣasa* demons that plagued the righteous Rama. Hence, Pollock believes that the military threat from the Muslim kings of Afghanistan and Central Asia led to the deployment of the *Rāmāyaṇa* as the literary framework through which to narrate a royal hero's life. As the *Rāmāyaṇa* “is profoundly and fundamentally a text of ‘othering,’” it was readily adaptable to the task of demonizing this new category of political rival, who was so culturally distinct.⁴⁵ The political relevance of the *Rāmāyaṇa* from the twelfth century onward thus reflects a growing antipathy toward Muslim power.

Pollock's argument has been challenged by Brajadulal Chattopadhyaya, who asserts that Pollock greatly exaggerates the centrality of Rama symbolism in the literary discourse of the medieval era.⁴⁶ Comparisons with other figures such as the Varaha incarnation of Vishnu, the sage Agastya, or the king of the gods Indra were made just as frequently as with Rama, Chattopadhyaya argues.⁴⁷ Nor were Muslims universally reviled.⁴⁸ Representations of Muslims generally oscillated depending on the prevailing political conditions: in times of military conflict and radically fluctuating spheres of influence, the rhetoric was often negative in tone; whereas long-established Muslim rulers were conceptually assimilated into the Sanskritic political imagination, as I have shown elsewhere in reference to the Deccan.⁴⁹ Whether the increased use of *Rāmāyaṇa* themes for political purposes can indeed be attributed to the growing threat of Muslim military power is also made suspect by the existence of tales about Rama-like kings whose enemies were other indigenous rulers and not Muslims.

In light of these objections, we should be cautious in interpreting *Prthvīrāja Vijaya*'s demonization of the Ghurids as a reflection of true repugnance towards Muslims. Its composer was engaging in a mode of dehumanizing the Ghaznavid and Ghurid rivals of the Chahamanas that was frequently employed to designate foes regardless of religious affiliation. On the other

⁴³ This scene has been translated and analyzed by Elliott McCarter, “The Picture-Gallery Episode of the *Prthvīrājavijaya Mahākāvya*: Translation of the Eleventh Sarga and Analysis of Its Political Application” (MA thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 2005).

⁴⁴ Pollock, “Ramayana and Political Imagination,” pp. 273–4. ⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 282.

⁴⁶ Chattopadhyaya, *Representing the Other*, especially pp. 98–115. ⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 55, 110–11.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 50–1, 63. ⁴⁹ Talbot, “Inscribing the Other, Inscribing the Self,” pp. 704–10.

hand, other long-standing foes of the Chahamanas such as the Chalukya kings of Gujarat – with whom they intermarried – were never cast in the role of demons in *Prthvīrāja Vijaya*, nor were they characterized in insulting ways. The hostile rhetoric of Chahamana inscriptions is also notable, as Pollock has rightly observed. For instance, in the Delhi Siwalik Inscription, Vigraharaja IV is praised as “the god who made Aryavarta once again true to its name [i.e., making it “the land of the Aryans (alone)’] by extirpating the mlecchas” or barbarians.⁵⁰ What we can infer with confidence from *Prthvīrāja Vijaya* and Chahamana inscriptions is that this court had a history of using extremely pejorative language in referring to military rivals who were socially and geographically distant. The rhetoric of “Othering” that Chahamana poets deployed strategically in order to elevate their patrons served the needs of Indo-Persian writers equally well, as we will see in the following exploration of thirteenth-century Persian accounts of the Ghurid conquest.

Thirteenth-century Indo-Persian perspectives

Prithviraj Chauhan’s defeat in battle is not covered in *Prthvīrāja Vijaya* since, as the word *vijaya* or victory in the title indicates, the poem was intended to end on a jubilant note, with an account of a successful military campaign. For information on this momentous event and its aftermath, historians have long relied on accounts in the Persian language. The theme of righteous conquest pervades *Tāj al-Ma’āsir* (ca. 1217)⁵¹ and *Tabaqāt-i Nāṣirī* (1259/60),⁵² which came out of a flourishing tradition of original historiography in Persian that was inaugurated at the Ghaznavid court during the eleventh century. Indo-Persian historiography continued with the court-centered perspective of the Ghaznavid histories and covered little else than the activities of the ruling elite.⁵³ Although modern scholarship routinely refers to them as “chronicles,” historical accounts in Persian belong to several different genres – Sunil Kumar classifies *Tāj al-Ma’āsir* as a *manāqib* or poetically embellished work that is openly eulogistic, and *Tabaqāt-i Nāṣirī* as a *tārīkh* or general historical survey composed in a more prosaic style. Regardless of genre, these and other Indo-Persian histories of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were all created for

⁵⁰ Translation by Pollock, “Ramayana and Political Imagination,” p. 278; the Sanskrit text was published in Kielhorn, “Delhi Siwalik Pillar Inscriptions,” p. 218. See also Pollock, “Ramayana and Political Imagination,” p. 273.

⁵¹ In addition to the translation by Saroop (*Taj ul Ma’athir*), an extensive summary of its contents is provided in Syed Hasan Askari, “Taj-ul-Maasir of Hasan Nizami,” *Patna University Journal* 18, no. 3 (1963): 49–127.

⁵² Minhaj Siraj Juzjani, *Tabaqāt-i Nāṣirī: A General History of the Muhammadan Dynasties of Asia*, trans. H. G. Raverty (Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint, 1970).

⁵³ Iqtidar Husain Siddiqui, *Indo-Persian Historiography up to the Thirteenth Century* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2010), pp. 8–12.

the benefit of a royal patron. Moreover, in almost all cases, Indo-Persian historical accounts of this era were written from the vantage point of Delhi, the center of Muslim power.⁵⁴

A triumphant tone characterizes the coverage of Shihab al-Din's conflict with Prithviraj Chauhan in Taj al-Din Hasan Nizami's *Tāj al-Ma'āsir*, the first lengthy historical text produced under the patronage of the Delhi Sultanate.⁵⁵ Its description of the second battle of Tarain starts with the passage quoted at the outset of this chapter, expressing Shihab al-Din's desire to "dye the sharp edge of his dagger with the blood of the wicked Raja." After many poetic flourishes within its prose narrative – but precious little in the way of specific details – the text concludes by stating that:

The Raja of Ajmer, who had chosen the path of arrogance and had girded up the loins of hostility, and had slipped the reins of insurgency into the hands of Satan, was taken prisoner and ultimately tasted the evil consequences of his misdeeds.⁵⁶

The outcome of contest was never in question, the text implies, for the victor had God on his side. The ornate style of *Tāj al-Ma'āsir*, often characterized by modern commentators as florid and even bombastic, tends to obscure historical particularities. Michael Bednar argues that such literature "blurs the line between literature and history, aesthetics and fact, and demonstrates how both may exist in a single text."⁵⁷ What was important in medieval narratives of military victory was the ability to acclaim the leader while inspiring his followers, not the recording of minutiae.

Unlike later Indo-Persian texts, *Tāj al-Ma'āsir* begins its account with Shihab al-Din's victorious campaign against Prithviraj Chauhan at the second Battle of Tarain, fought in 1192.⁵⁸ It conspicuously omits any mention of Shihab al-Din's defeat at Prithviraj's hands at Tarain in 1191 and directs attention solely to successes in battle (just like the *mahākāvya* genre of *Prithvīrāja Vijaya*), as was suitable in a literary work intended to eulogize the sultan. *Tāj al-Ma'āsir*'s author Hasan Nizami ensured in this manner that no shadow be cast on the aura of greatness enveloping Shihab al-Din. Hasan Nizami explicitly frames his

⁵⁴ Sunil Kumar, *The Emergence of the Delhi Sultanate 1192–1286* (Delhi: Permanent Black), pp. 363–70.

⁵⁵ The section relating to Prithviraj appears in Hasan Nizami, *Taj ul Ma'athir*, pp. 50–62.

⁵⁶ Translation by Bhagwat Saroop, *ibid.*, p. 60.

⁵⁷ Bednar focuses on the works of Amir Khusrau but his argument applies to a range of Indo-Persian "historical" texts (Michael Boris Bednar, "The Content and the Form in Amīr Khushraw's Duval Rānī va Khizr Khān," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 24.1 [2014]: 34–5).

⁵⁸ While the campaign leading to the first battle of Tarain may have commenced in 1190, the battle itself was most likely fought later that winter, in 1191 CE (D. Sharma, *Early Chauhan Dynasties*, p. 90 n49). The second battle of Tarain occurred about a year later and is generally dated to 1192 (Ganguly, "The Age of Prithvirāja III," p. 112). However, it is possible that the second battle occurred late in 1191 instead.

narrative as an account of “war with enemies of the faith,” and of the process by which “the Islamic way of life was established in the land of the Hindus.”⁵⁹ He therefore began his coverage of events with Shihab al-Din’s victory over Prithviraj, a precedent that was to have important consequences. That is, Hasan Nizami established the convention followed even today of considering Prithviraj as the first Indian king subjugated in the wave of conquests that led to the founding of the Delhi Sultanate. Eventually this would result in James Tod’s designation of “last Hindu emperor” for this Chauhan ruler – a claim that overlooked many subsequent non-Muslim rulers, most particularly those of South India’s Vijayanagara empire.

Tāj al-Ma’āsir is more informative about the aftermath of Prithviraj’s defeat than about what preceded it. Although Prithviraj survived for a short while, he was soon executed for continuing to oppose his new overlords and his son was appointed governor of Ajmer in his place. Meanwhile, Shihab al-Din had returned to Ghazni and his generals in South Asia were operating semi-autonomously. Central to the narrative is the Turkish general of slave origin, Qutb al-Din Aibak, who was based in the newly acquired fort of Delhi. In 1193, Aibak was forced to leave Delhi and go to the fort of Ranthambhor in northern Rajasthan, which was under siege by Prithviraj’s brother Har-raj. Har-raj withdrew on this occasion but a year or two later took control of Ajmer; he eventually killed himself after being defeated by a Ghurid army sent to recapture the city.⁶⁰ Modern scholars have drawn extensively on this account from *Tāj al-Ma’āsir* for their reconstruction of what happened to Prithviraj Chauhan and Ajmer in the two or three years after the second battle of Tarain.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Translation by Bhagwat Saroop; Hasan Nizami, *Taj ul Ma’athir*, pp. 9, 11. This must be why *Tāj al-Ma’āsir* failed to record Shihab al-Din’s earlier conquests in the subcontinent, particularly the takeover of Multan in 1175/76 and of Lahore in 1186, which had both been in the hands of Muslim rulers when Shihab al-Din seized them.

⁶⁰ Hasan Nizami, *Taj ul Ma’athir*, pp. 65–8, 107–10, 184–90. An inscription from the vicinity of Ajmer, dated in 1194/95 CE, records a grant by the wife of Hariraja (i.e., Har-raj) and thus confirms *Tāj al-Ma’āsir*’s assertion that Prithviraj’s kin remained powerful in his former capital for a short while after Prithviraj’s defeat (A. B. M. Habibullah, *The Foundation of Muslim Rule in India*, 2nd edn. [Allahabad: Central Book Depot, 1976], p. 67 n41). Hammira Mahākāvya also mentions Prithviraj’s brother Hariraja, who became king of Ajmer after Prithviraj’s death. The poem’s protagonist, Hammira, is said to be a descendant of Prithviraj’s son and Hariraja’s nephew (Nayachandra Suri, *Hammira Mahākāvya*, 2nd edn., ed. Muni Jinavijaya [Jodhpur: Rajasthan Prachyavidya Pratisthan, 1993], verses 3.74–82 & 4.1–31).

⁶¹ D. Sharma, *Early Chauhan Dynasties*, pp. 115–16. A few coins of the “horse and bullman” design bearing the names of both Prithviraj and (Shihab al-Din) Muhammad bin Sam have led to some conjecture that Prithviraj accepted Ghurid sovereignty for a period of time as *Tāj al-Ma’āsir* suggests; another possibility is that the Ghurids initially used indigenous styles in order to facilitate acceptance of their own coinage (P. N. Singh, “Coins Bearing the Names of Muhammad bin Sam and Prithviraj III: A Reappraisal,” *Israel Numismatic Journal* 10 [1988]: 113–16).

Hasan Nizami started composing *Tāj al-Ma'āsir* sometime in 1205 or 1206, less than two decades after Prithviraj's defeat.⁶² Shihab al-Din was assassinated in 1206, triggering a struggle for power won by his general Qutb al-Din Aibak, who is generally considered the first ruler of the Delhi Sultanate (r. 1206–10). The introduction to *Tāj al-Ma'āsir* mentions only Shihab al-Din (under his later name Mu'izz al-Din) and his subordinate Qutb al-Din Aibak, suggesting that Hasan Nizami originally intended to write only about these two men, although his narrative extends into the reign of Aibak's successor Shams al-Din Iltutmish (r. 1210/11–1236).⁶³ Given the precarious existence of the Delhi Sultanate at this time and Iltutmish's need for legitimization as a result of his status as a former slave, it is likely that Hasan Nizami took considerable liberties in composing his accounts of past events. As we have seen, Hasan Nizami passed over Shihab al-Din's early career (which included the conquest of Muslim rulers and a battle lost to Prithviraj Chauhan in 1191), in order to cast him in the most favorable light. Despite the proximity of *Tāj al-Ma'āsir* in time to the events it describes, we must therefore keep its ultimate purpose in mind when reading the contents.⁶⁴

Tabaqāt-i Nāṣirī is closer to what we think of as a work of history than the more ornate *Tāj al-Ma'āsir*, and has been called the “most reliable authority on the Ghurian conquest of North India and the foundation of the Sultanate of Delhi.”⁶⁵ Its author Minhaj Siraj Juzjani came from a learned family of long standing, who originated in a mountainous area of Afghanistan near the Ghur region, and did not arrive in South Asia until 1226/27. Juzjani went on to have a long, successful career in the Delhi Sultanate, several times serving as the Chief Qazi (judge) of the capital, Delhi.⁶⁶ His personal knowledge of the Sultanate elite makes Juzjani's history particularly valuable. Completed in

⁶² On Hasan Nizami, see Askari, “Taj-ul-Maasir,” pp. 49–60; Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, *On History and Historians of Medieval India* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1983), pp. 55–70; and Siddiqui, *Indo-Persian Historiography*, pp. 40–53.

⁶³ Jackson, *Delhi Sultanate*, pp. 26–43. Hasan Nizami probably finished writing *Tāj al-Ma'āsir* in or around 1217 CE, at a time when Iltutmish's position and the future of the Delhi Sultanate was not yet secure. One manuscript of this text consulted by H. M. Elliot is said to have continued the narrative up to 1229 CE. However, no such manuscript exists today and all other extant versions of the text cover events only until the beginning of 1217 (Nizami, *On History and Historians*, p. 60).

⁶⁴ Peter Jackson points out that Aibak and Iltutmish, both Turks and former military slaves, were essentially “usurpers” and therefore “stood in need of legitimization, and obtained it, on one level, from their panegyrists” (*Delhi Sultanate*, p. 31). The link between the Ghurids and their Delhi successors was therefore strengthened and the role of Aibak and Iltutmish in the conquest of North Indian territory amplified, in the histories produced in Delhi.

⁶⁵ Siddiqui, *Indo-Persian Historiography*, p. 129.

⁶⁶ H. G. Raverty, “Memoir of the Author,” in Juzjani's *Tabaqāt-i Nāṣirī*, pp. xix–xxxii; Nizami, *On History and Historians*, pp. 71–93; and Siddiqui, *Indo-Persian Historiography*, pp. 94–157.

1259/60 CE, *Tabaqāt-i Nāṣirī* is dedicated to the reigning Delhi Sultan, Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah (r. 1246–66), the youngest son of Iltutmish.

Unlike *Tāj al-Ma’āsir*, which is narrowly focused on the military exploits of three kings, *Tabaqāt-i Nāṣirī* is a general or universal history that starts with the first man, Adam. It devotes much attention to rulers who flourished in Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia, with a particular emphasis on the Shansabanid dynasty of Shihab al-Din/Mu’izz al-Din Muhammad of Ghur. Juzjani provides a comprehensive account of Shihab al-Din’s military activities, and includes events that cast him in a less favorable light, such as his failed campaign in Gujarat in 1178 and his seizure of Lahore in 1186 from a fellow Muslim, the Ghaznavid ruler. Juzjani also covers the first battle of Tarain in 1191, at which “the whole of the Rānās of Hind” are said to have accompanied Prithviraj.⁶⁷ The two battles of Tarain are described in more detail than the other South Asian campaigns of the Ghurids, and Prithviraj is the only ruler named in the list of Shihab al-Din’s victories that Juzjani appends to his account of this sultan. In his own way, Juzjani therefore also contributed to the perception that the battles of Tarain were watershed events that changed the course of history, just as had Hasan Nizami.

Tabaqāt-i Nāṣirī’s clear and straightforward descriptions form the basis of modern historical accounts of the two battles of Tarain. The immediate bone of contention that led to war between Shihab al-Din and Prithviraj was Tabarhindah fort (probably Bhatinda in India’s Punjab state), according to *Tabaqāt-i Nāṣirī*. The Sultan had captured it shortly before 1191, presumably from the Chahamanas, and Prithviraj assembled an army in order to gain it back. The Ghurid and Chahamana armies clashed at Tarain, where Shihab al-Din took part in the combat. He was seriously wounded and might very well have died or been captured, Juzjani reports, had it not been for the quick reaction of a young trooper who sprang up onto the Sultan’s horse and led it safely off the battlefield. The injury to their leader disheartened the Ghurid troops and they were easily defeated. Shihab al-Din then returned to Ghazni, leaving a garrison behind in Tabarhindah, which Prithviraj promptly besieged.

Prithviraj had secured the fort by the time Shihab al-Din/Mu’izz al-Din returned to the vicinity somewhat over a year later, and a second battle was fought at Tarain. Juzjani provides some specifics on battle tactics in the following passage:

(The Sultān) marshalled his ranks, and was advancing leisurely. The light-armed and unincumbered [sic] horsemen he had directed should be divided into four divisions, and had appointed them to act against the infidels on four sides; and the Sultān had commanded, saying: “It is necessary that, on the right and left, and front and rear,

⁶⁷ Translations by H. G. Raverty; in Juzjani, *Tabaqāt-i Nāṣirī*, pp. 455, 459.

10,000 mounted archers should keep the infidel host in play; and, when their elephants, horsemen, and foot (soldiers) advance to the attack, you are to face about and keep the distance of a horse's course in front of them." The Musalmān troops acted according to these instructions, and, having exhausted and wearied the unbelievers, Almighty God gave the victory to Islām, and the infidel host was overthrown.

Rāē Pithorā [Prithviraj Chauhan], who was riding an elephant, dismounted and got upon a horse and fled (from the field), until, in the neighbourhood of (the) Sursutī, he was taken prisoner, and they despatched him to hell . . . The seat of government, Ajmīr, with the whole of the Siwālikh (territory), such as Hānsī, Sursutī, and other tracts, were subjugated. These events took place, and this victory was achieved, in the year 588 H. [1192 CE].⁶⁸

In his analysis of the reasons for Ghurid success, André Wink notes the reference to mounted archers in the passage above and the key role they played in winning this battle.⁶⁹ Peter Jackson observes that the Sultan deployed classic nomadic tactics when he told his mounted archers (who were the light cavalry) to attack from all directions and then retreat to a safe distance once the opposing army countercharged.⁷⁰

Although *Tabaqāt-i Nāṣirī* was not the first Persian text to report on the conflict between Prithviraj Chauhan and Shihab al-Din, it was the most influential. Several major Indo-Persian histories subsequently repeated *Tabaqāt-i Nāṣirī*'s version of what had happened at Tarain with only minor changes. One example from the period of the Delhi Sultanate is *Tārikh-i Mubārakshāhī*, completed sometime after 1434 by Yahya ibn Ahmad Sirhindi and intended as an offering to the reigning sultan, Sayyid Mubarak Shah.⁷¹ Historical works from the reign of the Mughal emperor Akbar, such as Nizam al-Din's *Tabaqāt-i Akbarī* (1593) and Badauni's *Muntakhab al-Tawārīkh* (1595–96), continued to present the events at Tarain along the same lines as *Tabaqāt-i Nāṣirī*.⁷² It was standard procedure for Arabic and Persian historians to use earlier works in their own reconstructions of the past in this manner. Indo-Persian

⁶⁸ Translation by H. G. Raverty; in Juzjani, *Tabaqāt-i Nāṣirī*, pp. 468–9.

⁶⁹ Wink, *Al-Hind*, p. 93. For Wink's full explanation of the military advantages of the Ghurids, which included a better supply of horses and better military equipment, see *Al-Hind*, pp. 79–110.

⁷⁰ Jackson, *Delhi Sultanate*, pp. 16–17. Jackson points out that the Ghurid army had a larger number of heavy cavalry at this battle, despite the critical role apparently played by the light cavalry.

⁷¹ Sirhindi, *Tārikh-i Mubārakshāhī*, pp. 8–11. For an analysis of this chronicle, see Peter Hardy, *Historians of Medieval India: Studies in Indo-Muslim Historical Writing* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), pp. 56–67.

⁷² Nizam al-Din Ahmad ibn Muhammad Muqim, *Tabaqāt-i-Akbarī of Khwājah Niẓamuddīn Aḥmad*, vol. 1, trans. B. De (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1973), p. 39; 'Abd al-Qadir ibn Muluk Shah Badauni, *Muntakhab-ut-Tawārīkh*, vol. 1, trans. George S. A. Ranking (Karachi: Karimsons, 1976), p. 70. For more on these texts, see Harbans Mukhia, *Historians and Historiography during the Reign of Akbar* (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1976), pp. 89–153.

conceptions of how Prithviraj Chauhan was defeated are notably consistent over the centuries, due to their reliance on *Tabaqāt-i Nāṣirī*'s account.

This mainstream Indo-Persian narrative of the Tarain battles was transmitted not only in areas of North India close to Prithviraj's former territory but even in the far-off Deccan. *Tārīkh-i Firishtah* was composed in the Adil Shahi kingdom of Bijapur in the first decade of the seventeenth century, yet still follows the main outlines of the encounter as told by Juzjani in the mid thirteenth century. Firishta's text became an authoritative source of information on India for the English once Alexander Dow translated it in 1768, and so Europeans too became familiar with the standard Persian-language historiography of India.⁷³ This version of what had happened in the historic encounter between Prithviraj Chauhan and Muhammad of Ghur was incorporated into colonial knowledge partly because it had been acquired earlier than any rendition in Sanskrit or a North Indian vernacular. Even more important, however, was the general credence given to Indo-Persian historiography, which with its frequent citation of names and dates resembled European notions of proper history-writing. Accordingly, Indo-Persian accounts were assumed to be accurate histories whose testimony should be accepted with little question. Peter Hardy notes that "far from attacking, or merely weakening the native [Indo-Persian] tradition by a different example, the earliest British writers on medieval India if anything strengthened it."⁷⁴ Their belief in the evidentiary value of Indo-Persian historiography led them to transmit a construction of the Indian past that had been produced largely for the political elites of medieval Delhi, in which the memory of Prithviraj Chauhan was that of a loser in war. As a consequence, history textbooks today either follow *Tabaqāt-i Nāṣirī* in saying that Prithviraj was killed immediately upon his capture by the Ghurid army or assert, in accordance with *Tāj al-Ma'āsir*, that Prithviraj spent a short time as a Ghurid subordinate in Ajmer before being executed.

I will have more to say about *Tāj al-Ma'āsir* and *Tabaqāt-i Nāṣirī* in Chapter 3; for now I want to reiterate that both these texts, composed in Delhi for the patronage of the early sultans, present the conquest of Prithviraj Chauhan as a major milestone on the way to the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate. While nineteenth-century scholars assumed that Indo-Persian texts faithfully reflected historical reality, current scholarship on the Delhi Sultanate has provided us with a much better historical context for the production of

⁷³ Peter Hardy, "Firishta, by-name of Muhammad Ḳāsim Hindū Shāh Astarābādī," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edn., ed. P. Bearman; Th. Bianquis; C.E. Bosworth; E. van Donzel; and W.P. Heinrichs (Brill, 2011). Accessed online, 04 November 2011; www.brillonline.nl.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_SIM-2378

⁷⁴ Hardy, *Historians of Medieval India*, p. 1.

Tāj al-Ma'āsir and *Tabaqāt-i Nāṣirī*, and a more nuanced attitude regarding their alleged objectivity in narrating past events. Nonetheless, *Tabaqāt-i Nāṣirī*'s account of the battles between Prithviraj and Muhammad of Ghur has long been passed down as authoritative, first in the Indo-Persian tradition, later in colonial historiography, and even today in history books.

Precursors to *Prithvīrāj Rāso*

As a result of the scholarly preference for Indo-Persian texts in their reconstruction of the Ghurid conquests, as well as the value placed on contemporary or near contemporary testimony, several short narratives about Prithviraj in Sanskrit from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries are often overlooked today. These brief tales have contributed little to the making of the modern historical understanding of Prithviraj Chauhan, nor do they appear to have had much impact on conceptions of the king from the sixteenth century onward. Yet they are significant because they demonstrate that Prithviraj was being actively remembered in Indic-language traditions during the pre-Mughal era, even if not very vigorously or very widely. In turning to an analysis of these medieval Sanskrit accounts, we move away from an examination of the historical sources used by modern scholars to study Prithviraj and begin our exploration of later remembrances of the king recorded in Indian languages. In other words, from this point on in the book, I focus primarily on the study of the *idea* of Prithviraj. The fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Sanskrit tales covered in this section are especially interesting in their casting of the Chauhan lord as an ineffective and lethargic king, far from the *Rāso* epic's portrayal of him as an admirable and dynamic figure.

The three Sanskrit texts in which we find short accounts of Prithviraj's career are *Prabandha Cintāmaṇi*, *Hammīra Mahākāvya*, and *Purātana Prabandha Saṅgraha* (PPS). They are the only Indic-language narratives about Prithviraj that were almost certainly written down before the late sixteenth century.⁷⁵ The paucity of stories is not surprising, since there are relatively few works in Indic languages from this period of North Indian history. The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were the era of the Delhi Sultanate's dominance and so most of

⁷⁵ A few other texts do refer to Prithviraj Chauhan in passing, but without providing any useful details. One example is a verse praising him in *sārīgadharapaddhati*, a fourteenth-century anthology of Sanskrit poetry (Pollock, "Ramayana and Political Imagination," p. 274 n13). Also, Prithviraj is mentioned as a previous incarnation of Viramde, son of Kanhadade, a Chauhan warrior of the Sonigira line (Padmanabha, *Padmanābha's Kānhabade Prabandha*, trans. V. S. Bhatnagar [Delhi: Aditya Prakashan, 1991], p. 64.) This prose text was composed in Gujarati ca. 1455 CE by the Brahmin Padmanabha on the commission of Akhairaja, a fourth-generation descendant of Viramde. Prithviraj also appears in *Kharataragaccha-pattāvali*, discussed earlier in this chapter.

the surviving literature was composed in Persian. The Sultanate's strength waned dramatically after the sacking of Delhi by the Central Asian king Timur in 1398. In the aftermath of Timur's attack, political power devolved to new regional configurations, and patronage for literature in Indic languages began to increase slowly. Indian-language accounts of past kings – historiography in a broad sense – are primarily a phenomenon of the sixteenth century onward.

One exception to the generally sparse literary landscape of the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries are the Jain libraries of Gujarat and Rajasthan, where the dry climate preserved the books whose acquisition was considered meritorious in this religion. Jain scholars of the late medieval era had some interest in the lives of past kings, as a means of articulating the superior virtues possessed by those rulers who adhered to Jain principles.⁷⁶ The *prabandha* genre in particular manifests this Jain attention to royal biography, which resulted in a small corpus of "historical" writing that is nonetheless larger than that which we find in other non-Muslim contexts during this time period.⁷⁷ A connection to the Jain tradition of western India characterizes all three of our texts and must be the reason for their similarities; in each case, Prithviraj was attacked multiple times by a Muslim king, treachery contributed to Prithviraj's defeat, and the attack on Prithviraj occurred while he was sleeping.

The oldest of the tales is *Prabandha Cintāmaṇi*, composed by the Jain scholar Merutunga in Gujarat in 1304 CE.⁷⁸ This largely prose work contains numerous tales about great kings, some from the ancient past, such as the legendary Vikramaditya.⁷⁹ Many stories focus on the kings of medieval Gujarat, who are portrayed in positive terms in comparison to their traditional enemies, the kings of Malwa. *Prabandha Cintāmaṇi*'s coverage of Prithviraj comes in three parts: Prithviraj is first briefly praised; next, a barbarian (*mleccha*) king who has repeatedly attacked Prithviraj is killed through the heroic sacrifice of one of Prithviraj's underlings. Only the final section of this brief account focuses on Prithviraj, who comes under assault from the barbarian king's successor.⁸⁰ Prithviraj is said to have successfully defended himself

⁷⁶ John E. Cort, "Who is a King? Jain Narratives of Kingship in Medieval Western India," in *Open Boundaries: Jain Communities and Cultures in Indian History*, ed. John E. Cort (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), pp. 85–95; Toshikazu Arai, "The Structure of Jaina Kingship as Viewed by the *Prabandhacintāmaṇi*," in *Kingship & Authority in South Asia*, ed. J. F. Richards (Madison: South Asian Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1978), pp. 74–114.

⁷⁷ For more on Jain *prabandhas*, see D. Ali, "Temporality, Narration, and the Problem of History."

⁷⁸ Arai, "The Structure of Jaina Kingship," p. 74.

⁷⁹ Pollock, "Ramayana and Political Imagination," p. 273.

⁸⁰ The episodes that mention Prithviraj Chauhan comprise approximately 1150 words in English translation (Merutunga, *The Prabandhacintāmaṇi or Wishing-Stone of Narratives*, trans. C. H. Tawney [Delhi: Indian Book Gallery, 1982 [1901]], pp. 188–91); and thirty-seven lines of prose plus four lines of verse in the Sanskrit original (Merutunga, *Prabandhacintāmaṇi*, vol. 1, ed. Muni Jinavijaya [Shantiniketan, Bengal: Singhi Jain Jnānpith, 1933], pp. 114–16).

from the Muslim barbarians twenty-two times in the past, but he is not so fortunate on this last occasion. This theme of Prithviraj's repeated armed encounters with Shihab al-Din is found in virtually every story about him that I have encountered.

Prithviraj's downfall, in *Prabandha Cintāmaṇi*, is precipitated by his mistreatment of a minister, whose ears he has cut off. The wronged minister goes over to the enemy and guides the invading army to Prithviraj's encampment. Prithviraj is sleeping so soundly after a day of religious fasting that he is easily taken captive; presumably he had been excessive in breaking the fast for he did not resist capture. Sometime later, the lethargic Prithviraj is brought back to his own capital, and the enemy king is about to let him resume his throne. But the Muslim ruler sees, in Prithviraj's picture-gallery, images of Muslims "being slain by droves of pigs. The sovereign of the Turuṣkas [Turks] was exceedingly incensed at this biting insult, and he put Pr̥thvīrāja to death by cutting off his head with an axe."⁸¹ What is surprising in this tale's ending is not that a Muslim might get upset at seeing pictures of his co-religionists being killed by an unclean animal, but rather the suggestion that a non-Muslim might have had such images made, presumably for his own pleasure.

The second story relating to Prithviraj is found in *Hammīra Mahākāvya*, which was composed by another Jain author, Nayachandra Suri, perhaps around 1400.⁸² The more ornate Sanskrit verse of the *mahākāvya* genre sets it apart from the straightforward prose of Jain *prabandhas* such as *Prabandha Cintāmaṇi*. About ninety verses in *Hammīra Mahākāvya* are dedicated to Prithviraj, who figures in it as one of the forefathers of the main hero, Hammira, a Chauhan king of Ranthambhor.⁸³ In this narrative, the kings of the western countries approach Prithviraj for relief from the depredations of Shihab al-Din Muhammad Ghuri, based in Multan. Prithviraj marches against Shihab al-Din and captures him, but releases him unharmed seven times in succession – once again, we find the motif of the numerous victories won previously by Prithviraj in which he does not injure his arch-enemy or keep him captive for long.

Shihab al-Din then goes to a neighboring king, according to *Hammīra Mahākāvya*, and obtains a fresh army with which he advances on Delhi. Hearing about this from afar, Prithviraj sets out toward the city with a few

⁸¹ Merutunga, *Prabandhacintāmaṇi*, trans. Tawney, p. 191.

⁸² On the issue of the dating of this text, see Muni Jinavijaya, "Hammīrmahākāvya – Ek Paryālocan," in Nayachandra Suri, *Hammīra Mahākāvya*, pp. 26–7. The existing print edition is based on a manuscript copied in 1496 CE by a Jain scribe (Nilakantha Janardana Kirtane, "The Hammīra Mahākāvya of Nayachandra Sūri," in Suri, *Hammīra Mahākāvya*, p. ii).

⁸³ Suri, *Hammīra Mahākāvya* 2.75–372. For an English synopsis, see Kirtane, "Hammīra Mahākāvya," pp. xii–xv. For a Hindi translation, see Nayachandra Suri, *Hammīra Mahākāvya (Hindi Anuvād)*, trans. Nathulal Trivedi (Jodhpur: Rajasthan Oriental Research Institute, 1997).

followers. Shihab al-Din bribes the king's master of the horses and his musicians with many gold coins, and then assaults Prithviraj's camp just before daybreak. That is, Prithviraj is sleeping when the attack occurs, just as in *Prabandha Cintāmaṇi*, although he does not remain sluggish here. Prithviraj is caught in disarray, nonetheless, and gets on a horse to escape but his treacherous musicians sound the drums and the horse begins to prance around, for it has been trained to do so by the master of the horses. Unlike the *Prabandha Cintāmaṇi*, here the treachery occurs not because of Prithviraj's misdeeds but because of the greed of his retainers. Prithviraj is distracted by his horse's movements, in *Hammīra Mahākāvya*, and so is easily seized by enemy troops and taken to Delhi. After Prithviraj has been imprisoned for a month, someone suggests to Shihab al-Din that he should free Prithviraj, who had let him go unharmed many times before. This angers Shihab al-Din so much that he has Prithviraj executed immediately.

The third narrative comes from *Purātana Prabandha Saṅgraha (PPS)*, a collection of Sanskrit stories compiled in 1936 from several short manuscripts.⁸⁴ The “*Prthyvīrāja Prabandha*” (or Prithviraj story from *PPS*) consists of approximately forty long lines of prose, plus two verses of six lines apiece. Although the year 1471 is recorded at the end of the only manuscript of this text bearing any date, the portion of the manuscript containing “*Prthyvīrāja Prabandha*” was written by another scribe.⁸⁵ This means we cannot be certain that it was truly composed in 1471. The language of the text is less sophisticated than in the case of Merutunga's *Prabandha Cintāmaṇi*,⁸⁶ and its Persian and vernacular elements testify to a later date. The meaning of passages is not always clear, and portions of the text are damaged. These problems with dating and comprehending “*Prthyvīrāja Prabandha*” are unfortunate, since it contains some intriguing counterparts to *Prthyvīrāj Rāso*.

In “*Prthyvīrāja Prabandha*,” as in *Hammīra Mahākāvya*, Shihab al-Din is said to have been captured seven times previously by Prithviraj and released unharmed each time. Here Prithviraj has a minister, Kaimbasa, and a spear-bearer, Pratapasimha, between whom there is considerable bad feeling. When the minister complains to the king about Pratapasimha on one occasion, the king goes to Pratapasimha and is persuaded that the true villain is minister Kaimbasa, who has allegedly been aiding the Turks. In anger, the king attempts to shoot and kill Kaimbasa one night, in the dark, but the arrow hits another man instead. The king feigns innocence about his attempted murder of

⁸⁴ Muni Jinavijaya, ed., *Purātana Prabandha Saṅgraha* (Calcutta: Adhishtata-Singhi Jain Jnānāśram, 1936), pp. 86–7.

⁸⁵ The modern editor suggests that the existing manuscript was put together from more than one original (*Ibid.*, pp. 2–4, 10–11, 15).

⁸⁶ Arai, “The Structure of Jaina Kingship,” p. 75.

Kaimbasa, but his bard Chand Baliddika knows about it and privately censures him. The next day, the king dismisses both the minister and the bard from his service. As was the case in *Prabandha Cintāmaṇi*, Prithviraj's misguided and unjustified treatment of a subordinate creates a traitor to his cause.

Soon afterwards, the sultan again approaches Delhi with a large army, but Prithviraj falls asleep and remains so day after day – this is the most extreme condition of sleepiness we find in these three stories. Prithviraj is finally awakened by his sister and flees on horseback, but his former minister Kaimbasa helps the sultan's forces find him. The ex-minister also advises the sultan on how to capture Prithviraj, for a certain sound would cause his horse to prance around rather than run away. Thus the king is seized, placed in gold fetters, and brought to Delhi, where he reproaches the sultan for not releasing him as he had done previously for the sultan. One day the imprisoned Prithviraj asks Kaimbasa to bring him a bow and arrow, with the intention of shooting the sultan in the assembly hall. But his ex-minister informs the sultan of Prithviraj's intentions and a metal image is put in the place where the sultan customarily sat. When Prithviraj releases his arrow, therefore, all it does is break the metal image of the sultan in two. After this, Prithviraj is put into a pit and pelted to death with stones.

It is presumably the shared Jain context of *Prabandha Cintāmaṇi*, *Hammīra Mahākāvya*, and “Pṛthvīrāja Prabandha” that explains their common elements. The Jain origins of the two *prabandha* tales is definite, for their manuscripts were found in Jain libraries in Gujarat. The provenance of *Hammīra Mahākāvya* is less clear.⁸⁷ Its author Nayachandra Suri is indisputably a Jain, however, even though the *mahākāvya* genre was typically associated with Brahmins working for aristocratic patrons. The text's last section consists of praise of Nayachandra Suri and his spiritual lineage, to which the Jain scribe Nayahamsa added several more verses. Although *Hammīra Mahākāvya* is a courtly work, most probably intended to please a Chauhan lord, the lavishness of its eulogies of Jain scholars indicates transmission among the Jain literati. While others too may have heard these stories about Prithviraj Chauhan, they were being generated by the same general circles of educated Jains from western India.

A Jain critique of kingship is particularly notable in the depiction of Prithviraj in *Prabandha Cintāmaṇi* and “Pṛthvīrāja Prabandha.” In both texts, Prithviraj is represented as an inept and unworthy ruler who ultimately brought about his own demise. He lacks the wisdom or good judgment possessed by

⁸⁷ The author does not cite a location, and his text was copied by the scribe Nayahamsa in Firuzpur, a town that cannot be identified. This manuscript was obtained by the modern editor from a person in Nasik (Maharashtra) who had received it from someone else (Kirtane, “*Hammīra Mahākāvya*,” p. ii).

the good kings from Gujarat who, in *Prabandha Cintāmaṇi*, are “all insightful in judging situations they face, and . . . know how to control their senses.”⁸⁸ By the standards of this Jain paradigm of kingship, the Prithviraj Chauhan of the *prabandha* narratives is notable for a marked lack of discernment. Prithviraj cannot judge the true character of his ministers, for one thing, and so treats them wrongly, turning men who were once devoted servants into traitors.⁸⁹ This is a damning indictment of a ruler from the perspective of the scholarly/scribal class who composed and transmitted these tales.

An even more dramatic sign of Prithviraj’s deficiencies as a leader is his state of torpor at the time of the enemy assault.⁹⁰ *Prabandha Cintāmaṇi* states that Prithviraj was sleepily heavily, having broken a fast and apparently overly indulged in food and drink before going to bed. “Pṛthvīrāja Prabandha” goes farther and asserts that Prithviraj slept for ten whole days, during which time his entire army was decimated. He was oblivious and therefore totally unprepared for the events that quickly overtook him. The episode of the horse’s prancing that prevented Prithviraj from evading capture, found in both *Hammīra Mahākāvya* and “Pṛthvīrāja Prabandha,” can be read as another sign of his ineffectual nature – Prithviraj is incapable of controlling a horse, much less a kingdom. His failings were not those of cruelty or cowardice, yet Prithviraj is represented as entirely unsuited to kingship in these stories.

The situation is somewhat more complex in *Hammīra Mahākāvya*, which tries to reconcile a critical Jain viewpoint with the adulation that is required in the *mahākāvya* genre. *Hammīra Mahākāvya* is unlike the other two narratives in its casting of Prithviraj as an essentially brave man, who acts like a true warrior by vowing to defeat Shihab al-Din as soon as he hears about the sultan’s depredations. In contrast to the two *prabandha* stories, in this courtly poem Prithviraj is not unfair to his subordinates, who betray him merely out of greed. Little is made of the fact that Prithviraj was asleep when attacked, and he recovers consciousness quickly. The author of *Hammīra Mahākāvya* must

⁸⁸ Arai, “Structure of Jaina Kingship,” p. 90.

⁸⁹ The motif of a traitor’s role in the defeat of a kingdom is also found outside of Jain circles. A traitor leads to defeat in *Kāñhaṇade Prabandha*, as well as the Telugu *Pratāparudra Caritramu* (Cynthia Talbot, “The Story of Prataparudra: Hindu Historiography on the Deccan Frontier,” in *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia*, eds. David Gilmartin and Bruce Lawrence [Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000], pp. 292–3).

⁹⁰ The idea that the Chauhan king’s slothfulness contributed to his loss in battle is also found in *Viruddha Vidhi Vidhvansā*, another Sanskrit text from Gujarat, composed during the first half of the thirteenth century by a man whose relatives had served Prithviraj. It states that “the king, whose intellect was shrouded by the vice of sleep, who, although alive, was as good as dead in battle, was slaughtered by the Turuṣkas” (D. C. Ganguly, “A New Light on the History of the Cāhamānas,” *Indian Historical Quarterly* 16 [1940]: 571.) See also Narottamdas Swami, “Samrāt Prthvīrāj ke Do Mantrī” (in *Prthvīrāj Rāso kī Vivecanā*, eds. Mohanlal Vyas and Nathulal Vyas [Udaipur: Sahitya Sansthan, Rajasthan Vidyapith, 1959], pp. 657–60).

have been compelled to describe Prithviraj Chauhan as a laudable warrior because of his status as an illustrious predecessor of Hammira, the main hero of the work, who was a Chauhan lord. Although no patron is named in *Hammīra Mahākāya*, typically the patron of this type of dynastic history belonged to the same lineage as the text's protagonist. Nayachandra Suri cleverly used words with double meanings in the opening verses of his composition, thereby invoking the blessings both of various Hindu deities and also the Tirthankaras, the supreme Jain beings.⁹¹ Despite this additional evidence of the author's targeting of a courtly audience, we know only that the text was passed down by Jain scholars.

The most intriguing of the three narratives is the “Pṛthvīrāja Prabandha” of *PPS*, on account of its resemblances to *Pṛthvīrāj Rāso*. Several of the primary characters in the *Rāso* also appear in “Pṛthvīrāja Prabandha,” among them Prithviraj’s bard Chand and opponent Jaychand.⁹² This is also true of the king’s minister Kaimbasa of the Dahima clan: a seemingly historic person who is called Kadambavasa in the twelfth-century *Pṛthvīrāja Vijaya* and Kaymas in the later *Pṛthvīrāj Rāso*.⁹³ Even more fascinating than the shared cast of characters is the way “Pṛthvīrāja Prabandha” prefigures two of *Pṛthvīrāj Rāso*’s episodes, the killing of the minister Kaimbasa/Kaymas and the killing of sultan Shihab al-Din.

In *Pṛthvīrāj Rāso*, Kaymas is a loyal minister who has a weakness for women, as is made clear in the epic’s version of his death at Prithviraj’s hands:⁹⁴

A fair palace slave from Karnataka one night
Set her sights on the love-befuddled Kaymas.

Kaymas went (to see her) in the palace
after several hours of the night had passed.
A female *pān*-bearer witnessed this
and (told) the chief queen, alarmed.
“Holding a lit lamp, (someone)
is wandering in the women’s quarters like the moon.”
Full of rage, the queen wrote on birch-bark
and gave it to the servant (to deliver to) her husband,

⁹¹ Kirtane, “Hammīra Mahākāya,” pp. iii–iv.

⁹² Upon receiving word of Prithviraj’s death, the Jaychand of “Pṛthvīrāja Prabandha” orders celebrations throughout his capital (Jinavijaya, *Purātana*, pp. 86, 89).

⁹³ Kaymas is also mentioned in *Kharataragaccha Paṭṭavālī*, a Sanskrit account of Jain leaders that was completed in 1336 CE (Jinavijaya, *Kharataragaccha*, pp. 25–34).

⁹⁴ The following translation is based on verses 3.3–3.13 of a widely available adaptation of the shortest *Rāso*: Chand Bardai, *Pṛthvīrāj Rāsau*, ed. Mataprasad Gupta (Ciragamva, Jhansi: Sahitya Sadan, 1963); henceforth Gupta *Rāso*. I have also consulted Deshrajsimha Bhati, *Candbardātī kṛta Pṛthvīrāj Rāso kā Kaymās-vadh Saṭīka* (Delhi: Ashok Prakashan, 1968), pp. 67–75.

Telling her to saddle a horse
 and giving her an hour limit (for delivery).
 Quickly, the servant went to that forest full of elephants
 and found where Prithviraj was.

The king was sleeping peacefully,
 the wakeful moon keeping him company,
 (While she held) a burning lamp, the charming sound
 of (her) anklets broke (his slumber).

When (the movement of) Jaychand's army shook the earth,
 the king felt no concern.

He had fought Shah Shihab al-Din,
 in (many) battles enthusiastically.

(When) the minister (Kaymas) captured the accomplished Chalukya,
 (the king) was far away in Vishvasar (on more important matters).
 (Since Kaymas) continued to disregard this Chauhan,

only the gods could protect him.

When (she) put (her) hand on (his) chest, (his) eyes (opened) and looked,
 Then the servant took (the letter) in her hand and read it out loud.
 He got enraged, and a row of arrows appeared in his two arms.
 It was as if the Serpent lord had been awakened by his wife herself.

Neither the accompanying army nor the king's companions knew
 (that he left the forest).

He commended the servant who was the intermediary
 (between him and his queen).

He ruined the reputations of the lords of heaven,
 the underworld, and the human world,⁹⁵
 By speedily arriving at his home within an hour.

Ninety-nine moments of the night had passed,
 when (the king's) bow roamed around (in search of Kaymas).
 Eyes couldn't (see) hands move (in the darkness),
 while Kaymas was dallying in the palace.

(Prithviraj's) bow was swaying (in search of) the two overcome with lust,
 whose bodies were invisible (in the dark).
 (Prithviraj's) little finger struck (quickly) like lightning,
 and an arrow was loaded onto the bow.

The Chauhan's arrow was loaded;
 knowing this, gods, snakes, and men stayed afar.
 His fist and gaze shook due to anger,
 and one arrow was released that fell short.
 Another arrow was placed in his hand,

⁹⁵ The god Indra, the Indra of serpents [Shesha] and the Indra of men, respectively.

from behind, as the Paramari (queen) urged him on.
 As soon as the arrow twanged,
 (Kaymas's) struck body fell to the ground.
 This poem was created and sung by Saraswati,
 and then recited again by the poet Chand.
 In this way, (Kaymas) fell from a lofty position,
 just like the moon at the passing of night.

(Prithviraj said to the Paramari queen):
 "Beautiful one, grasp this bow,
 and look upon the arrow that subdued the wicked man.
 He sought such amorous delights,
 but what wretchedness he experienced!"

The king dug (a grave) and buried (him) in the middle of the night,
 along with the beautiful slave-woman.
 (Only) with the gods, the earth, the water, and the wind,
 did the poet Chand speak in the morning.

Prithviraj is away on a hunting expedition when his queen discovers that Kaymas has been violating the privacy of the women's quarters by sneaking in to visit his lover. Summoned by a letter, Prithviraj returns to the palace in the middle of the night and, without any warning, twice shoots an arrow at his errant minister, who is killed by the second one. The king buries Kaymas and tries to keep his dishonorable act a secret, but his poet Chand Bardai learns about it from a dream.

Kaymas's murder is one of three episodes that Frances Pritchett believes are integral to the *Rāso*'s plot, along with Prithviraj's shooting of the sultan and the abduction of the Kanauj princess Samyogita. The interrelationship between these three central episodes is, in Pritchett's words, "so systematic, and so consciously expressed within the poem itself, as to support the view that they formed, if not quite the whole of the original *Raso*, at least the core of it. For the *Raso* without them would hardly exist, since they provide both its climax and its conclusion."⁹⁶ The Kaymas episode foreshadows Prithviraj's latter shooting of the sultan, for in both instances Prithviraj displays his celebrated skill at hitting a living target based not on his ability to see it but rather to hear it. The first time, he does so because it is the pitch darkness of night, and he kills a man unjustifiably; the second time, it is broad daylight but the king has been blinded and can no longer see. There is an insinuation that Prithviraj, through his rash and unjustified murder of Kaymas, brought on his own tragic fate – his blindness and captivity at the hands of the sultan.⁹⁷ Sometime after

⁹⁶ F. R. Pritchett, "Prithviraj Raso: A Look at the Poem Itself," *Indian Literature* 23, no. 5 (1980): 59.

⁹⁷ Ibid., pp. 70–2.

he murders Kaymas, Prithviraj becomes blind, figuratively-speaking, to the dangers to his kingdom resulting from his obsession with Samyogita, which eventually leads to his physical loss of sight. Following through with this interpretation, one could point to the king's blindness as a metaphor for his moral state or note how the physical body is here inscribed by the exigencies of fate.

The two incidents in which Prithviraj Chauhan displays his celebrated ability to hit targets solely on the basis of sound also appear in "Pṛthvīrāja Prabandha," but in a form that inverts their significance. When Prithviraj releases an arrow at Kaimbasa in this tale, it passes under the minister's arm and hits another man's hand. Prithviraj misses his target, in other words, and is manifestly *not* the phenomenal archer that the *Rāso* represents him to be. The bard Chand knows about the king's attempt at murder, as in the *Rāso*, but here Prithviraj is more displeased by Chand's rebuke and dismisses Chand from his service, along with Kaimbasa.⁹⁸ Prithviraj thereby unwisely divests himself of not only a fine minister but additionally of his bard.

The Jain story's equivalent to the *Rāso*'s famous finale, where Chand Bardai concocts a scheme to destroy the sultan, likewise shows Prithviraj in an ignoble light. Prithviraj's former minister plays the same role in "Pṛthvīrāja Prabandha" as does Chand in the *Rāso*, of ostensibly assisting the king to avenge himself on Shihab al-Din. However, in the *prabandha* version, the former minister has secretly switched his loyalties to the sultan, who is informed of the plot and places a metal image in the place where he himself was normally seated at court. We have to assume that Prithviraj has already been blinded, since he does not see the arrow hitting Shihab al-Din but only realizes that he has failed to kill the sultan by the sound of the image breaking. Although Prithviraj manages to hit his target here, as in *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, he cannot achieve his goal, reinforcing the earlier message that he was an inept king who slept through the destruction of his army. This is an enormously critical difference, one that highlights Prithviraj's impotence as a man – a far cry from the *Rāso*'s much more satisfactory ending in which Prithviraj avenges himself on the sultan and dies with his honor restored. The king of "Pṛthvīrāja Prabandha" is a pathetic figure, a failure who dies ignobly by stoning.

The numerous congruences between *Prthvīrāj Rāso* and "Pṛthvīrāja Prabandha" are tantalizing. Because the date of "Pṛthvīrāja Prabandha" is uncertain and its language exhibits late features, we cannot be sure of its relationship

⁹⁸ The Prithviraj episode in *Purātana Prabandha Saṅgraha* is not complete; because of the manuscript's damaged condition, numerous words are missing. Its language also seems sub-standard, adding to the difficulties of grasping the text's meaning. Thus, Dasharatha Sharma understood this passage differently, to mean that Kaimbasa was in fact killed (*Early Chauhan Dynasties*, p. 81 n8).

in time to *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*. These kinds of ambiguities make it difficult to trace the historical development of the Prithviraj narrative with any precision. The story in “Pṛthvīrāja Prabandha” could have been appropriated from a lineal predecessor of the *Rāso* that it consciously inverted, for instance, or the *Rāso* may instead have adopted and transformed its motif of shooting in the darkness later on. Alternatively, the motif may have come from somewhere else altogether, for it is quite possible that other narratives about Prithviraj once existed, by different sorts of authors for different types of audiences.

Along similar lines, it is hard to interpret the significance of Shihab al-Din’s blinding of Prithviraj that is implied in “Pṛthvīrāja Prabandha” and made explicit in *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*. Was it a literary invention meant to reinforce the point about the Chauhan king’s metaphorical blindness (i.e., being asleep or sleepy at the time of attack), which receives so much emphasis in the *prabandha* literature? Or was its intent rather to show the sultan in a negative light, as a cruel and unjust sovereign? The sultan is also criticized in *Hammīra Mahākāvya* and “Pṛthvīrāja Prabandha” – as well as *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* – for imprisoning Prithviraj when Prithviraj had released him unharmed numerous times in the past.⁹⁹ This common complaint against the Ghurid king underscores his lack of chivalry in contrast to Prithviraj, an accusation that is amplified by his decision to have Prithviraj blinded. Yet the scene of the blind Prithviraj shooting an arrow at Shihab al-Din so neatly mirrors his shooting at minister Kaimbasa/Kaymas in the darkness that the two episodes must have been developed in tandem. Together, these stories underscore the imperfections of kings, both raja and sultan.

This survey of early tales about Prithviraj Chauhan demonstrates that the *Rāso* narrative did not arise in a vacuum but rather in an environment where there were multiple conceptions of the king in both the Indic and Persianate traditions. He is remembered in Indic narratives from western India primarily as a king who was repeatedly successful in battle against a Muslim opponent but was eventually captured and put to death. The characterization of Prithviraj in these tales as sleeping at the time of the sultan’s final attack implies a lack of attention that is highlighted also in *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*, where the king is distracted by his new wife and neglects his royal duties; this image of an unseeing, unconscious Chauhan lord is surely connected to the blindness he is subjected to later on in “Pṛthvīrāja Prabandha” as well as in the *Rāso*. The several elements of congruence between them suggest that some borrowing occurred, but it is impossible to specify in what direction. The *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* may have borrowed from these earlier Jain tales or other stories similar to them;

⁹⁹ The *Prabandha Cintāmani* perspective is rather different: the sultan was about to let Prithviraj go when he saw the offensive picture of Muslims being killed by pigs and changed his mind.

conversely, the Jain tales might have incorporated these elements from an oral tradition about Prithviraj that later culminated in the *Rāso*.

Yet I would not categorize the *Rāso* as a continuation of the Jain narratives, which use Prithviraj Chauhan as a counter-example to illustrate how kings should not behave. In none of the other tales is Prithviraj's heroism highlighted; instead he is cast as a flawed and failed king just as in the Indo-Persian tradition. Only in *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* is the Chauhan king represented as an admirable figure who should be emulated and remembered, and as a martial hero who exacted vengeance against an enemy and died with honor. The story elements that the *Rāso* shares with its Jain precursors (and possibly with other tales that no longer survive) are thus given an entirely different meaning in this epic, to which I turn next.

Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso, the text

The *rāso* or *rāsau* literature of Rajasthan is a genre of poetry that is ostensibly biographical or historical in nature, and is typically pervaded with the *vīra rasa* or heroic sentiment. While the term epic may not be applicable to all *rāso* texts, which vary considerably in contents and length, it is an apt description for *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*, a long, martial narrative.¹⁰⁰ The poem's language, a combination of Brajbhasha with regional Rajasthani elements, is often called Pingal in order to differentiate it from the Dingal poetry composed in Rajasthani proper.¹⁰¹ One of the most frequent verse forms in the *Rāso* is the six-line *chappay*, a meter with harsh, warlike connotations that is not as widespread in Brajbhasha as it is in the heroic poems composed in Dingal by Rajasthan's bards.¹⁰² Along with a martial tone, *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* is also characterized by an archaic quality in its vocabulary, especially in its longer version.¹⁰³

The large number of verse meters used in *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*, the widespread archaisms in its language, and the adoption of literary conventions such as the recounting of the six seasons or the head-to-toe description of a heroine mark it

¹⁰⁰ For the typical features of *rāso* literature and a brief description of the main *rāso* texts in both Brajbhasha (Pingal) and Rajasthani (Dingal), see Swami, *Rāso-sāhitya*, pp. 3–23.

¹⁰¹ I am here simplifying what is in fact a complex and murky linguistic situation. It is sometimes difficult to differentiate one language from another, as testified by the long debate on how to classify the *Rāso* (N. Singh, *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*, pp. 50–2; Motilal Menariya, *Rājasthān kā Piṅgal Sāhitya*, 2nd edn. [Bombay: Hindi Granth Ratnakar, 1958], p. 15). The language of the *Rāso* also varies considerably between recensions and even within a single manuscript (N. Singh, *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*, pp. 35–6; Swami, *Rāso-sāhitya*, p. 78).

¹⁰² Hazariprasad Dwivedi, *Hindi Sāhitya kā Ādikāl* (Delhi: Vani Prakashan, 1994), pp. 144, 146, 149; Manohar Prabhakar, *A Critical Study of Rajasthani Literature* (Jaipur: Panchasheel Prakashan, 1976), p. 167. For more on Dingal poetry, see Janet Kamphorst, *In Praise of Death: History and Poetry in Medieval Marwar* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2008).

¹⁰³ N. Singh, *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*, p. 59; R. S. McGregor, *Hindi Literature from Its Beginnings to the Nineteenth Century* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1984), p. 17.



Figure 2.2. *Pr̥thvirāj Rāso* manuscript, Maharaja Man Singh Pustak Prakash, Jodhpur

as a learned, courtly work of literature.¹⁰⁴ It existed, and was transmitted, primarily as a written rather than oral text. This is not to deny that it was performed, for written texts in South Asia were typically read out loud or recited to an audience rather than read quietly to oneself. As Sheldon Pollock has stated, “the oral performance of literature, typically on the basis of a memorized text or, more often, of a physically present manuscript-book, would characterize Indian literary culture into the modern period.”¹⁰⁵ Even in the case of a religious work such as Tulsidas’ sixteenth-century *Rāmcaritmānas* that was frequently performed in different modes of recitation,¹⁰⁶ the manuscript tradition displays surprisingly little variation – the individual performances might be divergent, in other words, but the written poem remained stable.¹⁰⁷ In the few instances where information is available about the conditions of production, we learn that *Rāso* manuscripts were written by Bhat bards, Brahmins, or Jains for the reading/recitation (*pāṭhan*) of men who were usually Rajputs. They were often produced in a book format, with pages bound within a cloth cover, as in the example shown in Figure 2.2 from mid eighteenth-century Jodhpur.¹⁰⁸ Unlike the Pabuji or Devnarayan epics of Rajasthan, which were recited by low-caste performers for a larger peasant

¹⁰⁴ McGregor, *Hindi Literature from Its Beginnings*, pp. 17 & 19.

¹⁰⁵ Sheldon Pollock, “Literary Culture and Manuscript Culture in Precolonial India,” in *Literary Cultures and the Material Book*, eds. Simon Eliot, Andrew Nash, and Ian Willison (London: The British Library, 2007), p. 80.

¹⁰⁶ See Philip Lutgendorf’s wonderfully informative book, *The Life of a Text: Performing the Rāmcaritmānas of Tulsidas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

¹⁰⁷ Pollock, “Literary Culture,” pp. 89–90.

¹⁰⁸ Only the Kanauj episode is covered in this manuscript (Ms. 26.5 at Maharaja Man Singh Pustak Prakash, Jodhpur).

audience, *Prthvīrāj Rāso* was an elite epic that circulated mainly within the Rajput warrior community.

Although we typically speak of the *Prthvīrāj Rāso* as if it were a single, fixed text, the reality is considerably more complex. For the past half century or more, literary scholars have classified the numerous *Rāso* manuscripts into four categories on the basis of their length: shortest (*laghutam*), short (*laghu*), medium (*madhyam*), and long (*bṛhad*).¹⁰⁹ This categorization into four recensions – groups of manuscripts that presumably have different histories of transmission – highlights the extreme variation in size, a striking feature of the *Rāso*'s manuscript tradition. Scholars have generally assumed that the epic grew progressively longer over time, because episodes appearing in the shorter recensions also appear in the longer recensions. That is, the standard model of textual development, of growth from a short original text to a longer one through accretion of additional material as time goes on, has been adopted as an explanation for the very marked differences in the length of *Rāso* manuscripts.

This is a misleadingly tidy picture of the *Rāso*'s textual history, however. Conspicuous exceptions to the thesis of an orderly expansion of the epic's narrative are several manuscripts of the medium recension, which do not contain the episode of Prithviraj's killing of the sultan. Indeed, in some instances the issue of whether or not a manuscript belongs to the medium recension has been disputed, casting some doubt on the utility of the category. Nor are the manuscripts distributed over time as neatly as the model might lead one to expect: there is virtually no difference in the dating of manuscripts from the shortest and short recensions, and slightly less than a century intervenes between the first examples of the shortest and long recensions, during which time span the epic presumably grew enormously. These, and other troubling issues, require extensive text-critical study of the kind that *Prthvīrāj Rāso* has not yet received. (For more details on *Prthvīrāj Rāso*'s textual history, see the appendix.)

Prthvīrāj Rāso was regarded as an authoritative source of information on Prithviraj Chauhan for centuries as a result of its claim to be an eyewitness account of his lifetime. The putative author, Chand Bardai, figures frequently in the epic action as the king's bard and loyal advisor. Bards wielded considerable authority in precolonial Rajasthan, not only for their ability to enhance a patron's reputation but also because their facility with speech was thought to derive from the gods.¹¹⁰ It was believed that superior bards like Chand were

¹⁰⁹ Extensive discussion of the *Rāso* recensions can be found in Swami, *Rāso-sāhitya*, pp. 53–81; and Rajmal Bora, *Prthvīrājāśo: Itihās aur Kāya* (Delhi: National Publishing House, 1974).

¹¹⁰ Denis Vidal, *Violence and Truth: A Rajasthani Kingdom Confronts Colonial Authority* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 102.

possessed of a prophetic power, which enabled them to view the past, present, and future: their advice was accordingly treasured by kings.¹¹¹ Prithviraj's gratifying act of vengeance – the slaying of the sultan with an arrow even while blind – was made possible only because of Chand Bardai's lofty reputation, which gave him entry into the sultan's court, and his wiles, which convinced the sultan to arm Prithviraj. According to the long recension, Chand narrated the *Rāso* epic to his son Jalha before departing for Ghazni.¹¹² This resolved the tricky issue of how someone whose death is described in a work could be its author: the final episodes were composed instead by his successor.

Throughout much of the nineteenth century, it was widely accepted even among European scholars that *Prthvīrāj Rāso* was contemporary to its hero's lifetime. In the 1880s, however, the Udaipur scholar Kaviraj Shyamaldas refuted its historicity primarily on the grounds of its faulty chronology, an issue covered at length in Chapter 7. Other problems with the epic also became apparent by the late nineteenth century as research into India's medieval history advanced. These problematic aspects of the *Rāso* included an inconsistent genealogy for Prithviraj and his ancestors, discrepancies as to the details of battle with Shihab al-Din as well as Prithviraj's fate afterwards, and the anachronistic casting of the thirteenth-century Mewar king Samarsi into Prithviraj's time frame. The *Rāso*'s language and vocabulary also point strongly to a date much later than the twelfth century.¹¹³ Few scholars today consider *Prthvīrāj Rāso* to be contemporary to Prithviraj's reign, at least in its current form.¹¹⁴ However, some scholars still believe that Prithviraj's bard Chand Bardai composed a poem about his king, which forms the basis of the present *Rāso*.¹¹⁵

I, along with others such as Narottamdas Swami and Namwar Singh, place the likely age of composition of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* in the sixteenth century, more specifically during the reign of the Mughal emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605 CE).¹¹⁶ One reason for pointing to the late sixteenth century is that two summaries of Prithviraj's life which closely follow the *Rāso* plot were written between ca. 1587–97. To be sure, earlier Prithviraj narratives contained elements of the *Rāso* story, such as the presence of a minister Kaymas or the king's defeat at the hands of Shihab al-Din. The two accounts of Prithviraj from Akbar's reign, on the other hand, are essentially synopses of the *Rāso*, so little do they diverge from its main storyline. More will be said about these summaries – contained within the Persian *Āīn-i Akbarī* and Sanskrit

¹¹¹ Tod, *Rajasthan*, p. 721.

¹¹² Swami, *Rāso-sāhitya*, p. 42.

¹¹³ Ibid., pp. 50, 98.

¹¹⁴ McGregor, *Hindi Literature from Its Beginnings*, p. 18.

¹¹⁵ For example, Bora, *Prthvīrājrāso*, pp. 122–4 & 136–7.

¹¹⁶ N. Singh, *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, pp. 246–7; Swami, *Rāso-sāhitya*, pp. 50–2.

Surjanacarita – in Chapter 3. Here it is sufficient to note that they testify to the familiarity of elite Rajputs with the *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* epic during Akbar's reign.

That the *Rāso* was well-known in some circles by the end of the sixteenth century can also be inferred from the date of the oldest extant *Rāso* manuscript. Dated in 1610, this manuscript – known as the Dharanojwali from the village in Gujarat where it was discovered – was copied from an existing text, so we can confidently push back the age of the epic to sometime before 1600. The Dharanojwali manuscript is one of only two examples of the shortest recension, and is composed in an old Brajbhasha that is more archaic and western in character than what is typical of the seventeenth century.¹¹⁷ The short and medium recensions are similarly sparsely represented, by only five and eleven manuscripts, respectively. The oldest short-recension manuscript comes from 1613, while the oldest medium-recension text is dated in 1635 – they are close in time to the Dharanojwali manuscript, in other words.¹¹⁸ This pattern of dates for the shortest (*laghutam*), short (*laghu*), and medium (*madhyam*) recensions indicates that *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* was composed, or perhaps compiled, toward the end of the sixteenth century and rapidly became popular.

It is possible, of course, that the *Rāso* had circulated in oral form prior to the late sixteenth century without leaving any surviving written trace, as some have claimed.¹¹⁹ Yet, this seems unlikely, for *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*'s elite scribes and patrons set it apart from the genre of folk epics told by low-caste performers, such as the Alha cycle of stories in North India or the epic of Palnadu in Andhra Pradesh, which were not written down until the nineteenth or twentieth centuries. The fact that Prithviraj Chauhan is represented so much more positively in the *Rāso* than he is in the written narratives that do survive from earlier times is also highly significant. Only in *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* is Prithviraj presented *not* as a failure but as a man who was ultimately successful. The *Rāso* cast its protagonist as an accomplished man of action, whose arrows achieved their aim and avenged his honor; he dies almost immediately afterwards at the pinnacle of a warrior hero's career. In contrast, the Jain *prabandhas* cast Prithviraj as an incompetent and apathetic king who deserved his fate; even *Hammīra Mahākāvya* considers Prithviraj to be ultimately ineffective. Had a more positive portrayal of Prithviraj, akin to that of the *Rāso*, been available to *Hammīra Mahākāvya*'s author, surely he would have utilized it in

¹¹⁷ On the language of the shortest recension, see N. Singh, *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*, p. 52. The Dharanojwali manuscript is now in the Jodhpur branch of the Rajasthan Oriental Research Institute (Ms. 12069). The other *laghutam* recension manuscript is dated 1640 CE (*samvat* 1697) and its current location is unknown.

¹¹⁸ Lists of short (*laghu*) and medium (*madhyam*) manuscripts are provided in Swami, *Rāso-sāhitya*, pp. 82–4.

¹¹⁹ Bora, *Pr̥thvīrājrāso*, pp. 122–4, 126–8.

order to win favor with a Chauhan patron. I believe that the absence of heroic representations of the king prior to Akbar's reign is a persuasive argument in favor of a late date for *Prthvīrāj Rāso*.

In any case, once written texts of the *Rāso* started being produced, they spread quickly. The shortest, short, and medium recensions – all attested by 1635 CE – were superseded in the eighteenth century by the long (*bṛhad*) recension. The bulk of extant *Rāso* manuscripts belong to the long recension, which some scholars have dated as early as ca. 1674 or 1690 CE.¹²⁰ The rulers of the Mewar kingdom in southeast Rajasthan were deeply involved in the production of this recension, a topic that will be covered in detail in Chapter 5. The long-recension manuscript of 1703 CE that was commissioned by the Mewar king Amar Singh II is particularly well known.¹²¹ This recension was the first to be printed in modern times, and remains by far the best known version of the epic. Manuscripts of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* continued to be made well into the twentieth century, and approximately 170 manuscripts survive into the present time, at a conservative estimate.¹²²

Conclusion

We have seen that Prithviraj Chauhan lived in an age of multiple political centers that were continually jostling for power. His dynasty, the Chahamanas of Shakhambhari, had been an independent player in the arena of North Indian politics for two hundred years or more and had achieved its maximum strength not long before Prithviraj's reign. Among the rivals who are specified in *Prthvīrāja Vijaya*, the only extant literary text from Prithviraj's age, were the Chalukyas of Gujarat led by their king Bhim. The Chahamanas had also long come into conflict with Muslim states based in Lahore and Ghazni, because their territory obstructed the passageway from the northwest to the more lucrative areas along the Ganges and in Gujarat. Perhaps for that reason, or perhaps because it was the literary vogue, Chahamana inscriptions and literary texts often characterized Muslim opponents in pejorative terms, more so than was the case in the later *Prthvīrāj Rāso*.

¹²⁰ The numbers recorded on certain manuscripts have been read differently, leading to a variety of dates for the long recension (e.g., Swami, *Rāso-sāhitya*, pp. 84–5; Bora, *Prthvīrājrāso*, pp. 81–6).

¹²¹ Formerly in the royal library, this is now Ms. 1838 at the Udaipur branch of the Rajasthan Prachyavidya Pratishthan.

¹²² This figure is based on my survey of manuscript catalogs, which turned up 102 manuscripts that were intended to narrate the entire epic (even if they are incomplete today) and another sixty-six manuscripts of one or two *Rāso* episodes. I thank Elliott McCarter for setting up a database from the information in the various catalogs. Since these catalogs only cover manuscripts possessed by relatively large archives, my tally does not account for the numerous manuscripts that surely remain in private hands.

The historic figure of Prithviraj Chauhan is difficult to recover, due to the scanty remains from his reign. He was successful in a few campaigns, against the Chandellas of Bundelkhand, against Bhim of Gujarat, and at least once against the Ghurid lord, Shihab al-Din Muhammad bin Sam. Despite the presentation of him as a mighty conqueror in *Prthvīrāja Vijaya*, however, none of his battles were of much consequence until the last one, which soon led to the annexation of his entire territory by the Ghurid armies and its Turkic generals. Their victory over Prithviraj of Ajmer is commemorated in Indo-Persian histories beginning in the early thirteenth century, upon which modern historiography has based its understanding of these events. While this was part of a larger trend of favoring inscriptions and Persian accounts over Indic literary texts as sources of historical information in the modern age, there was also little alternative. More than a century elapsed after Prithviraj's death before his fate was described in any surviving work in an Indian language, and the few Jain tales that we possess are quite short. The standard account of the Ghurid conquest of North India in modern history books, therefore, still closely follows the narrative, and chronology, of the Indo-Persian historiographical tradition.

Our every view of Prithviraj Chauhan in literary sources defines him in terms of his military activities, whether they be conflicts with Muhammad Ghuri or with the indigenous kings of northern and western India. As was the convention in these times, in *Prthvīrāja Vijaya* and elsewhere, Prithviraj Chauhan is noted primarily for the wars he pursued, rather than for his piety, generosity, or patronage of culture – he was, I suspect, a rather unremarkable king in a contentious age. Later remembrances of him from the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries uniformly recall the Chauhan king as a loser in the combat against Shihab al-Din's armies. In Indo-Persian histories, he is cast as an ignorant and arrogant infidel whose spectacular downfall highlighted the might of the Ghurid forces and the righteousness of their cause. For the Jain tradition of western India, Prithviraj similarly served to offset the greatness of Gujarat kings, who were not like this ignorant and oblivious Chauhan lord who had lost everything to his enemy.

The resonances between the Jain narratives on Prithviraj and the *Rāso* epic are admittedly intriguing. They both confirm the impact of the Jain intellectual tradition on Rajasthani culture and hint at the circulation of a larger corpus of tales about Prithviraj Chauhan at one time. The repeated attacks by Shihab al-Din on the Chauhan kingdom, the king's bad relations with a minister or official, and the king's heedless behavior when threatened with attack are all motifs found in the Jain stories that resurface in *Prthvīrāj Rāso*. The *Rāso* entirely alters the significance of Prithviraj, however, through its lavish praise of the king and his followers, who are presented as the epitome of Indian warriorhood. And by allowing the Chauhan king to avenge himself on his foe,

the *Rāso* transforms Prithviraj into a triumphant hero to be commemorated for all time. The comparison of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* with the three Sanskrit tales about the Chauhan king attests to the sharing of some aspects of historical memory – specific details, characterizations, or incidents – across religious and linguistic boundaries, in separate literary spheres. Despite these common components, however, what Prithviraj signified in the *Rāso* was altogether different from his meaning in the Jain tradition: particular elements of memory may therefore circulate across space or persist over time, but if configured in dissimilar ways can lead to noticeably divergent results.

Thus, the antecedents of *Prthvīrāj Rāso*'s positive portrayal of Prithviraj cannot be determined – where and how the heroic conception of the Chauhan king first emerged are still unknown to us, even more so than the actual historic figure himself. That is, the early stages of the *idea* of Prithviraj as a tragic hero can no longer be traced and remain an enigma. From the fact that he appears in *Hammīra Mahākāvya* as an important ancestor of the poem's Chauhan protagonist, however, we can surmise that Prithviraj's existence was remembered by fourteenth- and fifteenth-century warriors who considered themselves members of the Chauhan clan – a large and amorphous new social identity that alleged descent from the multiple branches of the earlier Chahamana lineage. *Surjanacarita*, a late sixteenth-century *mahākāvya* poem commissioned for a lordly Chauhan family, similarly treats Prithviraj as a celebrated forefather whose life story was memorable. It is likely, therefore, that Prithviraj had a genealogical significance for some families during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and that stories about him circulated within a memory community of warriors claiming a Chauhan/Chahamana status, and not only among educated Jains. While Prithviraj continued to be upheld as an illustrious ancestor by the Chauhan clan in subsequent centuries, he came to be admired far beyond the circles of his alleged descendants, as the following chapters will show.

3 Delhi in the making of the last Hindu emperor

During the reign of Rājā Pithaura (Prithwi Rājā), Sultān Muizzu'ddin Sām made several incursions into Hindustān without any material success. The *Hindu chronicles* narrate that the Rājā engaged and defeated the Sultān in seven pitched battles. In the year 588 A.H. (A.D. 1192) an eighth engagement took place near Thānesar and the Rājā was taken prisoner ... The *Persian historians* give a different account and state that the Rājā was killed in battle.¹ [emphasis added]

Abu al-Fazl, *Ā'īn-i Akbarī*, ca. 1597

Introduction: telling the *Rāso* in Persian

With these words written in Persian at the end of the sixteenth century, Abu al-Fazl, confidante and official historian of the Mughal emperor Akbar, displays his knowledge of two separate historiographic traditions. One consisted of historical writing in Persian, the official language of the Mughal court, and the second of “Hindu chronicles” or works composed in Indic languages. Other members of the cosmopolitan Mughal elite must have been aware that understandings of the past differed considerably between Persian and Indic-language texts, but Abu al-Fazl was unusual in exhibiting his familiarity with both traditions.

Abu al-Fazl was also exceptional in choosing to present a description of events drawn from an Indian-language history when a Persian-language alternative was available. After mentioning the battle fought in 1192, Abu al-Fazl provides a narrative of King Prithviraj Chauhan’s career derived from “Hindu chronicles.” A mere 900 words in English translation, his brief account closely follows the plot of the much longer *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, the epic about Prithviraj that has dominated subsequent remembrances of the king in Indian languages. Surprisingly, Abu al-Fazl’s summary of the *Rāso* predates any extant manuscripts of the epic: his *Ā'īn-i Akbarī* was completed ca. 1597, more than a

¹ Translation by H. S. Jarrett; in Abu al-Fazl, *Ā'īn-i Akbarī*, vol. 2 (Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1989 [1927]), pp. 305, 307.

decade before the oldest *Rāso* manuscript, dating from 1610. Thanks to Abu al-Fazl, we can be certain that the *Rāso* story was being actively disseminated by the end of the sixteenth century, not just in Rajasthan but also in the elite circles of the imperial court.

Why Abu al-Fazl decided to relate the *Rāso*'s version of Prithviraj's story rather than the other options that were available to him is not immediately apparent, particularly considering modern conceptions of *Prithvirāj Rāso* as a "Hindu counter-epic." This notion of opposed literatures was formulated by Aziz Ahmad in an essay that begins with the statement, "Muslim impact and rule in India generated two literary growths: a Muslim epic of conquest, and a Hindu epic of resistance and of psychological rejection." The *Rāso*'s "anti-Muslim epic-content," according to Ahmad, "goes far beyond the tragic situation of a single historical event, and weaves around it an accumulated arena of heroic resistance spreading over several centuries."² Ahmad's is but one example of a prevalent reading of the *Rāso* that would seem to preclude its use by a Muslim author, even one as liberal in his views as Abu al-Fazl. To be sure, Akbar's court is famous for its creative synthesis of Indic and Persianate cultural elements, as well as for its interest in a diversity of religious beliefs. Most often, however, scholars point to painting, architecture, or music as the arena for the development of new forms of "composite" culture. Until recently, little attention has been paid to imperial Mughal patronage of Indian languages or to the mutual influence of literary cultures across the Indic-Persian divide.³

In this chapter, I begin an exploration of the various reasons for *Prithvirāj Rāso*'s appeal during the early modern period. My scrutiny of the epic's evolution and audience from the late sixteenth to early eighteenth centuries extends over several chapters, an emphasis that is warranted given the *Rāso*'s tremendous impact on historical memories of Prithviraj to the present day. The *Rāso*'s significance as a manifestation of the regional warrior ethos and identity of Mughal-era Rajputs is studied in Chapter 4, followed by an examination in Chapter 5 of the Udaipur court's appropriation and expansion of the text between the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Here, in Chapter 3, I focus on one of the *Rāso*'s most important literary maneuvers, the transposition of Prithviraj Chauhan's capital from Ajmer to Delhi. This recasting of Prithviraj as the king of Delhi, the premier center of power in North

² Aziz Ahmad, "Epic and Counter-Epic in Medieval India," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 83 (1963): 470, 473.

³ A notable exception is the work of Allison Busch: "Hidden in Plain View: Brajbhasha Poets at the Mughal Court," *Modern Asian Studies* 44.2 (2010): 267–309; and *The Poetry of Kings: The Classical Hindi Literature of Mughal India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). See also, Carla Petievich, *When Men Speak as Women: Vocal Masquerade in Indo-Muslim Poetry* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Francesca Orsini, ed., *Before the Divide: Hindi and Urdu Literary Culture* (Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010).

India from the early thirteenth century onward, effectively changed Prithviraj's meaning for later generations. He was no longer remembered as the lord of a city, Ajmer, which was overshadowed in political significance after 1200, but as lord of the most potent of all North Indian cities. Just as Delhi epitomized the might of all political places, so too did Prithviraj come to epitomize the greatness of all political persons.

That Prithviraj's life-story had become inextricably enmeshed in the imagined space of a past Delhi is made apparent by the location of the story within Abu al-Fazl's text. *Ā'īn-i Akbarī* was part of the bigger project of chronicling the history of Akbar's reign under the title *Akbarnāma*. Unlike the first two volumes of *Akbarnāma*, which are narrative in style and begin with Akbar's genealogy, much of *Ā'īn-i Akbarī* is a compilation of facts and statistics pertaining to Akbar's empire, including his army and the imperial household. Particularly noteworthy is the gazetteer-like section of *Ā'īn-i Akbarī* that covers the fifteen provinces of Mughal India.⁴ For each province (subah, *sūba*), Abu al-Fazl provides a short geographical introduction, the historical background, and statistical information on economic revenues and the human population. Abu al-Fazl's synopsis of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* appears in the chapter on Delhi province.

Abu al-Fazl regarded *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, which represents itself as an eyewitness account of the king's reign, as a reliable indigenous history. He was, therefore, largely faithful to its narrative when telling his own version of Prithviraj's story, except for one important omission that will be described later. In the same way, Emperor Akbar and the Mughal court understood India's martial epic par excellence, the *Mahābhārata*, to be an actual record of India's ancient past.⁵ Like several other Sanskrit texts, the *Mahābhārata* was translated into Persian on Akbar's orders, with a preface written by Abu al-Fazl himself.⁶ A good deal of the action in both the *Rāso* and the *Mahābhārata* takes place in the same general area: the Yamuna-Ganga doab and the Delhi territory. In *Ā'īn-i Akbarī*, Abu al-Fazl makes use of both epics precisely because of the information they provide on the history of this key area of the empire.

Knowledge of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* and other Indic texts was thus a manifestation of the Mughal court's growing interest in history and consequent patronage of historical writing. A number of the historical texts written on Akbar's command related to his own family, such as the chronicle of his father Humayun's

⁴ Mukhia, *Historians and Historiography*, pp. 64–5. For more on Abu al-Fazl, see Nizami, *On History and Historians*, pp. 141–60.

⁵ Carl Ernst, "Muslim Studies of Hinduism? A Reconsideration of Arabic and Persian Translations from Indian Languages," *Iranian Studies* 36, no. 2 (2003): 173–95.

⁶ M. Athar Ali, "Translations of Sanskrit Works at Akbar's Court," *Social Scientist* 20 (1992): 40.

reign written by Gulbadan Begum, while others like *Akbarnāma* commemorated Akbar's entire lineage, along with the emperor himself. This was not the limit of the court's historiographic gaze, however, which in works like *Tārīkh-i Alfī*, commissioned to celebrate the Islamic millennium, extended to all of Islamic history, including long accounts of the Ottoman and Safavid empires.⁷

The increasing production of written narratives of the past in Sanskrit and the Indic vernaculars, particularly among the Rajput elites associated with the imperial court, must have received some stimulus from the Mughal fascination with history. An example of Rajput historiography from the late sixteenth century is *Surjanacarita*, a Sanskrit courtly poem on the life and ancestry of Hada Surjan of Bundi, one of Akbar's high-ranking Rajput lords. Like Abu al-Fazl's *Ā'in-i Akbarī*, *Surjanacarita* also contains a synopsis of Prithviraj's life based on *Prthvīrāj Rāso*. While these two versions of the Chauhan king's story are different enough to suggest somewhat variant avenues of transmission, the point I wish to stress here is that they both came out of the same general social circle – the elite society associated with the Mughal court – and a similar concern with remembering the past. One of the principal arguments of this chapter is hence that *Prthvīrāj Rāso* developed and flourished very much within the larger context of the Mughal empire, not in isolation from nor in opposition to it.

The city of Delhi held a special meaning for the political elite of the Mughal era, regardless of their ethnicity, religion, or literary preferences. Accordingly, in the pages that follow, I focus on the question of how Prithviraj came to be associated with Delhi, a critical maneuver that ensured memories of him would endure over the centuries. The large secondary literature on cultural memory has long pointed to the importance of place, of specific geographic locations, in the recollection of the past. As far back as Maurice Halbwachs, the father of memory studies, scholars have recognized that collective memories are closely tied to places, which are demonstrably real even if the memories themselves are less tangible.⁸ Spatial locations provide a sense of continuity between the past and present, and thus act as anchors or tethers for the memories of events or people linked to them. This is why “sites of memory” is such an apt translation for Pierre Nora's notion of *lieux de mémoire*, for remembrances of the past cluster around battlegrounds, monuments, and other physical places.⁹ While Prithviraj Chauhan too is a site of memory, a good deal of his

⁷ Ali Anooshahr, “Dialogism and Territoriality in a Mughal History of the Islamic Millennium,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 55, no. 2/3 (2012): 220–54.

⁸ Gérôme Truc, “Memory of Places and Places of Memory: For a Halbwachian Socio-Ethnography of Collective Memory,” *International Social Science Journal* 62 (2011): 147–59. doi: 10.1111/j.1468–2451.2011.01800.

⁹ Steven Hoelscher and Derek H. Alderman, “Memory and Place: Geographies of a Critical Relationship,” *Social & Cultural Geography* 5.3 (2004): 349.

symbolic potency even today derives from his perceived identity as a past king of Delhi. This characterization of Prithviraj appeared only several centuries after his death, after Delhi had become a far more important city than it had been during the Chauhan king's lifetime. Even if not accurate, however, the historical imaginary that situated Prithviraj in a timeless imperial Delhi has proved to be remarkably robust and resilient.

I begin tracking this historical imaginary by looking in some detail at the ways in which *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, other Indic texts, and even Indo-Persian histories increasingly linked the king to the site of power, Delhi. I move on to examine how these literary representations correlate to historical changes in the political importance of Delhi and Ajmer cities, and also evaluate the validity of claims that the Chauhan dynasty held sway over the territory of Delhi. After these considerations, I return to Abu al-Fazl's Prithviraj story for a closer analysis of its contents and implications. In this way, the chapter ends as it began, in the historical setting of the Mughal court, for it is among the small circle of Rajput families who joined Mughal service that the earliest patronage of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* can be identified, belying its alleged character as an expression of popular resistance to Muslim rule. Contrary to what many might expect, and what Aziz Ahmad's description of it as a "Hindu counter-epic" implies, *Prthvīrāj Rāso* is an epic that developed and matured in a Rajput milieu pervaded by Mughal culture and imperial service.

The tale of Delhi's pillar

As we saw in Chapter 2, a twelfth-century Sanskrit poem (*Prthvīrāja Vijaya*), thirteenth-century Persian histories (*Tāj al-Ma'āṣir* and *Tabaqāt-i Nāṣirī*), and a fourteenth-century Jain sectarian chronicle in Sanskrit (*Kharataragacchapaṭṭāvali*) all place the king Prithviraj firmly in the city of Ajmer, founded by one of his ancestors in the early twelfth century. Yet the learned Abu al-Fazl, who had access to the large imperial library and many informants, chose in his late sixteenth-century *Āīn-i Akbarī* to narrate the tale of Prithviraj Chauhan as part of Delhi's history and not that of Ajmer. Nowhere does Abu al-Fazl mention Prithviraj and his Chahamana (in Sanskrit) or Chauhan (in the vernacular) dynasty's association with Ajmer, an important provincial capital in the Mughal empire.¹⁰ Despite all the testimony to the contrary, Prithviraj belongs only to Delhi in *Āīn-i Akbarī*'s historical construction; he is entirely

¹⁰ When describing Marwar in the chapter on Ajmer province, Abu al-Fazl notes that Shihab al-Din decided to attack Jaychand of Kanauj after defeating Prithviraj (*Āīn-i Akbarī*, 2:276). Some of Jaychand's lineage subsequently settled in Marwar – these are the alleged ancestors of the Rathor Rajput clan. This is the only time Prithviraj's name appears in *Āīn-i Akbarī* outside of the chapter on Delhi province, so that any connection with his actual home area is totally erased.

effaced from Ajmer's past. Abu al-Fazl had his own reasons for wishing to situate Prithviraj in Delhi, the long-standing center of Muslim power in North India, a point to which we will return. But he also had a good precedent in doing so, for *Prthvīrāj Rāso* places the king and much of the epic's action in and around that city.

The *Rāso* is quite ingenious in the way it links Prithviraj to Delhi, without denying that Ajmer had been the capital of Prithviraj's lineage for generations. Rather than making him the king of just one of these cities and its territory, *Prthvīrāj Rāso* explains that he was ruler of both. In recognition of Prithviraj's familial tie to Ajmer, the *Rāso* reports that Prithviraj eventually inherited its throne from his father Someshvar. Years before he receives Ajmer as his patrimony, however, Prithviraj had already become the king of Delhi, according to the *Rāso*. Sovereignty over Delhi and its territories was passed down to him from his maternal grandfather, Anangpal of the Tomar dynasty, who had no male offspring. This is a plausible explanation, since we know that there was a succession of Tomar kings in Delhi and since brahminical law allowed inheritance to devolve to a daughter's son, in the absence of any sons. On the other hand, the *Rāso* is in complete contradiction to several other texts, particularly *Prthvīrāja Vijaya*, the one surviving literary work from Prithviraj's court, which names the king's mother as a princess of the Chedi dynasty from Tripuri in Central India.¹¹ As the genealogy set forth in *Prthvīrāja Vijaya* agrees with those in twelfth-century Chahamana/Chauhan inscriptions, scholars are almost unanimous that the *Rāso* is wrong about Prithviraj's maternal ancestry.¹²

The story of how Prithviraj obtained the throne of Delhi was obviously known to the *Rāso*'s audience, for even the shortest recension (or manuscript tradition) of the epic refers to it in passing.¹³ It is narrated in detail in the *Rāso*'s long recension, taking up two of its sixty-eight chapters: "Tale of Delhi's Pillar" ("Dillī Killī Kathā") and "Tale of the Gift of Delhi" ("Dillī Dān Kathā"). "Tale of Delhi's Pillar" explains that Delhi was founded on a spot where a maternal ancestor, Kalhan, witnessed a rabbit turn around and confront a dog chasing after it. The rabbit's unusual bravery resulted from the presence underneath it of the hooded head of the divine serpent Shesha, who was bearing the weight of the world. The king therefore secured the site (which later becomes Delhi) and ensured his dynasty's longevity by embedding a stone pillar into the Serpent lord's head.¹⁴ Many generations later, Prithviraj's

¹¹ Verses 7.16, 7.18, 7.32 in Jayanaka, *Prthvīrājavijaya*, pp. 182,185.

¹² Morison, "Some Account of the Genealogies," pp. 188–92; Vyas, "Bijholi Rock Inscription," p. 87.

¹³ Bora *Rāso*, vol.1, vv. 27–30.

¹⁴ Although the principal meaning of *killī* or *kilī* is peg or stake, I translate it as pillar here since the story is widely understood to refer to the Iron Pillar at Mehrauli.

maternal grandfather Anangpal Tomar hears the story but doubts its truth for he has no sons to carry on the lineage.¹⁵

These events and their aftermath are narrated in this fashion in the *Rāso*:¹⁶

Then Anangpal's daughter said, "Listen, son, to my story!
Just as with the previous tale, I'll tell you something extraordinary.
Our paternal ancestor, King Kalhan, once was hunting in these woods.
He released a dog to go after a rabbit and track him down.
[But] the rabbit stayed put there, facing him, and the dog fled afraid.
All the companions were amazed at this, and stuck around the place."

"Reflecting on this, Vyās, the light of the world,
quickly ascertained an auspicious moment.
And, aided by destiny, drove a stone rod (through the ground and)
into the head of (the Serpent lord) Shesha."

"King Kalhan settled his own people there at Kalhanpur [i.e., Delhi].
Many generations after that king, Anangpal became the ruler."

"When he heard this old story, the king (Anangpal) was totally dumbfounded,
Lethargic and demoralized, his mind paralyzed by uncertainty."

"The courtiers all became doubtful (too),
(though) Vyās's words were superior (like) the Veda.
As time passed and the opposite (of the expected) happened,¹⁷
(the king's) mind became full of anguish."

Then Anangpal's daughter faced her son and said,¹⁸
"This matter really astounded my father at the time.
The king summoned Vyās, light of the world, for a grand ceremony,
(Saying,) rename the village so that the Lakshmi of (my) house will
prosper.¹⁹

Then the noble brahmin thought it over, consulting scriptures & treatise; and
At an auspicious juncture of time, (extracted and) drove in the stone (pillar)
again."

"Then said Vyās, light of the world,
'oh Tomar king, you listen!'

¹⁵ I use the Sanskritized version of the dynastic name rather than the vernacular variants found in the *Rāso* (e.g., Taīvar, Tauvar, Tuñvar, Tūar), just as I use Pṛithvīrāj rather than Prathīrāj, Prathurāv, Prithirāj, and the like.

¹⁶ The following translation is based on Mohansimha *Rāso* 3.13–22; I occasionally relied on variants from the corresponding verses in Chand Bardai, *Pṛithvīrājrāso*, 2 vols., ed. Mohanlal Vishnulal Pandya & Shyamsundar Das, 2nd edn. (Varanasi: Nagaripracharini Sabha, 1993). This last edition will be referred to as Pandya *Rāso* henceforth.

¹⁷ That is, when no sons were born to Anangpal and the succession was threatened.

¹⁸ The remaining verses are all a report of what happened told by Anangpal's daughter to her son Prithviraj.

¹⁹ That is, so the queen would have a son.

(With this) rod on Shesha's head,
 (your) lineage is as firmly in place as the polestar.
 Right now is the exact instant, planet, and rising sign,
 as when the Maharaj [Kalhan] completed (the rite).
 If (the pillar) remains in the earth for five (more) *gharis*,²⁰
 the king's ritual will continue to be effective.'
 But all this, said by the excellent Vyas,
 was thought to be falsehood.
 For who can ward off a thing that is destined to be,
 or know what deeds have been done?"

"Tomar king Anang, disdaining (Vyas') words, said in surprise,
 'What things will happen in the future, that even Brahma cannot avert!'
 While some dissuaded and some said (do it), he uncovered that place,
 And extracted the stone (pillar) that had been divinely destined.
 Blood poured out in a stream; Vyas's prediction was proved right.
 The family, servants, and ministers of the king stayed staring in wonder."

"Scolding them all, Vyas said, the sorrow in his heart hidden,
 'What can one say to a king's face?, (but) you are ignorant fools.
 Oh emperor Anangpal, the mind that caused this digging up,
 Had become slow-witted, Tomar, and led to the pillar's loosening.'
 Said Vyas, light of the world, 'I am able to foresee the future.
 (First) the Tomar, (then) the Chauhan, and afterwards the Turks will prevail.
 The Tomars will keep this region their home, then a king like Bali in prowess,
 (Who is) the Mewat²¹ lord, after nine (plus) seven (years),
 (will bring all) under one umbrella (and become) a universal sovereign'."

The prophecy that a Chauhan would become king of Delhi is fulfilled in the second *Rāso* episode, "Tale of the Gift of Delhi." Years have elapsed since the events involving the pillar and Prithviraj is now a young man. The aged Anangpal Tomar is still sonless and desires to abdicate the throne so that he can devote his remaining years to spiritual pursuits. Prithviraj moves to Delhi and assumes the throne, while Anangpal retreats to the foothills of the Himalayas.²²

The story of Delhi's pillar shares motifs with other legends about the founding of medieval political centers, especially the rabbit whose atypical

²⁰ A *ghari* is twenty-four minutes, or a short period of time.

²¹ This is a loosely defined region extending from northern Rajasthan to Delhi. Here, the reference is to Prithviraj Chauhan.

²² However, in an episode found only in the long recension, Anangpal regrets his decision a few years later and demands the Delhi kingdom back. Prithviraj refuses to return the kingdom, whereupon Anangpal tries unsuccessfully to seize Delhi by force and then approaches Shihab al-Din for assistance. Prithviraj manages to capture both Anangpal and Shihab al-Din and persuade Anangpal to return to his spiritual pursuits. The episode contains numerous didactic verses stressing that land once given cannot be repossessed and that old men should abandon worldly attachments.

courage in the face of a predator reveals the latent power residing in that location. An almost identical tale is told about the site of Vijayanagara, the capital of the extensive empire that dominated South India from the mid-fourteenth through mid-sixteenth centuries. The kings who observed the wondrous rabbit while out hunting there were informed by a sage of the event's significance, and promptly had a city built in this previously uninhabited spot.²³ The extraordinary character of a site destined to become the home base of a powerful royal dynasty is sometimes signified by a talisman, just like Delhi's pillar, which served to anchor the world firmly in place. In the case of Warangal, capital of the Kakatiya rulers of the Andhra region from the late twelfth to early fourteenth centuries, a divine vision supposedly led the king to discover a miraculous philosopher's stone that could transmute iron into gold.²⁴ This stone not only demonstrated the remarkable nature of the location (nearby the earlier Kakatiya fort at Hanumakonda), but also conveniently ensured the dynasty's prosperity, or so it was believed.

What differentiates the legend about Delhi from these other tales about the origins of capital cities is that it is universally assumed to have a material referent: the famous Iron Pillar, shown in Figure 3.1. Delhi's Iron Pillar is a conspicuous artifact – 7.2 meters or 23.5 feet in length including the portion underground, and weighing an estimated 6100 kilograms.²⁵ That the Iron Pillar had been dug up and implanted again at some point in the past is clear from its surface, for a rough area is presently visible that must have become corroded earlier when buried in the dirt. The content and script of the oldest inscription on the pillar suggest a date of ca. 400 CE and an association with King Chandragupta II, the greatest of the Gupta line of rulers. According to the inscription, the pillar was (originally) located on Vishnupada hill, which some scholars have identified as the site of Udayagiri in Central India, where several monuments of the Gupta dynasty are found.²⁶ When this heavy object was dislodged and moved to Delhi is a question that scholars continue to debate without reaching a clear consensus.

Scholars have often supposed that the Iron Pillar was relocated to Delhi ca. 1200, because of its present position within the grounds of the Qutb mosque complex, a series of monuments begun in 1193 by Qutb al-Din

²³ Phillip B. Wagoner, "Appendix B: The *Vidyāranya-kṛti* on the Founding of Vijayanagara," in *Tidings of the King: A Translation and Ethnohistorical Analysis of the Rayavacakamu* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993), pp. 165–9.

²⁴ Talbot, "Story of Prataparudra," p. 285.

²⁵ The height and weight of the pillar are derived from B. M. Pande, *Qutb Minar and Its Monuments* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 32.

²⁶ For example, R. Balasubramaniam, *The World Heritage Complex of the Qutub* (Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2005), pp. 35–42.



Figure 3.1. Iron Pillar, Delhi; photograph courtesy of Catherine B. Asher

Aibak. Qutb al-Din, a leading general of Shihab al-Din Muhammad of Ghur²⁷ and later the first Delhi sultan, chose this pre-existing fortified site as the base of his Delhi operations. He commemorated his successes on the battlefield with the construction of the lofty Qutb Minar tower, as well as a congregational mosque that recycled architectural components – notably carved stone columns from Hindu and Jain temples – from earlier Indic buildings. Planted right in the middle of the Qutb mosque's courtyard, the Iron Pillar is another object from the pre-Islamic past that was appropriated by Delhi's new rulers. The re-use of older Indian objects at this site has often been construed as a display of dominance meant to intimidate the newly subjugated Hindu populace and demonstrate the superiority of Islam over other faiths. Recent

²⁷ Because *Prthvīrāj Rāso* and other texts in the vernacular refer to the sultan as Sahabdin, a variant of Shihab al-Din, I most frequently use the latter name in referring to him. Persian histories, in contrast, use the name Mu'izz al-Din that he adopted in 1174 after conquering the town of Ghazni (Flood, *Objects of Translation*, p. 94).

interpretations point instead to the wider Islamic community as the audience whom the early Delhi sultans wished to impress. New to power and facing considerable competition, Qutb al-Din Aibak and his successors sought to prove their credentials as Islamic leaders by means of the built environment at their Delhi site.²⁸ Rather than Qutb al-Din, Finbarr B. Flood has recently suggested that the person responsible for moving the Iron Pillar was Shams al-Din Iltutmish, the second Delhi sultan (r. 1210–36 CE).²⁹

Other scholars have followed the lead of Alexander Cunningham in ascribing the relocation of the Iron Pillar to a pre-Sultanate king. Cunningham, a British scholar-administrator, carried out the first officially ordered archaeological study of Delhi, including the Qutb complex, in 1862–3.³⁰ Perhaps because of his institutional stature – in 1871 Cunningham became the first Director General of the newly established Archaeological Survey of India – Cunningham's views on the Qutb site have been extremely influential, more so than they likely deserve. He believed that a historic king called Anangpal Tomar had brought the Iron Pillar to its current location in the middle of the eleventh century, in the course of settling Delhi city.³¹ Cunningham's basis for this assertion is a short phrase inscribed on the pillar that he read as *samvat Dihali 1109 Ang Pāl bahi*, meaning “in Samvat 1109 [1052 CE], Ang [=Anang] Pāl peopled Dilli.”³² The inscription is hard to decipher, however, and Cunningham's reading of it has been contested.³³ In addition, it seems highly unlikely that the impressive feat of relocating a large pillar would have

²⁸ Kumar, “Qutb and Modern Memory.”

²⁹ Flood, *Objects of Translation*, p. 248. Flood also suggests that Iltutmish was following the precedent of earlier Indic kings, citing the example of the Ashokan pillar, reinscribed by the Chahamana king Vigraharaja IV (with the “Delhi Siwalik Pillar Inscription”), and thus interprets Iltutmish's appropriation of the Iron Pillar as having “little to do with cultural rupture and everything to do with the construction of fictive continuities” (*Objects of Translation*, p. 250). However, the inscribing of an additional record on an existing pillar (or stone slab) was a rather rare occurrence, and not so aggressive in its implications; transplanting a monumental object seems more like displaying a trophy of war.

³⁰ Upinder Singh, *The Discovery of Ancient India: Early Archaeologists and the Beginnings of Archaeology* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004), pp. 66–8, 81–2.

³¹ Cunningham thought there were three different Anangpals, the second of whom moved the Iron Pillar (c. 1050), while the third Anangpal was on the throne in 1163 CE when Delhi was conquered by a Chauhan (*Four Reports Made during the Years 1862–63–64–65*, vol. 1 [Delhi: Indological Book House, 1972], pp. 149–55). Others have dated the last Anangpal a few decades earlier (for example, John S. Deyell, *Living without Silver: The Monetary History of Early Medieval North India* [Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990], p. 171).

³² Cunningham, *Four Reports*, p. 151.

³³ The inscription was read as *sammat Dhilli 1109 Amgapala vadi* by Daya Ram Sahni (J. A. Page, *An Historical Memoir on the Qutb: Delhi*, Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India No. 22 [Calcutta: Government of India Central Publication Branch, 1926], p. 45). More recently, B. R. Mani has read it as *samvat kinlī 1109 Āṅgapāla bādi*, meaning “Anangpal tightened the nail [iron pillar] in samvat 1109” (*Delhi: Threshold of the Orient* [Delhi: Aryan Books International, 1997], pp. 46–7).

been recorded in such a brief fashion. On the other hand, the temple columns and other architectural components that were reused in the building of the Qutb mosque appear to date from the eleventh or early twelfth centuries;³⁴ since the site underwent major construction at that time, it is possible that the installation of the Iron Pillar also occurred then.

A little known Jain hagiography from 1132 CE provides further support for the thesis that the Iron Pillar was brought to Delhi before the time of the Sultanate. In *Pāsanāha-cariu*, an Apabhramsha text commissioned by a prominent Jain merchant of Delhi, the city is praised extravagantly. Delhi's king Anangpal is similarly lauded, for his generosity and military exploits, and also because “the weight of his pillar caused the Lord of the Snakes to tremble.”³⁵ If this translation by Richard J. Cohen is correct, it demonstrates the existence of some sort of narrative about a Delhi king called Anangpal and his pillar well before the time of *Prthvīrāj Rāso*. The story of Anangpal's loosening of the pillar – equivalent to the *Rāso*'s “Tale of Delhi's Pillar” – continued to circulate independently and several versions of it were collected in Delhi in the 1860s by Cunningham.³⁶

It thus appears that the Anangpal pillar tale was an old local tradition from around Delhi that *Prthvīrāj Rāso*'s authors incorporated into the epic, thereby providing a convincing explanation for how Prithviraj became king of a realm other than the one into which he was born. In this manner, Prithviraj became associated in public consciousness with an old Indian artifact whose prominent position at the center of the Delhi stronghold of Turkic power made it an icon of the pre-Sultanate past. The recollection of Prithviraj as a former ruler of Delhi was strengthened and made more concrete through this linking of him to a physical object that was publicly displayed in the city and evoked past glory: the memory of the Chauhan king was not just grounded in the city as a whole but tied specifically to this talismanic artifact that embodied Delhi's political greatness.

Diverging histories of Delhi and Ajmer

Why was it so important to the author(s) of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* to place its hero in the city of Delhi? We can infer some degree of intentionality in the *Rāso*'s

³⁴ Finbarr B. Flood, “Pillars, Palimpsests, and Princely Practices: Translating the Past in Sultanate Delhi,” *RES* 43 (2003): 107. Cunningham also mentions an inscription on the colonnade of the mosque that bears the Vikram era date 1124, or 1067 CE (*Four Reports*, p. 153).

³⁵ This is Richard J. Cohen's translation of the phrase *valabhaba-kampāviya-nāyarāu*, in which *vala* is equated to post or pillar (“An Early Attestation of the Toponym Dhilli,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 109.4 [1989]: 515, 519). For more on *Pāsanāha-cariu*, see also Richard J. Cohen, “The Apabhramsha Cariu as Courtly Poem,” in *Studies in Early Modern Indo-Aryan Language, Literature and Culture*, ed. Alan W. Entwistle and Carol Salomon (Delhi: Manohar, 1999), pp. 101–14.

³⁶ Cunningham, *Four Reports*, pp. 171–5.

displacement of Prithviraj's arena of action from Ajmer to Delhi. Since the epic recognizes that his dynasty's homeland was in the Ajmer region, its alteration of geographic setting cannot be construed as a simple error, resulting from the faulty transmission of facts over time. The reason is not hard to guess – over the roughly 400 years that elapsed between Prithviraj's lifetime and the composition of the *Rāso*, Delhi had become a far more important place, while Ajmer, conversely, had declined in political significance. This point has often been overlooked in modern times, because of the centrality of Delhi in recent centuries. Similarly, it must have been inconceivable to the sixteenth and seventeen-century inhabitants of North India that Delhi could ever have been overshadowed by the much smaller Ajmer.

Although the vicinity of Delhi had been settled since the prehistoric period, and the classical *Mahābhārata* epic situates the capital of its Pandava heroes there, there is little evidence of an actual town during the first millennium CE. Delhi is nowhere listed among the many settlements plundered during Mahmud of Ghazni's multiple expeditions to South Asia between 1000 and 1025 CE, nor does al-Biruni, who accompanied Mahmud to the subcontinent, ever mention it.³⁷ The town figures in a few Indic literary texts of the twelfth century, mainly in connection with Jain religious worship rather than military might or political consequence.³⁸ Thirteenth-century Indo-Persian accounts confirm the relative unimportance of Delhi at the time of the Ghurid conquest. Immediately after their victory in 1192 at the second battle of Tarain, which is only 80 miles north-northwest of Delhi, the Ghurid army is said to have set out not toward Delhi but to the considerably more distant city of Ajmer. Delhi was not targeted for subjugation until a year or two after Ajmer, although it soon became a garrison site.³⁹ Ajmer, "the seat of government" in the words of *Tabaqāt-i Nāṣirī*, was a far more consequential target than Delhi in the 1190s.

Delhi was still just the headquarters of a district (*pargānā*) when Shams al-Din Iltutmish was enthroned as the second of the Delhi Sultanate rulers in 1210.⁴⁰ His long, successful reign of twenty-six years elevated Delhi to a new

³⁷ Carr Stephen, *The Archaeology and Monumental Remains of Delhi* (Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2002 [1876]), pp. 10–11.

³⁸ Most notably, *Pāsañha-cariū*, described in the previous section, which was composed in Delhi in 1132 by a Digambara Jain poet for a merchant patron (Cohen, "An Early Attestation," p. 513).

³⁹ The Ghurid forces may have occupied Delhi in two stages. *Tāj al-Ma 'āsir* goes directly from an account of the second Battle of Tarain in 1192 to the conquest of Ajmer. Immediately thereafter, it states that a garrison was left behind in Indarpat (Indraprastha), at some distance from the existing Delhi fort, which was only annexed some time later (Hasan Nizami, *Taj ul Ma'āthir*, pp. 61–70). *Tabaqāt-i Nāṣirī* states that Ajmer was subjugated along with its territory following the second Battle of Tarain. Only after Kuhram and Meerut were captured in 1193 was Delhi taken (Juzjani, *Tabakāt-i Nāṣirī*, pp. 468–9).

⁴⁰ Iqtidar Husain Siddiqui cites Isami, a mid-fourteenth-century author in the Deccan, to this effect ("Social Mobility in the Delhi Sultanate," in *Medieval India*, vol. 1, ed. Irfan Habib [Delhi:

position as the dominant site of political power in North India. Thus, roughly a quarter-century after Iltutmish's death, his capital was extolled by the Persian-language chronicler Juzjani as having been "the centre of the circle of Islām . . . and the tabernacle of the eastern parts of the universe."⁴¹ Contributing to Delhi's greater importance were the unsettled conditions in the lands to the northwest, where the Mongols had already begun their destructive incursions.⁴² As waves of skilled immigrants sought safety in the subcontinent, Delhi became the "asylum of the universe," in Juzjani's words; Juzjani himself had fled to South Asia after fighting against the Mongols in Afghanistan for some years.⁴³ By the 1330s, Delhi had grown so much that the Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta proclaimed it to be "the largest of the cities of India, and even of all the cities of Islām in the East."⁴⁴ Although the Delhi Sultanate lost its position of dominance over North India during the fifteenth century, instead becoming merely one of several regional kingdoms, Delhi was still acknowledged as the "capital of all Hindustan" by the Mughal emperor Babur in the early sixteenth century.⁴⁵

Delhi's status as a symbol of political might survived the transfer of power in 1526 from the Lodi dynasty of the Delhi Sultanate to the Mughal line of kings. Babur (r. 1526–30) and Akbar (r. 1556–1605) made imperial tours of the Delhi area, which continued to be known as the Dar al-Mulk or "seat of the empire, even though they made their capitals elsewhere."⁴⁶ Babur's successor Humayun, on the other hand, lived in Delhi and was buried there in 1556. Foreign travelers to India in the early seventeenth century – when the Mughal kings held court in Agra, Lahore, and elsewhere – were evidently well-acquainted with the idea of Delhi as the political center of India. William Finch, for instance, says of Delhi that "the kings of India are here to be crowned, or else they are held usurpers," while William Hawkins called it "the chief city or seat royal of the Kings of India."⁴⁷ Despite the fact that Akbar

Oxford University Press, 1992], p. 32). Due to the intense struggle for power among Ghurid generals after Shihab al-Din Muhammad bin Sam's death in 1206, Qutb al-Din Aibak moved to Lahore in order to be closer to his former master's domains (Kumar, *Emergence of the Delhi Sultanate*, pp. 121–2). As an independent ruler, he was therefore not resident in Delhi, although he had been previously.

⁴¹ Juzjani, *Tabakāt-i-Nāṣirī*, p. 599.

⁴² Kumar, *Emergence of the Delhi Sultanate*, pp. 188–91.

⁴³ Translation by Raverty; in Juzjani, *Tabakāt-i-Nāṣirī*, p. 599; details on Juzjani's life can be found in Nizami, *On History and Historians*, pp. 76–9.

⁴⁴ Translation by Husain; in Ibn Battuta, *The Reḥla of Ibn Battūta*, p. 24.

⁴⁵ Babur, *The Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor*, translated, edited, and annotated by Wheeler M. Thackston (Washington, D.C.: Freer Gallery of Art: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 1995), p. 330.

⁴⁶ Ebba Koch, *Mughal Art and Imperial Ideology: Collected Essays* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 164.

⁴⁷ William Foster ed., *Early Travels in India, 1583–1619* (London: Oxford University Press, 1921), pp. 156 and 100, respectively. Finch was in India from 1608–11 and Hawkins from 1608–13. Note also the comment by Richard Steel and John Crowther in 1614 CE that Delhi

never resided there for any length of time, the conceptual link between Delhi and supreme political power was so strong that he was often referred to by the title Dillishvara, or Lord of Delhi, in Indic texts, as we see in a Sanskrit inscription from his son Jahangir's reign dated in 1607 CE.⁴⁸ The widespread association of Delhi with empire was no doubt a major factor in Emperor Shah Jahan's decision to relocate the Mughal capital there in 1639, which in turn had an impact on the British, who made Delhi their capital in 1911.

The power of Delhi as an imperial symbol becomes even more apparent when we witness it being invoked in areas of South India that lay far beyond its actual reach. Delhi was regarded in the early modern Deccan as an age-old seat of political power, in a conception that merged the Mughal empire with the Delhi Sultanate. Thus, a Sanskrit text from ca. 1600 portrayed the fourteenth-century founders of the Vijayanagara empire, Harihara and Bukka, as having been (military) servants of the Delhi sultans. In the communally charged atmosphere of the twentieth century, this account of political subordination was re-interpreted as a scenario of forced conversion to Islam. However, Phillip Wagoner has observed that the narrative of Harihara and Bukka's former relations with Delhi was actually "a political foundation myth, an ideological attempt to represent the authority of the Vijayanagara state as deriving directly *from that of the Sultanate*."⁴⁹ Similarly, *Rāyavācakamu*, a Telugu text also from ca. 1600, portrayed Delhi as one of the three imperial centers in the subcontinent, along with Vijayanagara city in South India and the realm of the Orissan Gajapati kings in eastern India.⁵⁰

In contrast to the dramatic rise in Delhi's fortunes, by the middle of the fifteenth century Ajmer had deteriorated to such an extent from its heyday under Prithviraj's Chahamana/Chauhan dynasty that tigers were said to roam through the town.⁵¹ The city's location on the eastern flanks of the Aravalli hills, which bisect Rajasthan along a northeast to southwest alignment, placed it on the main trade route leading southward to the alluvial plains and maritime ports of Gujarat. Owing to its strategic location, Ajmer was continually fought over during the centuries of Sultanate rule, sometimes being held by the Delhi Sultan or by one of the local Rajput rulers or by a king from the Malwa region

was "a Citie . . . which is great and ancient, in times past the seat of the kings" (quoted in Stephen P. Blake, "Cityscape of an Imperial Capital: Shahjahanabad in 1739," in R. E. Frykenberg ed., *Delhi through the Ages* [Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986], p. 154).

⁴⁸ *Epigraphia Indica* 36.17-B from Mandasor district, Madhya Pradesh. Numerous examples of the use of this title for Akbar can also be found in literary texts.

⁴⁹ Phillip B. Wagoner, "Harihara, Bukka, and the Sultan: The Delhi Sultanate in the Political Imagination of Vijayanagara," in *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia*, eds. David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), pp. 304–5.

⁵⁰ Wagoner, *Tidings of the King*, pp. 60–9. ⁵¹ Sarda, *Ajmer*, p. 39.

of Central India.⁵² It regained some measure of political importance after Mughal emperor Akbar seized it in 1568 and turned it into his base for military operations against the Rajput kingdoms.

Ajmer's greatest claim to fame has long been not political or economic but rather religious in nature, for it is the site of the tomb of Khwaja Mu'in al-Din Chishti. Mu'in al-Din was the first of the renowned Chishti order of Sufi mystics to have been active in India, supposedly arriving in Ajmer in the late twelfth century, either along with Shihab al-Din's Ghurid armies or slightly before them. The Chishtis became pre-eminent among the Sufi orders in India during the lifetime of Nizam al-Din Awliya (1242–1325), who lived in Delhi and counted several influential courtiers among his disciples. This gradually led to increased interest in Mu'in al-Din's Ajmer grave for pilgrimage purposes, although no structures were constructed at the site until the late fifteenth century. The lavish patronage of Emperor Akbar, who visited the tomb fourteen times, helped elevate it to its current status as North India's leading Sufi shrine.⁵³

For the audience of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* in the late sixteenth century and afterward, therefore, the mention of Ajmer would have evoked the sacred landscape of Indian Islam. The memory of Ajmer's distant past as the nucleus of a powerful Rajput kingdom was not entirely effaced, but it was overlaid by the far more vivid and immediate inscription of Ajmer as a Muslim holy space. In Sufi circles, moreover, Shihab al-Din's defeat of Prithviraj and conquest of Ajmer were attributed to the Sufi saint Mu'in al-Din Chishti's spiritual power.⁵⁴ Delhi had likewise been appropriated by Indian Muslims as a site of their community identity, marked by the tombs of Nizam al-Din Awliya and other Sufi saints – Simon Digby has referred to Delhi as a “city of the sanctified Muslim dead.”⁵⁵ But this was only one aspect of its meaning, since Delhi also represented the ultimate political authority for all communities in sixteenth and seventeenth-century North India, regardless of religious or ethnic affiliation. If Prithviraj was truly the greatest hero of his age, as the *Rāso*

⁵² Ajmer appears to have been given back to Prithviraj and/or one of his relatives in the immediate aftermath of the second Battle of Tarain. Conditions were so unsettled in the city in 1194 that the Jain leader Jinapati Suri left after a brief two-month stay (D. Sharma, “Gleanings from the Kharataragacchappatīvalī,” p. 227). The history of Ajmer in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries is particularly murky (Sarda, *Ajmer*, p. 149).

⁵³ Aside from P. M. Currie's *The Shrine and Cult of Mu'in al-dīn Chishtī of Ajmer* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), see also Iqtidar Husain Siddiqui's “The Early Chishti Dargahs” and S.A.I. Tirmizi's “Mughal Documents Relating to the Dargah of Khwaja Mu'inuddin Chishti,” both in *Muslim Shrines in India*, ed. Christian W. Troll (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989).

⁵⁴ Currie, *Mu'in al-dīn Chishtī*, pp. 29–30, 80–1, 85–8.

⁵⁵ Simon Digby, “Tabarrukāt and Succession among the Great Chishtī Shaykhs of the Dehli Sultanate,” in *Delhi through the Ages*, ed. R. E. Frykenberg (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 90.

insists, it would have been unthinkable to the people of a later time for his capital to have been anywhere other than Delhi. The transposition of Prithviraj from Ajmer to Delhi can be understood as an entirely logical move on the part of the *Rāso* composer(s), who sought to make the past more comprehensible to his audience.

The draw of Delhi across the Indic/Persian divide

While the *Rāso* was the first work to appropriate the Anangpal Tomar pillar story and thus provide a plausible reason for Prithviraj's presence in Delhi, it was not the first to envision the king acting in and around Delhi. The literary inclination to situate Prithviraj Chauhan in Delhi began with *Hammīra Mahākāvya*, a fifteenth-century Sanskrit work. The poem is purposefully ambiguous about the site of Prithviraj's capital, which is never explicitly named. Prithviraj's final battle takes place not at Tarain or even in Ajmer, but right outside Delhi.⁵⁶ Only after Prithviraj is dead and Delhi firmly secured do the Sultan's armies head south to Ajmer. *Hammīra Mahākāvya* thus resembles *Prthvīrāj Rāso* in representing Delhi as the central site in the struggle between Prithviraj and Shihab al-Din, but unlike the *Rāso* it also depicts Ajmer as a secondary objective. The text's strong desire to place Prithviraj on the foremost political stage of its day was a harbinger of a larger trend that is fully manifested in *Prthvīrāj Rāso*.⁵⁷

Pre-modern Indian literature has in modern times frequently been accused of historical inaccuracy, a complaint foreshadowed by the Muslim scholar al-Biruni, who said ca. 1000 CE in an oft-quoted passage that “the Hindus do not pay much attention to the historical order of things . . . and when they are pressed for information are at a loss, not knowing what to say, they invariably take to tale-telling.”⁵⁸ That texts in Indic languages may have taken liberties with “what really happened” has been taken for granted in the secondary scholarship, which until the past quarter century accepted only a handful of such works as useful for historical purposes.

In contrast, Western scholars have long regarded the Indo-Persian chronicle tradition as possessing strong historical sensibilities akin to those of Europe, and consequently they have drawn heavily on Persian texts in their reconstructions of the South Asian past. Contrary to expectations, however, we find that

⁵⁶ Suri, *Hammīra Mahākāvya* 3.50–72.

⁵⁷ *Purātana Prabandha Saṅgraha* similarly states that Prithviraj ruled from Yoginipura (that is, Delhi), although he was born in the city of Shakhambari (near Ajmer) in Rajasthan (Jinavijaya ed., pp. 86–7). The standard dating of the text to 1471 CE is somewhat suspect, however, as explained in Chapter 2.

⁵⁸ Translation by Edward Sachau; in Muhammad ibn Ahmad Biruni, *Alberuni's India*, vol. 2 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1910), pp. 10–11.

the way Indo-Persian histories described Prithviraj Chauhan's relationship to Delhi changed over time. To be sure, we do not witness the wholesale transplantation of the king from one city to another in the manner of *Prthvīrāj Rāso*. But a careful reading reveals that Delhi gradually assumed greater prominence in successive Persian accounts of the battles between Prithviraj and Shihab al-Din (referred to by his later name Mu'izz al-Din or simply as the sultan).⁵⁹ Delhi's king is always said to be someone other than Prithviraj, in contrast to what we find in the *Rāso*, but Delhi's stature is enhanced in Persian histories by having its king become more closely connected to Prithviraj. In this way, Indo-Persian historiography came to remember the Chauhan king as having links to the city of Delhi, just as *Prthvīrāj Rāso* did.

The mid thirteenth-century *Tabaqāt-i Nāṣirī* is the first to name the king of Delhi and describe him as a participant in the battles of Tarain. It relates an episode from the first battle, in 1191, in some detail:⁶⁰

The *Rāe Kolah Pithorā* [Prithviraj] . . . had arrived near at hand, and the Sultān marched to Tarā'in to meet him. The *whole of the Rānās [kings] of Hind were along with the Rāe Kolah*. When the ranks were duly marshalled, the Sultān seized a lance and attacked the elephant on which *Gobind Rāe*, *Rāe [Rājāh] of Dihlī*, was mounted, and on which elephant he moved about in front of the battle. The Sultān-i-Ghāzī, who was the Haidar of the time, and a second Rustam, charged and struck *Gobind Rāe* on the mouth with his lance with such effect that two of that accursed one's teeth fell into his mouth. He launched a javelin at the Sultān of Islām and struck him in the upper part of the arm and inflicted a very severe wound. The Sultān turned his charger's head round and receded, and from the agony of the wound he was unable to continue on horseback any longer. Defeat befell the army of Islām so that it was irretrievably routed [emphasis added].

The main reason for Shihab al-Din's failure to win the first battle is alleged to be the injury he sustained at the hands of Gobind Rai, the king or lord of Delhi. This explains why the episode was included in the chronicle, rather than the intrinsic importance of the Delhi king or his city.

While Gobind Rai merited mention only because of his combat with Shihab al-Din in the thirteenth century, later retellings of these events turned him into a more consequential individual. The most notable expansion of Gobind's position occurs in *Tārīkh-i Mubārakshāhī*, a text dating to 1434 CE. Reporting on the colorful episode from the first battle, it states:⁶¹

⁵⁹ I have examined the following Indo-Persian histories in English translation: *Tāj al-Ma'āsir* by Hasan Nizami (ca. 1217 or 1229 CE), *Tabaqāt-i Nāṣirī* by Juzjani (1259–60), *Futūh al-Salātīn* or *Shāh Nāmah-i Hind* by Isami (1349–50), *Tārīkh-i Mubārakshāhī* by Sirhindī (1434 or 1448), *Tabaqāt-i-Akkāri* by Nizam al-Din Ahmad (1593), *Muntakhab-ut-Tawārīkh* by Badauni (1595/96), and *Tārīkh-i Firishtah* by Firishta (ca. 1610).

⁶⁰ Translation by Raverty; in Juzjani, *Tabaqāt-i-Nāṣirī*, 1:458–60.

⁶¹ Translation by Basu; Sirhindī, *Tārīkh-i Mubārakshāhī*, pp. 8–9. I have changed Basu's Sanskritized version of the name "Govind" to the vernacular "Gobind" in order to maintain consistency between the different accounts I discuss.

In the year 587 H. [1191 CE] . . . when the Sultān was about to depart, he received information of the approach of the accursed Pithor Rāī [Prithviraj] with his numerous cavalry, foot and elephants against the Muslim army . . . Although the Muslims displayed great valour . . . (their) army was defeated. When the Sultān saw this, he spurred on his charger against *Gobind Rāī*, the ruler of Dehli and the brother of Pithor Rāī, and who was mounted on an elephant, which was always in the front line of the army, and smote him on the face thereby breaking the teeth of the accursed chief. [emphasis added]

Gobind Rai is not only the ruler of Delhi in this version, but also the brother of Prithviraj.⁶² Presumably because of his close relationship to Prithviraj, the commander-in-chief of the army, Gobind Rai “always” fought in the front ranks. As a consequence of this assertion of sibling ties between the Delhi king and Prithviraj, Delhi was transformed into a Chauhan possession at the time of the Tarain battles. This point is reinforced later on in *Tārīkh-i Mubārakshāhī*, when the annexation of Delhi sometime after the second battle of Tarain in 1192 is narrated. Shihab al-Din’s general Qutb al-Din Aibak is said to have “conquered the strongholds of Mirat [Meerut] and Dehli from the kinsmen of Pithor Rāī and Gobind Rāī.”⁶³ Delhi was depicted in this work as a major power base whose seizure had considerable political value because it had been ruled directly by the Chauhan lineage.

Tārīkh-i Mubārakshāhī’s transformation of the Delhi king into Prithviraj’s brother was followed by later influential histories, including two produced at Akbar’s court –Nizam al-Din Ahmad’s *Tabaqāt-i Akbarī* and Abd al-Qadir Badauni’s *Muntakhab al-Tawārīkh* –although they change his name from Gobind to Khand, Khanda, or Khandi.⁶⁴ Far away from Delhi, in the Deccan court at Bijapur, Muhammad Qasim Firishta made the same identification in *Tārīkh-i Firishtah*, composed around 1610.⁶⁵ In the words of the Briggs translation of Firishta’s famous history, the Sultan “heard that Pithow Ray, Raja of Ajmeer, with his brother Chawund Ray, the Raja of Dehly, in alliance with other Indian princes, were marching” toward the sultan’s forces.⁶⁶ By the early seventeenth century, therefore, Persian chronicles have Prithviraj and his

⁶² In contrast, Isami’s *Futūh al-Salātīn* does not identify Gobind as Prithviraj’s brother. Completed in 1349–50, this text falls midway between *Tabaqāt-i Nāṣirī* and *Tārīkh-i Mubārakshāhī* in date.

⁶³ Translation by Basu; Sirhindi, *Tārīkh-i Mubārakshāhī*, p. 11.

⁶⁴ Nizam al-Din Ahmad, *Tabaqāt-i-Akbarī*, trans. Brajendranath De (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1973), 1:39; and Badauni, *Muntakhab-ut-Tawārīkh*, 1:69. The sibling relationship is not mentioned in John Briggs’ translation of Firishta (*History of the Rise of the Mahomedan Power in India till the Year AD 1612*, vol. 1 [London: Printed for Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1829]) but appears in a translation by Raverty of the relevant passage from Firishta in Juzjani, *Tabakāt-i-Nāṣirī*, 1:462–3 n3.

⁶⁵ Firishta himself states that he presented the work to the ruler in 1609 CE, but editor Briggs has noticed references to an event occurring in 1611 (*History*, pp. xlvi, xliv).

⁶⁶ Translation by Briggs; Firishta, *History*, p. 172.

brother, the king of Delhi, marching out together at the head of the army opposing Shihab al-Din. In the Persianate historical imagination of the Mughal era, the late twelfth-century Delhi king was almost as powerful a person as his brother, the king of Ajmer.

The modifications made to the Delhi king's role in successive Persian chronicles are restricted in degree, to be sure. At no time do we witness a major revision or lengthy interpolation of new information – the changes are small and incremental. Within this historiographic tradition, each author was expected to base his text on earlier written works. For instance, both *Tarīkh-i Mubārakshāhī* and *Tabaqāt-i Akbarī* are specifically cited as sources of information by Badauni,⁶⁷ while Firishta cites the *Tabaqāt-i Nāṣirī* among many others.⁶⁸ The precedent set by previous historians acted as a constraint on the extent of change any single author could introduce into his account of the battles of Tarain. The cumulative effect of several centuries of slightly inflating the Delhi king's role was nonetheless quite considerable. From a figure who was noticed in the mid-thirteenth-century *Tabaqāt-i Nāṣirī* only because he seriously wounded the sultan, the lord of Delhi was eventually turned into a principal actor in the confrontation between the opposing armies. By accentuating the role of the king of Delhi, the authors of Persian histories managed, in their own subtle fashion, to suggest that Delhi had possessed more political relevance in the late twelfth century than it actually did. Despite the enviable reputation for historical reliability Indo-Persian chronicles have possessed since the early nineteenth century, we can see that they were not immune from the urge to adjust the past to make it more intelligible to the present.

In a more muted fashion, Persian narratives of the Ghurid conquest display the same trend toward a gradually increasing emphasis on Delhi that can be observed in Indic-language works such as *Hammīra Mahākāvya* and *Prthyvīrāj Rāso*. While acknowledging that distinct literary realms existed in medieval and early modern India, we should not assume that they were hermetically sealed from each other.⁶⁹ Akbar's decision to mandate the use of Persian at all levels of administration ensured its greater spread among non-Muslim scribal communities such as the Kayasthas and Khatri, as well as Brahmins, which already had some acquaintance with Persian from the days of the Delhi Sultanate and its successor states.⁷⁰ Nor were educated Muslims necessarily

⁶⁷ Badauni, *Muntakhab-ut-Tawārikh*, 1.10. ⁶⁸ Firishta, *History*, p. xl ix.

⁶⁹ Indeed, Francesca Orsini describes fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century North India as having a “multilingual and multi-locational literary culture,” with several classical cosmopolitan languages and a widespread spoken vernacular that was written in a variety of scripts (“How to Do Multilingual Literary History? Lessons from Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century North India,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 49 [2012]: 238, 229).

⁷⁰ Muzaffar Alam, *The Languages of Political Islam, India 1200–1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 115–40.

ignorant of Indic languages, particularly in the case of the North Indian vernaculars. The Sufi romances composed in the Avadhi literary dialect in the pre-Mughal era are well known, as are the Brajbhasha verses coined in the late sixteenth century by “Rahim,” Akbar’s prominent courtier Abd al-Rahim Khan-i Khanan, to cite just two examples.⁷¹ Persian, Sanskrit, and forms of Hindi or Hindavi co-existed in the intellectual milieu of medieval and early modern North India and, although the choice of literary language was often aligned with ethnic or religious affiliations (with Muslims composing in Persian and non-Muslims in Sanskrit or Hindavi), that was by no means always the case. Very few studies have compared works about the past composed in Indic languages to those written in Persian in order to identify commonalities in historical perception or historiographic development.⁷² But considering the multilingual and multicultural character of the intellectual elites of North India, one has to assume that other scholars besides Abu al-Fazl were aware of the divergence of historical constructions across literary boundaries, even if he was the only one to state the fact explicitly.

We must also recognize that scholars operating within the distinct conventions of the Persianate and Indic literary realms might still respond similarly to larger political and cultural trends in the world around them. In both literary traditions, cities were powerful symbols of political might, possessing an indefinable charisma and conferring an indisputable authority on their rulers. Detailed, if often hyperbolic or imaginary, descriptions of major cities were a characteristic feature of many poetic compositions in both Persian and Indic languages, underscoring the centrality of cities in intellectual life. Sunil Sharma has pointed out that Indo-Persian “poets described relationships between cities and their inhabitants in the metaphoric language of love,” while Phillip B. Wagoner notes that Warangal city was perceived as “a teeming, intense microcosm that contains within its walls the essence of the larger world without.”⁷³ In the Indic world, royal cities were often thought to be imbued with a special spiritual potency that conferred political strength on their ruling

⁷¹ Aditya Behl, *Love's Subtle Magic: An Indian Islamic Literary Tradition, 1379–1545*, ed. Wendy Doniger (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Rupert Snell, *The Hindi Classical Tradition: A Braj Bhāṣā Reader* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London and New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 40–1 & 122–8.

⁷² One exception is Michael B. Bednar, “Conquest and Resistance in Context: A Historiographical Reading of Sanskrit and Persian Battle Narratives” (PhD dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2007).

⁷³ Sunil Sharma, “If There Is a Paradise on Earth, It Is Here”: Urban Ethnography in Indo-Persian Poetic and Historical Texts,” in *Forms of Knowledge in Early Modern Asia*, ed. Sheldon Pollock (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 242; Phillip B. Wagoner, “A Dense Epitome of the World: The Image of Warangal in the Krīḍābhīrāmamu,” in Vinukonda Vallabharaya, *A Lover's Guide to Warangal*, trans. V. Narayana Rao and David Shulman (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002), p. 98.

dynasties – accordingly, the Sisodiya kings called themselves the lords of Chittor, the centuries-old political center of the Mewar region, long after its destruction and their relocation to the city of Udaipur. The growing stature of Delhi over the centuries therefore led the later authors of both Indic and Persian accounts of the Tarain battles to enhance the position of Delhi in these momentous events, to the degree permissible within the parameters of their respective literary traditions. Regardless of language employed or religious affiliation, these authors shared the view that the premier political center of North India in their own time must have been equally significant in the past. At least to this extent, at a minimum, we can speak of a common historical construction and shared culture.

From Tomar to Chauhan rule in Delhi inscriptions

Although contemporary testimony places Prithviraj squarely in Ajmer, there may be some basis for the later belief that he was Delhi's ruler, if only nominally. There are no grounds to suppose that Prithviraj ever lived in, or even visited, the city, but his dynasty may have had some connection with the locality. Scholars have tried to reconcile the discrepancy between literary texts that cast Prithviraj as the king of Delhi (like the *Rāso*) and others that understand the king of Delhi to be an entirely separate person (like *Tabaqāt-i Nāṣirī*) by suggesting that Prithviraj was the Delhi king's overlord. That is, Prithviraj might have indirectly controlled Delhi, a town under the command of one of his subordinates. The notion that Prithviraj was Delhi's sovereign could have its roots in the conquest of the region around Delhi in the early 1160s by Prithviraj's uncle, the Chahamana king Vigraharaja IV.⁷⁴ Vigraharaja's "capture of Dhillika" (Delhi) and "acquisition of Asika" (Hansi) are specifically listed among his admirable accomplishments in an inscription found in Rajasthan; this inscription from 1170 cites Someshvara, Prithviraj's father, as the ruling king.⁷⁵ In an inscription issued by Vigraharaja himself in 1164, which was originally situated in the Himalayan foothills about 150 miles north of Delhi, the king is said to have subjugated the entire territory from the Vindhya mountains in the south to the Himalayas in the north.⁷⁶ Although the epigraphic evidence is limited, it is quite possible that Vigraharaja's paramount sovereignty was acknowledged over much of Haryana and the Delhi territory, as well as a great deal of Rajasthan.

⁷⁴ Dasaratha Sharma posits the Vikram *samvat* dates of 1208 to 1223 for Vigraharaja IV's reign; other scholars offer slightly different dates (*Early Chauhan Dynasties*, p. 62).

⁷⁵ Vyas, "Bijholi Rock Inscription," p. 95.

⁷⁶ Kielhorn, "Delhi Siwalik Pillar Inscriptions," pp. 216, 219.

Inscriptional eulogies frequently boast about short-lived victories on the battlefield that did not in fact lead to any annexation of territory, but the Chahamanas appear to have actually held Hansi for at least a brief while. Their possession of Hansi, a major fortress in the eastern half of the plain between the Sutlej and Yamuna rivers in modern Haryana state, is confirmed by the presence of a Chahamana inscription there from 1168.⁷⁷ In contrast, it appears that the Chahamanas, if they ever did occupy Delhi, soon relinquished direct control over it to a local lord. This is suggested by a later Jain text, which notes that the king of Delhi in 1165 CE was a man called Madanapala, almost certainly of the Tomar lineage.⁷⁸ The evidence from this reliable Jain tradition is in accordance with the thirteenth-century Persian chronicle *Tabaqāt-i Nāṣīrī*, which does not call the Delhi king a Chahamana or Chauhan. Hence, most mainstream historians today assume that the Tomar kings continued to govern Delhi, probably as underlings to the Chauhans. In that event, Prithviraj (r. ca. 1178–92) could very well have exercised a nominal overlordship over Delhi, even though it was actually in the hands of the Tomar dynasty. This scenario would agree with the depiction in Persian histories of Prithviraj as being accompanied on the battlefield at Tarain by “the whole” (that is, an array) of the kings of North India.

In an interesting twist of events, the Chahamana king Vigraharaja’s inscription, once situated in the foothills of the Himalayas, wound up two centuries later in the city of Delhi. It was carved on the smooth sandstone of an Ashokan pillar dating back to the third century BCE, which was reportedly seen by the Delhi sultan Firuz Shah Tughluq while on a hunting expedition.⁷⁹ This large pillar measuring 13 meters in length was relocated from the village of Topra to a new citadel in Delhi, now called Kotla Firuz Shah, which the sultan had built.⁸⁰ The prominent displaying of Vigraharaja’s inscription in Firuz Shah Tughluq’s fortified palace may have contributed to the view that the Chahamanas/Chauhans had once governed from Delhi. The learned denizens of Delhi would certainly have known from the late fourteenth century onward about this impressive relic of the past, placed in the midst of the city,

⁷⁷ Bhandarkar, “Hansi Stone Inscription,” pp. 17–19.

⁷⁸ Madanapala is mentioned in *Kharataragaccha-pattāvalī*, which describes a visit by the celebrated teacher Jinachandra Suri to Delhi in the Vikram samvat year 1222 or ca. 1165 CE (Jinavijaya, ed., *Kharataragaccha*, pp. 21–2). Madanapala’s name also appears in a list compiled by Thakkura Pheru, Delhi mintmaster in 1318, of kings whose billon coins had been struck at Delhi (Deyell, *Living without Silver*, pp. 152, 154, 265).

⁷⁹ Much of our information on this comes from the chronicler Afif, whose comments are translated in part by J. A. Page, *A Memoir on Kotla Firoz Shah, Delhi* (Delhi: Manager of Publications, 1937).

⁸⁰ The laborious process of dislodging the pillar, transporting it by barge down the Yamuna River, and erecting it in Delhi in 1367 CE has been described and illustrated in a short text from the sultan’s reign, whose author is not known. The text is translated in Page, *Memoir on Kotla Firoz Shah*, pp. 33–42.

which proclaimed Chahamana sovereignty over a large expanse of North India. Like the Iron Pillar in the Qutb Minar complex, it too testified to the past greatness of Prithviraj and his family.

Even before Vigraharaja's pillar was brought to the city, the historical memory of the Delhi populace already recalled a past in which the Chauhans were its former kings. A set of Sanskrit endowments inscribed between 1276 and 1328 state that Delhi was ruled first by the Tomaras, then by the Chahamanas/Chauhans, and at present by kings who were Shakas – a word, like Turushka, that was commonly used to designate Muslims from Afghanistan and Central Asia. These references to Delhi and its sequence of royal dynasties appear at the beginning of the inscriptions, each of which documents the construction of a well by a merchant or other private donor. As three of the four records come from the vicinity of Delhi, they apparently reveal a common conception originating there.⁸¹ The fourth inscription is found in western Rajasthan but was commissioned by an official of the Delhi Sultanate and can therefore also be considered a product of Delhi's historical imagination from the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.⁸²

The lengthiest passage about Delhi's previous ruling dynasties appears in the last of the inscriptions, dated 1328 CE:

There is a region called Hariyānā – like heaven on earth. There lies the city of Dhillī built by the Tomaras. Therein, subsequent to the Tomaras, the Cāhaman kings, intent on protecting their subjects, established a kingdom, in which all enemies were struck down. Thereupon the *maleccha* [barbarian] Sāhvadīna [Shihab al-Din], having burnt down the forest of hostile tribes by the fire of his valour, seized that city by force. Thenceforth that city has been in the possession of the Turuṣkas [Turks] to this day: at present Prince Śrī Muhammad Sāhī rules over it.⁸³

In the passage above, Delhi is said to have been created by the Tomara dynasty, who were succeeded by the Chahamanas. Shihab al-Din then conquered the city and was followed by a series of Turkic rulers.⁸⁴

⁸¹ The three records from the vicinity of Delhi are the Palam Baoli Inscription, the Delhi Museum Stone Inscription (originally from Sonepat), and the Sarban Stone Inscription (Pushpa Prasad, *Sanskrit Inscriptions of Delhi Sultanate 1191–1526* [Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990], pp. 3–18, 27–31). The fourth inscription is from western Rajasthan (Pandit Ram Karna, "Ladnu Inscription of Sadharana of Vikrama Samvat 1373," *Epigraphia Indica* 12 [1913–14]: 17–27).

⁸² The donor whose gift is recorded in the Ladnu Inscription was a treasurer or *dhanādhikāri* in Ala al-Din Khalji's government. He is called a kshatriya, which may indicate a mercantile, Khatri-type, affiliation (Karna, "Ladnu Inscription," p. 22). Although the Delhi Museum Stone Inscription is heavily damaged, enough of it is legible to identify the patron as a member of a mercantile group, just as in the case of the Palam Baoli and Sarban Stone Inscriptions.

⁸³ Translation by Prasad, *Sanskrit Inscriptions*, p. 30; also J. Eggeling, "Inscription in the Delhi Museum," *Epigraphia Indica* 1 (1892): 94.

⁸⁴ The depiction of Muslim rulers in these Delhi inscriptions is not unusual for Sultanate-era Sanskrit inscriptions. Muslim rule was typically portrayed as a calamity only after indigenous kings had overthrown a Muslim ruler, according to Chattopadhyaya (*Representing the Other*,

In the minds of at least some Delhi-area residents a century or so after Prithviraj's defeat, Prithviraj's lineage (although not explicitly Prithviraj himself) was remembered as having ruled their city. We must treat these claims with considerable caution despite their relatively early date since the inscription just quoted also asserts that the sultan Shihab al-Din captured Delhi, in contradiction to Persian chronicles, which attribute this feat to Qutb al-Din Aibak; furthermore, the list of Delhi sultans recorded in one of the inscriptions is quite inaccurate.⁸⁵ The allegation that Delhi was ruled in succession by the Tomars, then the Chauhans, and finally the Turks also figures in the *Rāso*'s "Tale of Delhi's Pillar" as a prediction of what was to occur in the future. Like the story of Anangpal and the Iron Pillar, the dynastic sequence of Tomar-Chauhan-Turk is a construction of the past that was evidently emanating from Delhi itself.⁸⁶ This local Delhi memory, which surfaces in inscriptions less than a century after Turkic rule began, lends some weight to the thesis that the Chahamanas/Chauhans were once the paramount rulers of Rajasthan, Haryana, and the Delhi territory. It may also reflect the continuing importance throughout the thirteenth century of Prithviraj's lineage, now based in the northern Rajasthan fort of Ranthambhor rather than Ajmer. Even if the Chauhans were the overlords of Delhi's ruler, however, there is no reason to situate Prithviraj in the city – a point I argue at greater length below.

Prithviraj Chauhan in *Ā'īn-i Akbarī*

We can at last address the issue of why, at the end of the sixteenth century, the Mughal historian Abu al-Fazl chose to pass on an Indic rather than Persian account of Prithviraj's twelfth-century struggle with the king of Ghur, Shihab al-Din Muhammad. During the four hundred years that separated Abu al-Fazl from the Ghurid victories at Tarain, much of North India came to be ruled from Delhi, the initial base of Shihab al-Din's general and successor, Qutb al-Din

pp. 29–60). If a Muslim was currently king, however, Sanskrit inscriptions used the same metaphors and conventions to describe him as they would an Indic king. In the public rhetoric of medieval Indian kingship, Muslim rulers were thus represented as essentially indigenous. The statement that "the town of Dhilli which was first ruled by the Tomaras and then by the Chahamana kings, is now ruled by the Shaka kings" has two other implications. Representing the Delhi sultans as successors to earlier Indic kings suggests a continuity of rule – that is, it glosses over any radical changes in the structure or style of governance between dynasties. It also implies that Delhi was a political center of considerable antiquity, extending back for centuries.

⁸⁵ Karna, "Ladnu Inscription," pp. 21–2.

⁸⁶ Residents of Delhi continue to pass on memories of momentous events in the city's medieval past – for a different take on Prithviraj Chauhan and Muhammad Ghuri from Delhi in the current time, see Anand Vivek Taneja's engaging essay, "Village Cosmopolitanisms: Or, I See Kabul from Lado Sarai," at www.chapatiomystery.com/archives/homistan/village_cosmopolitanisms_or_i_see_kabul_from_lado_sarai_.html, accessed Jan. 2, 2014.

Aibak (r. 1206–10), and the capital of Shams al-Din Iltutmish (r. 1210–36), under whom Turkic rule was consolidated. In the retrospective gaze of later texts, whether composed in Indic languages or in Persian, the status of Delhi in the twelfth century was inevitably magnified. As a corollary to the enhancement of Delhi in historical memory, Prithviraj Chauhan – the first major king Shihab al-Din defeated in the area that is now India (he had earlier conquered the Muslim Ghaznavid king of the Pakistan Punjab) – was increasingly remembered for his association with this premier political center of the sixteenth century rather than with the ancestral Chahamana capital at Ajmer. Had he repeated the Indo-Persian accounts of the Ghurid conquests, with their mention of a Delhi king who was another person altogether, Abu al-Fazl could not have inserted Prithviraj so definitively into the history of the city that signified political power in the minds of his contemporaries.

In treating Prithviraj as part of Delhi's past, Abu al-Fazl was participating in a general trend that was particularly notable in Indic-language traditions. Abu al-Fazl's rendition of Prithviraj's career, which is clearly derived from the *Prthvīrāj Rāso* epic, is included in his synopsis of the history of Delhi province in *Ā'īn-i Akbarī*. This short history is preceded by a list of the earlier rulers of Delhi divided into five groups: first the Tomars; then the Chauhans; the Ghur dynasty (i.e., Shihab al-Din and his Turkic successors); the Khaljis; and a last category containing the Sayyid and Lodi dynasties of the Delhi Sultanate, as well as Akbar's two Mughal predecessors, Babur and Humayun.⁸⁷ But, although Abu al-Fazl follows the Sanskrit inscriptions from Delhi and *Prthvīrāj Rāso* in describing rule over Delhi as having passed from the Tomars to the Chauhans and subsequently to the Turks, he ignores the *Rāso* story of Anangpal Tomar's gift of Delhi to Prithviraj. Instead, Prithviraj's Chauhan dynasty acquired sovereignty over Delhi, Abu al-Fazl tells us, when they were victorious in war against the Tomars.⁸⁸

Just as the Chauhans had become the kings of Delhi by conquering the Tomars, so too did Shihab al-Din and his Turkic generals obtain their position as rulers of North India by defeating Prithviraj Chauhan in battle. For, as Abu al-Fazl writes immediately after he has reported on Prithviraj's death, "when the Chauhan dynasty fell, the choicest portion of Hindustan passed into the hands of Sultan Muizzu'ddin Ghuri [Shihab al-Din]."⁸⁹ The implication is that Shihab al-Din acquired authority over North India in a rightful manner, in the course of warfare. Thus, the political transition from one set of kings to another

⁸⁷ Abu al-Fazl, *Ā'īn-i Akbarī*, 2:302–4.

⁸⁸ The narrative of Delhi's history begins with its founding by Anangpal Tomar and then its acquisition through battle by a Bildeva Chauhan (possibly the Chahamana king Vigraharaja IV under his vernacular name Visaldev). The long account of Prithviraj's reign follows next.

⁸⁹ Translation by Jarrett; Abu al-Fazl, *Ā'īn-i Akbarī*, 2:307.

is represented by Abu al-Fazl as an altogether normal process of dynastic change through conquest. This is in accordance with the standard paradigm in Persian historiography, which considered the rise and fall of states as the recurring pattern of human history.⁹⁰ Furthermore, transfers of power from dynasty to dynasty through military means were considered legitimate in both Indic and Islamicate political cultures. The Turkic and Afghan (Khalji) sovereigns of the Delhi Sultanate were in no way differentiated, in Abu al-Fazl's king-list, from the Indian royal families that had preceded them in the long succession of ruling groups who had controlled Delhi and from there much of North India. The seamlessness of the transition from one dynasty to the next in this kind of presentation served to naturalize the various Muslim kings into the Indian geopolitical landscape.

Abu al-Fazl's desire to link the Muslim kings of Delhi with the city's pre-Muslim past is made evident elsewhere in his chapter on Delhi province as well. While describing some of the famous places and sights of Delhi, Abu al-Fazl notes that Sultans Qutb al-Din Aibak and Shams al-Din Iltutmish – the first and second Delhi sultans, respectively – “resided in the citadel of Rajah Pithura [Prithviraj].”⁹¹ By identifying the old Delhi fort where the earliest Delhi sultans were based as the residence of Prithviraj Chauhan, Abu al-Fazl once again bridges any gap between the pre-Islamic and Islamic eras (and situates Prithviraj solely in Delhi in the process). The fortified complex where the Delhi sultans first based themselves – which now contains the Qutb Minar tower, the Qutb mosque and Iron Pillar among other structures – is clearly a site that had been previously inhabited.

Abu al-Fazl was the first to use the Persian name Qila Rai Pithora (“fort of king Prithviraj”) to designate this site, to the best of my knowledge. Reading the secondary scholarship can be quite misleading in this regard, since scholars often substitute the name Qila Rai Pithora when referring to a Persian chronicle's mention of the old Delhi citadel.⁹² In every instance where I have been able to consult a translation of the Persian original or have the original checked, I have found that the word used is simply “Dehli.”⁹³ In Indo-Persian texts, “Dehli/Delhi” is a separate place that is distinct from fortified sites such as Siri and Tughluqabad, which were constructed in what is now New Delhi by

⁹⁰ J. S. Meissami, “The Past in Service of the Present: Two Views of History in Medieval Persia,” *Poetics Today* 14.2 (1993): 252–7.

⁹¹ Translation by Jarrett; Abu al-Fazl, *Ā'īn-i Akbarī*, 2:283.

⁹² For example, Sunil Kumar uses the name in referring to Sirhindī's *Tārīkh-i Mubārakshāhī* (“Making Sacred History or Everyone His/Her Own History: The Pasts of the Village of Saidlajab,” in *The Present in Delhi's Past* [Delhi: Three Essays, 2002], p. 101).

⁹³ I thank Michael Bednar for checking for the name Qila Rai Pithora in the Persian originals of Sirhindī's *Tārīkh-i Mubārakshāhī*, the *Ā'īn-i Akbarī* passage, and several other texts. Barry Flood was kind enough to consult *Tāj al-Ma'āṣir* for me as well.

later sultans (Ala al-Din Khalji and Firuz Shah Tughluq, respectively). Timur, the Central Asian king who sacked the Sultanate capital in 1398, specified that there were three cities of Delhi: Siri, Jahanpanah, and Old Delhi.⁹⁴ But since the time it was apparently coined by Abu al-Fazl, Qila Rai Pithora has become a popular label for Delhi's old citadel, where the Qutb mosque and other Sultanate monuments now stand.

Although the existence of pre-Sultanate walls and buildings at the location is not in question, there is no firm evidence to connect them with Prithviraj or any other Chauhan.⁹⁵ It has become customary since the mid-nineteenth century, however, to differentiate an older citadel built by the Tomars, popularly called Lalkot, from the supposedly later fort of the Chauhans, labeled Qila Rai Pithora. This two-fold classification of the site was first advanced by the influential archaeologist Alexander Cunningham,⁹⁶ and is still followed in standard scholarly works on Delhi.⁹⁷ Subsequent study of the Qutb complex has raised questions about several of Cunningham's ideas relating to Lalkot,⁹⁸ including the assertion that two phases of pre-Sultanate building can be definitively distinguished, especially as archaeological excavation of the site has been limited.⁹⁹ It is high time for the ascription of a pre-Sultanate fort to Prithviraj Chauhan to be examined critically, since it appears to rest largely on the testimony of Abul al-Fazl, as interpreted by Cunningham.¹⁰⁰ Such scrutiny

⁹⁴ Page, *Memoir on Kotla Firoz Shah*, p. 22.

⁹⁵ In his *Āśār al-Sanādīd*, the path-breaking Urdu history of Delhi on which Alexander Cunningham and later British scholars relied heavily, Sayyid Ahmad Khan employed the name Qila Rai Pithora several times, in a manner that demonstrates his familiarity with *Āīn-i Akbarī* (Kumar, "Qutb and Modern Memory," pp. 45–7).

⁹⁶ *Āīn-i Akbarī* is the only text cited by Cunningham in support of his assertion that Qila Rai Pithora was the second of old Delhi's seven cities (for the list of cities, see *Four Reports I*, p. 134; Cunningham cites Abu al-Fazl on the bottom of p. 151).

⁹⁷ Y. D. Sharma, *Delhi and Its Neighbourhood* (Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1974), p. 14; and B. M. Pande, *Qutb Minar*, pp. 60–3.

⁹⁸ Cunningham believed Lalkot was an extensive, well-fortified citadel that encompassed the area which is today the Qutb world heritage site, around which Prithviraj supposedly built another set of fortifications (*Four Reports*, pp. 160, 180–4). However, archaeologists soon realized that the walls surrounding the Qutb monuments were an extension done during the reign of Ala al-Din Khalji to the existing fortifications, and not part of Lalkot (Stephen, *Archaeology and Monumental Remains*, pp. 31–4; Mani, *Delhi*, pp. 42, 45, 47–8). Furthermore, excavations conducted in the 1950s refuted Cunningham's belief that the western walls were also original to Lalkot (Y. D. Sharma, *Delhi*, p. 50; Mani, *Delhi*, pp. 94–5).

⁹⁹ Carr Stephen, writing in 1876, decided that Lalkot was no more than a palace and thus only recognized the existence of one pre-Sultanate fort at the current Qutb complex, which he called Qila Rai Pithora (*Archaeology and Monumental Remains*, pp. 31–4). The most recent archaeologist to study the site discusses only one pre-Sultanate fort, referred to as Lalkot – the name used by Alexander Cunningham and Carr Stephen for Anangpal Tomar's fort. However, he also states that "a fortification wall was provided, possibly by the Chauhanas which is now known as Qila Rai Pithora" (Mani, *Delhi*, p. 115).

¹⁰⁰ A brief inscription on the Qutb Minar that reads *pirathī nirapah* (vernacular for "king Prithvi") is also often adduced as proof that the site was once the residence of Prithviraj Chauhan. (The

is unlikely to happen, given the designation in 2002 of a park called the Qila Rai Pithora Conservation Complex (described further in this book's epilogue), which was created at the behest of the Ministry of Tourism and Culture in conjunction with the Archaeological Survey of India.

Aside from Abu al-Fazl's statement, the strongest argument in favor of Prithviraj's presence in Delhi is provided by numismatics. John S. Deyell argues that all Rajput bull-and-horsemen billon coins issued between ca. 1120 and 1193 were produced in the same mint, which must have been at Delhi because early Sultanate sources call the coins Delhiwalas.¹⁰¹ These coins of uniform weight and design bear the names of a series of kings, two of whom were definitely Tomars. Two or three others, including a king called Prithipala, might be Chauhans, implying that this dynasty took over the minting of coins in Delhi from the Tomars.¹⁰² Others disagree with Deyell and identify Prithipala as a Tomar king who was not the same man as Prithviraj Chauhan.¹⁰³ Furthermore, even if Prithviraj did issue these coins under the name Prithipala, the label Delhiwala for the coins may have only come into use some decades *after* the Tarain victory, when Delhi had already become a major garrison for the Ghurid forces. In other words, the term may denote the coins being *used* in Delhi and not necessarily only those coins *minted* in Delhi.¹⁰⁴ While the numismatic material deserves further consideration, it does not provide a sufficient basis for asserting that Prithviraj Chauhan ever lived in Delhi, in my opinion. That this point needs to be so strenuously argued is a testament to the success of Abu al-Fazl and others in imagining Prithviraj as part of Delhi's past. In popularizing the name Qila Rai Pithora for the Qutb

inscription appears in Prasad, *Sanskrit Inscriptions*, p. 2). The inscription is not dated and its reading is uncertain, so it could refer to another king of similar name or something altogether different – it is flimsy testimony at best.

¹⁰¹ Deyell, *Living without Silver*, pp. 154–5.

¹⁰² Thakkura Pheru, Delhi mintmaster in 1318, wrote that the billon coins of Anangpala, Madanapala, Pithaupala, and Chahadapala were struck at Delhi (*ibid.*, pp. 152, 154, 265).

¹⁰³ A king named Prithvipal or Prithviraj does appear in later Tomar genealogies (Hariharivasa Divedi, *Tomarom kā Itihās*, vol. 1, *Dillī ke Tomar* (736–1193) [Gwalior: Vidya Mandir Prakashan, 1973], p. 55).

¹⁰⁴ This supposition is bolstered by questions about the famous inscription on the Qutb mosque stating that “the materials of 27 temples, on each of which 2,000,000 Deliwals had been spent, were used” in building it (Page, *Historical Memoir of the Qutb*, p. 29). While this inscription has generally been thought to date to 1193, when the mosque was constructed, Finbarr Flood and others have suggested that it was actually inscribed during Iltutmish’s renovations to the site in the 1220s (Flood, *Objects of Translation*, pp. 156–7). This inscription is rather suspect, in any case, because it bears the date 587 AH or 1191 CE, a year *before* the second battle at Tarain, although the mosque commemorated by the inscription was only constructed *after* the Ghurid victory in 1192. See also Flood’s “Appropriation as Inscription: Making History in the First Friday Mosque of Delhi,” in *Reuse Value: Spolia and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine*, eds. Richard Brilliant and Dale Kinney (Farnham, Surrey, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), which I came across just as I was completing my writing.

complex, Abu al-Fazl once again implied that the early Delhi sultans were legitimate leaders of the city and realm, for they occupied the same space that had been the center of power under previous rulers.

Abu al-Fazl takes pains to accentuate the hoary age and past glory of the city that had become the seat of Muslim power in India throughout his chapter on Delhi province in *Ā’īn-i Akbarī*. “Delhi is,” he informs the reader, “one of the greatest cities of antiquity.”¹⁰⁵ He goes on to equate Delhi with Indraprastha, the capital of the Pandava brothers in the classical *Mahābhārata* epic, which would push the founding of the city back to sometime before 3100 BCE in the traditional Indian reckoning. Citing the ancient Indraprastha was yet another means by which Abu al-Fazl sought to amplify the historic significance of the city of Delhi, just as he had through linking Prithviraj Chauhan to it. The origins of the city were represented as lying in the mists of mythic time, while its modern history was traced via the king-lists up to the contemporary Mughal era. By virtue of their control over India’s oldest political center, the Mughal emperors could thus be depicted as standing at one end of a long continuum of power in the Indian subcontinent. In this effort to project an image of historical continuity between the past and present, Prithviraj was the pivotal figure who straddled the divide between the city’s pre-Islamic and Islamic eras.

When reporting the history of Delhi subsequent to Prithviraj’s death, Abu al-Fazl resorted to the standard historiography of Persian texts. In thereby grafting an Indo-Persian view of the past onto an Indic one, Abu al-Fazl created a true composite account of Delhi’s history. His decision to combine both Indic and Islamicate elements embodies a new and radical concept, which can be traced back to Akbar himself, that of India as a territory encompassing both Muslims and non-Muslims.¹⁰⁶ *Ā’īn-i Akbarī* was not a historical text per se, for its subject was the Mughal empire and the beginning sections of the work cover the Mughal court and its army. Abu al-Fazl did not limit himself to the treatment of the political and military establishment, but went on to describe each of the lands that lay within the empire along with its history. This was a marked departure from both Indic and Persian works that dealt with the past, with their elite dynastic orientation and organization. Mughal India was thus constituted as a geographic space with its own distinct history, a place whose past predated the Muslim conquest and whose present included Hindus and Jains as well as Muslims. If not yet imagined as a nation comprised of its

¹⁰⁵ Translation by Jarrett; Abu al-Fazl, *Ā’īn-i Akbarī*, 2:283.

¹⁰⁶ M. Athar Ali, “The Perception of India in Akbar and Abu’l Fazl,” in *Akbar and His India*, ed. Irfan Habib (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 215–24. However, Ali Anooshahr argues that the last section of *Tārīkh-i Alfi*, written by Ja’far Beg Qazvini for completion in 1591 CE, contains “the first expression of the concept of Hindustan as a political and cultural unit, here under Mughal rule,” rather than Abu al-Fazl’s *Ā’īn-i Akbarī* (“Dialogism and Territoriality,” p. 248).

peoples, as India would be in the modern era, *Ā'īn-i Akbarī*'s India was envisioned as the array of places and peoples over which the Mughal rulers held sway.

Prithviraj's story at the Mughal court

Abu al-Fazl's familiarity with Prithviraj and the *Rāso* story can be attributed to the cosmopolitan character of the court milieu in which he resided. During Akbar's long reign, extending from 1556 to 1605, the emperor conquered territory as far south as the Deccan and laid the administrative foundations for the next century of Mughal rule. Despite his great accomplishments as a military leader and administrative reformer, Akbar is best known today for his policy of integrating Indians, both Muslim and non-Muslim, into the highest ranks of the ruling elite. Prominent among the non-Muslim lords of the empire were the Rajput class of Hindu warriors. Beginning in the 1560s, Akbar repeatedly campaigned against the many Rajput kingdoms of Rajasthan and had subjugated the majority of them by the early 1580s. Select members of the defeated Rajput ruling families were inducted into the Mughal power structure and frequented the Mughal court. Akbar also actively pursued marriage alliances for himself and for his sons with the daughters of leading Rajput lords.

Knowledge of *Prithvirāj Rāso* at the Mughal court would have been disseminated by the retinues of the Rajput nobles who were this epic's main group of patrons. One of these high-ranking Rajput lords was Surjan of the Hada Chauhan lineage of Bundi, who surrendered Ranthambhor to Akbar in 1569 and was consequently obliged to join the imperial service.¹⁰⁷ The subjugation of Ranthambhor, a famous old fort in northern Rajasthan, is described at some length in *Akbarnāma*, Abu al-Fazl's history of Akbar's reign.¹⁰⁸ Abu al-Fazl not only recorded events from the career of Surjan of Bundi but also knew him personally, for in the early 1580s both Abu al-Fazl and Surjan were appointed by Emperor Akbar to a committee headed by the imperial prince Danyal.¹⁰⁹ A few years after his death in 1585, a long poem about Surjan and his ancestors titled *Surjanacarita* (literally, "deeds of Surjan") was completed, possibly on his son's commission.¹¹⁰ One of this

¹⁰⁷ Cynthia Talbot, "Justifying Defeat: A Rajput Perspective on the Age of Akbar," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 45.2–3 (2012): 329–68.

¹⁰⁸ Abu al-Fazl, *The Akbar Nāmā of Abu'l-Fazl*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Delhi: Ess Ess Publications, 1977), 2:489–96.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 3:598.

¹¹⁰ Two editions exist: Chandrashekha, *Surjana-caritam*, ed. Jatindra Bimal Chaudhuri (Calcutta: Prachyavani Mandir, 1951) and Chandrashekha, *Surjanacarita Mahākāvya*, ed. and Hindi trans. Chandradhara Sharma (Kashi: Chandradhara Sharma, 1952).

Sanskrit work's twenty cantos is devoted to Prithviraj Chauhan, because the Hada lineage of its hero Surjan belonged to the larger Chauhan clan and considered Prithviraj to be an illustrious predecessor. The *Surjanacarita* account follows the main plot of the *Rāso*, with an emphasis on Prithviraj's romance with the princess of Kanauj. Like the Persian-language *Ā’īn-i Akbarī*, therefore, this Sanskrit text demonstrates that the vernacular *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* was known in elite court circles at a date earlier than the epic's oldest extant manuscript.

If not from a bard of Surjan's who might have recited the epic at court or from a Bundi scholar consulted while doing research for *Ā’īn-i Akbarī*, Abu al-Fazl may have learned about *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* from one of the aristocratic Rajput families known to have commissioned a copy of it. For instance, the oldest *Rāso* manuscript, a copy made in 1610 of an existing text, was created for a member of the Bikaner branch of the Rathor Rajput clan, located in north-western Rajasthan. The patron was a grandson of Maharaja Kalyanmal, the first Rathor ruler of the Bikaner kingdom to acknowledge subservience to Mughal power.¹¹¹ The Bikaner Rathors became Mughal subordinates in 1570, after meeting with Emperor Akbar at Nagaur and offering him two princesses in marriage.¹¹² They were not the first Rajputs to join the imperial service, but they were among the earliest lineages to do so and soon attained a prominent position at the Mughal court. Maharaja Kalyanmal eventually rose to the high rank of 2000 *zāt* in the imperial service, just as Hada Surjan of Bundi had some years earlier.¹¹³ The next leader of the Bikaner Rajputs, Maharaja Ray Singh, was an active fighter on behalf of the Mughal empire from an early age and held the lofty rank of 4000 *zāt* at the end of Akbar's reign, which was raised to 5000 *zāt* by Akbar's son and successor, Jahangir.¹¹⁴ A son of Maharaja Ray Singh's prime minister was the sponsor of another early manuscript of *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*.¹¹⁵ Indeed, both the shortest (*laghutam*) and short (*laghu*) versions of the epic are closely associated with Bikaner, which seems to have been the epicenter of *Rāso* production in the beginning of the seventeenth century.¹¹⁶

¹¹¹ The patron was Raja Bhagavandas, son of Raja Bhan and grandson of Maharaja Kalyanmal; this colophon has been published in Bora, *Pr̥thvīrājrāso*, pp. 103–4.

¹¹² Richard D. Saran, and Norman P. Ziegler, *The Mertiyo Rathors of Merto, Rājasthān: Select Translations Bearing on the History of a Rajput Family, 1462–1660*, vol. 2, *Biographical Notes* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Centers for South and Southeast Asian Studies, 2001), pp. 195–6.

¹¹³ Shahnavaz Khan Awrangabadi, *The Māthir-ul-Umarā*, 2nd edn., trans. H. Beveridge; rev. Baini Prashad (Patna: Janaki Prakashan, 1979), 2:566.

¹¹⁴ Awrangabadi, *Māthir-ul-Umarā*, p. 569. ¹¹⁵ Swami, *Rāso-sāhitya*, p. 82.

¹¹⁶ Three of the five manuscripts of the short (*laghu*) recension were connected to the Bikaner royal family and are now in the collection of the Anup Sanskrit Library at Bikaner. The other

Another group that is linked to early patronage of the *Prthvīrāj Rāso* is the Kachhwaha clan, the first important Rajputs to submit to Akbar's overlordship, in 1562, and subsequently the most powerful of all Hindu lineages at Akbar's court. The colophons of several manuscripts of the *laghu* recension contain a stanza referring to the compilation of the *Rāso* by Chandra Singh of the Kachhwaha family of Amber.¹¹⁷ Chandra Singh was a nephew of the celebrated Maharaja Man Singh, Akbar's trusted general and the highest-ranking Hindu noble of Akbar's reign. Maharaja Man Singh, his father, and grandfather – all of the Kachhwaha lineage – were the only three Hindus in the imperial service with a higher rank than Maharaja Ray Singh of the Bikaner Rathors, mentioned in the previous paragraph.¹¹⁸ We can accordingly situate the production and dissemination of the shorter and earlier *Rāso* manuscript traditions in northern Rajasthan, among Rajput lineages who were highly favored in Mughal service.

The range of forms in which the tale of Prithviraj was transmitted by approximately 1600 is a symptom of the cultural diversity of the Mughal era's elite audiences.¹¹⁹ Renditions of Prithviraj's story were available in each of the three literary languages of North India: Persian in *Ā'īn-i Akbarī*, Sanskrit in *Surjanacarita*, and a Rajasthani-inflected form of Brajbhasha (Hindi) in the case of *Prthvīrāj Rāso*. Only an active process of cultural dialogue among the various constituents of elite Mughal society can account for the existence of these similar narratives, through which the memory of Prithviraj was transmitted to multiple literary communities. But co-existence does not mean equivalence – the versions of Prithviraj's story in different languages resemble each other but are not identical. There are small but significant deviations in the narratives: minor changes in the plot, differing emphases, and especially omissions of certain features. These divergences in the Prithviraj stories, which

two manuscripts are also in Bikaner archives; one was written at Fatehpur in the Shekhavati region of northern Rajasthan ca. 1650 CE (Swami, *Rāso-sāhiya*, pp. 57, 83). Only two manuscripts of the shortest (*laghutam*) recension have been identified. The whereabouts of one of these is no longer known, and the other is the Dharanojwali manuscript described previously.

¹¹⁷ Swami, *Rāso-sāhiya*, pp. 82–3; Bora, *Prthvīrājrāso*, p. 102. Chandra Singh and his father Sur Singh, who was also in Akbar's service, are both mentioned in Nainsi's *Khyāt* (*Mun̄hatā Naiṣī rī Khyāt*, vol. 1, ed. Badariprasad Sakariya [Jodhpur: Rajasthan Oriental Research Institute, 1984], p. 296).

¹¹⁸ I use the rankings listed by Abu al-Fazl as the basis for my statements (*Ā'īn-i Akbarī*, 1:323–86). The rank of 5000 *zāt* held by the Kachhwaha lords Bharmal, Bhagwantdas, and Man Singh was the highest level that could be attained outside the imperial family during Akbar's reign. Akbar's famous revenue minister Raja Todar Mal held the same rank as Maharaja Raysingh of Bikaner, 4000 *zāt*.

¹¹⁹ An even more notable sign of the multi-lingual nature of the Mughal court is the presence of poetry that consciously mixed Hindi (in its Brajbhasha and Khari Boli forms) with Persian (Imre Bangha, "The Emergence of Khari Boli Literature in North India," in *Before the Divide: Hindi and Urdu Literary Culture*, ed. Francesca Orsini [Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010], pp. 36–47).

can be attributed to the different social contexts of their production, reveal the competing interests at work in the construction of this particular historiography. As Finbarr B. Flood has pointed out, in reference to material culture, “to emphasize the historical importance of transregional circulation and trans-cultural communication is to deny neither the existence nor the perception and representation of cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious difference.”¹²⁰ While there might have been some consensus on the general contours of the past, the details differed and so too, in the end, did the significance of Prithviraj Chauhan.

A brief review of the Prithviraj accounts in *Surjanacarita* and *Ā'īn-i Akbarī* illustrates the ways in which the basic narrative could be subtly altered, for different purposes. The version of Prithviraj Chauhan’s life found in *Surjanacarita*, composed c. 1590, is told in 166 verses.¹²¹ Only a quarter of the poem deals with the conflict between Prithviraj and Shihab al-Din; instead much attention is devoted to Prithviraj’s enmity with a rival Indian king, Jaychand of Kanauj, whose daughter Prithviraj abducts and brings home after prolonged combat. Although the armed conflict between the Kanauj troops and Prithviraj’s brave warriors following the abduction is central to *Prthvīrāj Rāso*’s heroic vision, the author of *Surjanacarita* cares little about Prithviraj’s subordinates, preferring rather to keep his focus on the king, a putative ancestor to the poem’s patron. Whereas the *Rāso* blames Prithviraj’s infatuation with his new bride and the loss of his best warriors against Kanauj for his subsequent defeat against Shihab al-Din Muhammad of Ghur, in *Surjanacarita* no connection is drawn between these events.

While the spotlight remains on Prithviraj throughout the *Surjanacarita*, therefore, he is absolved of any responsibility for the tragedy that ensues. It is not Prithviraj’s fault but rather Muhammad Ghuri’s, whose conduct is castigated in the following manner:

Because of an extremely compassionate nature, the patient Prithviraj captured the enemy 21 times, confined him, and let him go, thereby ignoring the harsh reality of politics. The ungrateful Yavana [Ionian or foreigner from the west] used deception to seize Prithviraj, who’d been so kind to him, and took the captive Prithviraj away to his own country. For evil people, nothing is beyond the pale. That man of obstinate intellect and stupid policies, motivated by his own life-taking Creator, had both eyes of the confined and weaponless Prithviraj removed.¹²²

The poet Chandrashekha dwells on Prithviraj’s misery after being blinded and declares that even a vengeful man should be content with taking an enemy’s life, rather than inflicting the worse fate of mutilation on him.¹²³

¹²⁰ Flood, *Objects of Translation*, p. 4.

¹²¹ The poem’s tenth chapter is entirely about Prithviraj Chauhan.

¹²² *Surjanacarita* 10.128–130. ¹²³ Ibid., 10.131–139.

The depiction of Shihab al-Din Muhammad of Ghur in Abu al-Fazl's Persian account of Prithviraj diverges notably from that in *Surjanacarita*. Every effort is made to minimize the sultan's role in ruining Prithviraj.¹²⁴ It was largely Prithviraj's own fault that he lost the battle in 1192, according to Abu al-Fazl, for "it is said . . . that the Raja kept to his palace in selfish indulgence, passing his time in unseemly pleasure, heedless of the administration of the state and of the welfare of his troops."¹²⁵ The *Āīn-i Akbarī* narrative also emphasizes the part Kanauj king Jaychand played in Prithviraj's downfall, for Jaychand is said to have switched allegiances and acted in concert with Muhammad of Ghur in the final assault. In trying so hard to absolve Shihab al-Din of blame for Prithviraj's defeats, Abu al-Fazl virtually denies him any credit for the battlefield victory.

The clearest indication that Abu al-Fazl wanted to tone down the antagonistic aspects of the story comes from his failure to mention that Prithviraj was blinded by the sultan. In other accounts, the blinding, which renders a man forever ineligible for kingship in traditional Indian thinking, is the critical act that establishes Shihab al-Din as a wicked man. The sultan's cruelty is typically juxtaposed to Prithviraj's generosity of spirit in repeatedly releasing his unharmed enemy-prisoner after the payment of a ransom. Although pre-modern Indic-language texts such as *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* (contrary to what people may think today) generally depicted Shihab al-Din in positive terms, as a resolute warrior who never abandoned the battlefield, his reputation was tarnished by his treatment of the captive Prithviraj. The limits to Abu al-Fazl's willingness to narrate past events from a Rajput perspective are revealed by the omission of this crucial detail about the blinding.

Conclusion

We have seen in this chapter that multiple streams of historical transmission, arising from the Indo-Persian as well as Indic literary traditions, were affected by the magnetism of Delhi as a symbol of political legitimacy. The attempt to transcend the temporal distance between their own time and that of Prithviraj often led to a spatial displacement of twelfth-century events onto the political landscape of contemporary times – that is, the disjunctions of time were masked or negated by a corresponding transposition of places. Delhi thus became the site of Prithviraj's activities in several of the texts I examined

¹²⁴ He begins his narrative with neutral language concerning Muhammad Ghuri's ambitions: "During the reign of Raja Pithaura (Prithvi Raja) Sultan Muizzuddin Sam made several incursions into Hindustan without any material success" (translation by Jarrett; Abu al-Fazl, *Āīn-i Akbarī*, 2:305).

¹²⁵ Translation by Jarrett; Abu al-Fazl, *Āīn-i Akbarī*, 2:305.

here; elsewhere Delhi is brought closer to the forefront through the attribution of a close kinship tie between its lord and Prithviraj. Such strategies were both diverse and dynamic, resulting in not one genealogy whereby the memory of Prithviraj was relayed to successive generations but numerous ones. In a later chapter, I briefly describe other trajectories taken by remembrances of Prithviraj, in the Sufi hagiographies of the Chishti order and the oral epics of the Gangetic region; the *Rāso* was by no means the only avenue through which North Indian society recollected the Chauhan king. However, for many members of the Mughal court elite, not only Rajputs but also others, the textual traditions of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* became increasingly influential in shaping their conceptions of this pre-Islamic king and his times.

Throughout the centuries, different groups found different reasons to admire Prithviraj and pass on traditions about him. But one aspect of his appeal has remained unchanged from the late sixteenth century down to the present day, and to that extent we can speak of a unity in the historical imaginary so far as Prithviraj Chauhan is concerned. Prithviraj's prominence in Indian culture, I believe, derives largely from the fact that memory identified him as ruling from the most powerful political center of North India since the early thirteenth century, Delhi. Situating Prithviraj in Delhi helped make sense of the pre-Muslim past in a Muslim-dominated early modern present where power had long emanated outward from Delhi. It also made it possible for *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, a regional epic (composed in a local vernacular, patronized by a local elite, and taking place in a regional arena) to envision an imperial space. By placing Prithviraj in Delhi, the epic's hero could be cast as the ruler of the North Indian heartland and precursor to the later Muslim emperors, remapping Prithviraj's regional realm as an imperial world. Another reason for appropriating Prithviraj as one of Akbar's predecessors in *Ā'īn-i Akbarī* may therefore have been the desire to incorporate this symbol of Indian kingship into the Mughal political tradition.¹²⁶

Since the Mughal court was the nexus of political power in North India from Akbar's reign on, it makes sense that a narrative about a past king would be transmitted among the lords, scholars, and poets connected to the imperial elite, whether in condensed formats such as in *Ā'īn-i Akbarī* and *Surjanacarita* or in the earlier, shorter manuscripts of the *Rāso* epic. That authors composing in Persian such as Abu al-Fazl might have been conversant with narratives from Indic literary traditions becomes less surprising in light of recent research

¹²⁶ Note that the Mughal court construed the *Mahābhārata* epic as a book that was primarily about kingship (Audrey Truschke, "The Mughal Book of War: A Persian Translation of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 31.2 [2011]: 518; Ernst, "Muslim Studies of Hinduism?," pp. 180–2). I argue in Chapter 4 that *Prthvīrāj Rāso* resembled a vernacular *Mahābhārata* in making possible a regional geo-political vision.

that has highlighted the extent of Mughal patronage for Brajbhasha, as well as for Sanskrit.¹²⁷ Allison Busch has painstakingly amassed a long list of Brajbhasha poets patronized by Mughal emperors beginning with Akbar, showing that they were considerably more numerous than we had previously realized.¹²⁸ As a vernacular, Brajbhasha would have been more widely understood and could thus serve as a common ground for those whose literary training had primarily been in the erudite traditions of elite Sanskrit or Persian verse. It also made the conventions of Indian poetry accessible to courtiers of varied backgrounds, who might share an evening of Indian music or verse-making together. So critical was the Mughal context to the development of courtly poetry in Brajbhasha that Busch asserts it “would never have grown into a major literary culture if it had not been accorded the stamp of excellence by the Mughal court and the higher echelons of Indo-Muslim society.”¹²⁹ In poetry, just as in painting and architecture, the cosmopolitan character and artistic cachet of the Mughal court exerted a strong influence on Rajput cultural production in the early modern era.

Historical writing at the sub-imperial courts of Rajput lords was another aspect of Rajput culture that received considerable impetus from the Mughal connection. To be sure, genealogies and tales of major battles had long been passed down orally by Rajasthani bards, and written narratives of ancestral bravery were not entirely unknown. Before the second half of the sixteenth century – that is, before Akbar’s reign – written accounts of the Rajput past were quite rare, however. Some of the pasts that were recorded beginning in the late sixteenth century may have been largely imaginary, as in the case of the story of Pabuji, an allegedly historic hero from Marwar, as well as in the *Rāso* version of Prithviraj Chauhan’s life.¹³⁰ Other texts included events from the recent past along with older material – this was true of the Sanskrit poem *Surjanacarita*, about Hada Surjan and his Chauhan predecessors, composed ca. 1590. A similar dynastic history in verse that featured a contemporary lord and his ancestors is *Māncarit*, a vernacular text (combining Brajbhasha and Rajasthani) written in 1585 for the Kachhwaha lord Man Singh, Akbar’s highest-ranking Rajput noble.¹³¹ A prose chronicle from western Rajasthan probably dating between 1595 to 1600, *Dalpat Vilās* takes as its subject

¹²⁷ On Sanskrit, see Audrey Truschke, “Cosmopolitan Encounters: Sanskrit and Persian at the Mughal Court,” PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2012.

¹²⁸ Busch, *Poetry of Kings*, pp. 130–65. ¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 165.

¹³⁰ The date for the earliest written account of Pabuji comes from Kamphorst, *In Praise of Death*, p. 28. For more on historical texts from western Rajasthan, see Norman P. Ziegler, “Marvari Historical Chronicles: Sources for the Social and Cultural History of Rajasthan,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 13 (1976): 233–5.

¹³¹ Allison Busch, “Portrait of a Raja in a Badshah’s World: Amrit Rai’s Biography of Man Singh,” *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient* 55, no. 2/3 (2012): 287–328.

another Rajput lineage aligned with the Mughals, the Rathors of Bikaner.¹³² For these Rajput families in imperial service, the writing of biographies and histories became a means of articulating identity in a competitive world full of noble rivals. In the following chapter, I argue that *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, another “historical” text that developed and matured within the composite society of the Mughal elite, similarly became a vehicle for the expression of a distinct Rajput identity.

Interest in using the medieval past for political purposes was strong in other regions of the subcontinent too, as Richard M. Eaton and Phillip B. Wagoner have shown for the Deccan in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹³³ Regardless of the religious affiliation of their rulers, Western Deccan polities of the early modern era sought to appropriate the prestige of the mighty Chalukya empire of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, while those of the Eastern Deccan looked back to the thirteenth-century Kakatiya kingdom. One of the primary modes by which Chalukya and Kakatiya political greatness was evoked by later Deccan kings was through architecture: the re-use of actual structural components from medieval sites, the revival of past architectural styles, or the mimicking of the layout of a former capital. By replicating the monuments and designs of previous kingdoms, these Deccan polities were remembering past political centers and drawing power from them. The rootedness of historical memories in actual places is thus not restricted to the case of Prithviraj Chauhan and Delhi. In both North India and the Deccan, we also witness a lively awareness of the medieval past in the early modern present – a topic that merits much more investigation by scholars.

¹³² Rawat Sarasvat, ed., *Dalpat Vilās* (Bikaner: Sadul Rajasthan Research Institute, 1960), p. 7.

¹³³ Eaton and Wagoner, *Power, Memory, Architecture*.

4 The heroic vision of an elite regional epic

For the *rājasūya* sacrifice, Lord Pangaraj [Jaychand]
did the preparations with loving care.
He conquered all kings as far as the sea,
and assembled them like a garland of pearls on his neck.
But Jaychand became distressed, hearing that the Juginipur [Delhi] king
would not come to make the necklace whole.
Getting angry, Jaychand straight away sent a messenger, (thinking)
“how, (if) remiss in service (to me), has he enjoyed (rule over) a
territory?” . . .
(Prithviraj’s) Guru Govindraj said (to the messenger),
“In the middle of Kaliyug, who now performs this sacrifice?
 . . .
We dwell in the jungle on the banks of the Kalindi [Yamuna R.],
we know nothing of this king Jaychand as lord.
But we do accept the king of Juginipur country,
of the family of Jarasandh,¹ the lord Prithvi.
By whom the Shah [Shihab al-Din] was taken captive three times,
and King Bhimsen (of Gujarat) was beaten and demolished. . . .
While his head is still on his shoulders, how can this sacrifice take place?
Only if there is no Chauhan left on earth!”

Gupta *Rāso* 2.3 ll. 1–8, 13–14, 27–32, 35–6²

Introduction: regional rivalries in *Prthvīrāj Rāso*

With these verses, *Prthvīrāj Rāso* commences the events that culminate in the epic’s central heroic episode: the expedition of Prithviraj and his men to Kanauj and back. At the outset of the quote, Jaychand of Kanauj is planning

¹ Many variants of the verse do not include the name Jarasandha, a king of Magadha in the *Mahābhārata*.

² In preparing this English translation I have consulted John Taylor Roberts, “Pṛthvīrāja Rāsau: Canto II, a Word by Word Grammatical and Etymological Analysis,” PhD Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1966.

an ancient ritual of kingship, the *rājasūya* or royal coronation, which publicly proclaimed an overlord's paramount status. At first, success seemed near at hand, for Jaychand "conquered all kings as far as the sea," with each defeated foe regarded as a prize as precious as one of the pearls that adorned the victor's neck in abundance. But one particular pearl – the king of Yogenipur (Delhi) – could not be strung on Jaychand's necklace. Prithviraj's men refused to recognize Jaychand's claim to supremacy while there existed a great leader like their own king, who had captured the Shah and destroyed the power of the Gujarati king Bhim. With this bold rejection of Jaychand's assertion of superiority, Prithviraj Chauhan and his supporters set the stage for an inevitable confrontation between the neighboring kingdoms of Delhi and Kanauj. Thwarted in his ambition by Prithviraj's refusal to attend the ceremony, King Jaychand of Kanauj becomes an implacable foe of the Chauhan lord.

The importance of place in the remembrance of Prithviraj Chauhan is once again brought out in the quoted verses, when his guru identifies the king and his cohort as dwellers along the banks of the Yamuna R., where Delhi was situated. We have already seen that Prithviraj's alleged association with the city of Delhi, North India's premier political center, was a major reason for his persistence in historical memory among a variety of different social groups. Capitals were intimately linked to kings and their dynasties in Indian tradition, as the sources of their spiritual and material power. Yet, the *Rāso* is not only about a former king of Delhi city, but also about his many military associates – the *sāmans* about whom I have much to say in this chapter. The community of elite warriors who followed the Chauhan lord, in *Prthvīrāj Rāso*'s imagination, came from various localities throughout the region controlled from Delhi, roughly corresponding to the modern Delhi Union Territory, Haryana, and Rajasthan. Because the *Rāso* glorifies the leading warrior lineages from this region of North India, I interpret it in the following pages as an elite regional epic: an epic that was primarily meaningful for the political elite of a single region of early modern India.

While the region of the Delhi kingdom stands at the center of the epic world envisioned by *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, that world's horizons are demarcated by the presence of enemy territories. Lying in the easterly direction was the Gangetic kingdom of Kanauj led by Jaychand, whose hostility toward Prithviraj and his realm began with the incident of the spurned *rājasūya* sacrifice. To the south was the kingdom of the Chalukyas of Gujarat, whose king Bhim is described in the verses above as having been "beaten and demolished" by Prithviraj Chauhan; to the west was Shihab al-Din Ghuri, based in Ghazni but often active closer to Delhi and identified in the quote as the "Shah" who had already been "taken captive three times." These enemy territories lay beyond the effective reach of Prithviraj and his warrior associates and so help define the area within which the *Rāso*'s heroes flourished. This martial community based

in Delhi, on the banks of the Yamuna, did not acknowledge the authority of King Jaychand, as the quote from the *Rāso* makes evident. The epic's geopolitical vantage point is thus firmly fixed in the region running from Delhi to Chittor, not coincidentally the same region from which most of the Mughal empire's Rajput subordinates were drawn.

By valorizing the warriors from Delhi-Haryana-Rajasthan in their struggles against the warriors of the Western Ganges, Gujarat, and Afghanistan-Pakistan, *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* contributed to the formation of a distinct, aristocratic Rajput identity among the martial lineages of that area. Its emphasis is on the heroism of the many elite subordinates who fought on Prithviraj's behalf, whether against armies from Kanauj, Patan, or Ghazni. Without the constant challenges presented by their armed foes, Prithviraj's fighters would not have had occasion to engage in greats feats of valor and martial ability and thereby amass enduring fame. Their opponents from other regions served as the backdrop against which the exploits of Delhi's heroes could be illuminated and in contrast to which the Rajput identity of Rajasthan's elite warriors could be articulated. That is, while the *Rāso* can be classified as a regional epic because much of the action occurs within a single geographic area, even more important is its sociological significance for a regional community: the elite Rajputs of Rajasthan and its vicinity.³ Because many of Prithviraj's *sāmant* generals in the epic were regarded as ancestors of the leading Rajput lineages of the Mughal period, the *Rāso* remained relevant to the political elite of the larger Rajasthan region well into the colonial era. Unusually for its time period, *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* was a record of an ostensibly shared past that incorporated many distinct clans and lineages from a large expanse of territory into a joint community.

In this chapter, I focus both on the regional character of *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* as an elite epic and on the Rajput martial ethos that it espouses, with particular reference to the Delhi–Kanauj confrontation. This is an additional element that led to the *Rāso*'s popularity and ensured its persistence into modern times, along with its linking of Prithviraj to the age-old political center of Delhi. By appealing to a powerful and numerous class of warriors, the *Rāso* epic captured the interest and patronage of an audience that ensured its transmission for centuries. I begin the chapter with an overview of the conflict between the Kanauj and Delhi kingdoms, which I consider to be the key heroic episode of the entire epic. Following that, I engage in a detailed analysis of the *sāmant* subordinates who figure in the battle against the Kanauj army and their perceived relationship to the Rajput lineages of early modern India. Next,

³ Prithviraj's sphere of influence does not correspond exactly with Rajasthan, of course, and Rajput communities are found in other regions such as Gujarat and Bundelkhand. Yet Prithviraj's territory does encompass most of the area from which the elite Rajputs of the Mughal era originated.

I move on to a consideration of the *Rāso*'s treatment of its chief character. While much of the epic exalts Prithviraj's *sāmans*, it also sought to elevate the king above all others by stressing his acquisition of royal brides, an activity in which only Prithviraj engages throughout the course of the narrative. The chapter concludes with a comparison of the *Rāso* to the *Mahābhārata* and a final reiteration of the argument that, in the early modern era, *Prīthvīrāj Rāso* was a regional epic that helped consolidate the common identity of local warriors as aristocratic Rajputs. Only in the nineteenth century did the *Rāso* become well known in other areas and among other communities, an argument that I present more fully in Chapter 6.

Challenging Kanauj: an overview

Just as Prithviraj's actual capital of Ajmer was eclipsed in political importance in the centuries after 1200 by the rapidly growing Delhi, so too did the position of Kanauj decline in later years. During the early medieval period, however, Kanauj was the dominant city of North India in both fact and fame. Situated on the western banks of the Ganges R. in the lower Doab region, Kanauj rose to power in the seventh century as the capital of the celebrated emperor Harshavardhana, and it remained important under the subsequent dynasty of the Gurjara-Pratiharas.⁴ In the late eleventh century, the Gangetic cities of Kanauj, Ayodhya, and Benares came under the control of the Gahadavala dynasty of kings, the last of whom was Jaychand (r. ca. 1170–94).⁵ The wealth and human resources of the Kanauj territory would have made it a formidable rival to any polity based in the Delhi-Haryana-Rajasthan region, and so the *Rāso*'s recollection of a war between Jaychand of Kanauj and Prithviraj of Delhi is eminently logical. While there is no independent testimony that the Chahamana and Gahadavala kingdoms actually had a major military conflict, it is certainly a plausible scenario. All things considered, it appears likely that the Gahadavala kingdom based in Kanauj was a more powerful and influential state than that of the Chahamanas of Ajmer.⁶

⁴ André Wink, "Kanauj as the Religious and Political Capital of Early Medieval India," in *The Sacred Centre as the Focus of Political Interest*, ed. Hans Bakker (Groningen: Egbert Forster, 1992), pp. 101–5.

⁵ D. C. Ganguly, "Northern India during the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries," in *The History and Culture of the Indian People*, vol. 5, *The Struggle for Empire*, ed. R. C. Majumdar, 3rd edn. (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1979), pp. 51–4. Ganguly gives 1193 as the date of the battle in which Jaychand was defeated and lost his life; the date is more commonly given as 1194, however.

⁶ The continuing importance of Kanauj is revealed in *Tāj al-Ma'āṣir*, composed just decades after the Battle of Tarain of 1192. This chronicle considers Jai(t)chand the chief of the infidels; he is called Rai of Benares after the second major city in Gahadavala territory (Askari, "Taj-ul-Maasir of Hasan Nizami," p. 74).

A lingering memory of Kanauj's former greatness may explain why *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* devotees so much attention to the rivalry between Jaychand and Prithviraj, or perhaps we can point to a long-standing struggle for power between the Western Gangetic region and the Delhi-Haryana-Rajasthan area. In any case, the conflict with Kanauj – whose seeds were sown by Prithviraj's refusal to attend Jaychand's *rājasūya* sacrifice – is a crucial component of the epic narrative. The entire series of events is grouped together in the longest recension of the *Rāso* under the title “Kanavajj Samay,” with *samay* denoting a canto, chapter, or book. All versions of the story contain at least three segments: (1) Prithviraj's journey from his capital Delhi to Kanauj, and a description of that city; (2) Prithviraj and Chand Bardai's adventures in Kanauj, including Prithviraj's elopement with Jaychand's daughter Samyogita; and (3) the prolonged battle fought by Prithviraj and his hundred *sāmant* warriors on their way back to Delhi against the enormous army of Kanauj.⁷ Because the actual battle occurs as a result of the Kanauj army's pursuit of Prithviraj, who had carried off the Kanauj princess, this whole set of events is sometimes also subsumed under the label “the abduction (*haran*) of Samyogita.”

In sharp contrast to popular perceptions of the Prithviraj narrative today, *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* treats the abduction of Samyogita and ensuing battle as the key episode in Prithviraj's military career, rather than the final battle at Tarain or Prithviraj's shooting of the sultan. One reason for regarding it as the core of the epic is the episode's length.⁸ This is especially true of the shortest recension of the epic, in which the incidents relating to Kanauj take up more than half the text. In the shortest recension, Shihab al-Din of Ghur's first appearance in the epic only comes *after* these events: Jaychand in his rage and frustration at Prithviraj's abduction of his daughter actively solicits the sultan's military intervention. In comparison, the episodes in which Muhammad Ghuri figures, covering the fateful final battle between the Chauhan and Ghurid armies (“Barī Larāī”) and the final revenge of Prithviraj on the sultan in Ghazni (“Bānbedh”), comprise only a fourth of the *Rāso*'s shortest recension, considerably less than that which is devoted to Jaychand.⁹

There are additional reasons to view Kanauj Samay as the *Rāso*'s central episode. The conflict with Kanauj is pivotal to the epic's plot line, for one thing, explaining how the mighty Prithviraj Chauhan could be defeated by

⁷ There are several additional episodes in the medium and long recensions of *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*, narrating Samyogita's previous life as a celestial maiden, the eulogies of Samyogita and Prithviraj's qualities by a parrot couple that cause the two humans to fall in love with each other sight unseen, and the like.

⁸ N. Singh, *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*, p. 37.

⁹ It is difficult to get an accurate gauge of differences in length because the way verses are defined and counted varies, but the longest recension is said to have close to twenty-five times more verses than the shortest recension (Swami, *Rāso-sāhitya*, p. 78).

Shihab al-Din Ghuri, whom he had routed in battle numerous times before. The episode also expresses the *Rāso*'s heroic ethos most fully, in its detailed description of the deaths of many aristocratic warriors in Prithviraj's entourage. I take a closer look at the battle scenes and the identity of their elite Rajput heroes in the next section of this chapter; after first discussing the importance of Kanauj Samay to the development of the *Rāso* narrative here. I commence with a summary of the episode's plot, in order to demonstrate its centrality to the epic story.

The quote from *Prithvirāj Rāso* that opened this chapter informs us that Jaychand, king of Kanauj, proposed to hold a *rājasūya* sacrifice, despite being counseled that it was not appropriate for the current degenerate Kali age. Although Prithviraj Chauhan, lord of Delhi, refuses to attend the ritual and thus acknowledge Jaychand as his superior, Jaychand goes ahead with his plans for the *rājasūya*, placing a golden image of Prithviraj at the doorway of his palace as an insult. Jaychand intends to concurrently hold a *svayamvara* ceremony for his daughter Samyogita, during which she would choose a husband from among the many princes attending her father's sacrifice. Jaychand's claim to supremacy is shown to be false, when Prithviraj embarks on a successful campaign of conquest and Samyogita declares him to be her heart's desire. Both the *rājasūya* and the *svayamvara* ceremonies are ruined, and Jaychand sequesters his lovesick daughter in a tall building on the banks of the Ganges.¹⁰

Meanwhile, according to the *Rāso*, Prithviraj reaches Kanauj, accompanied by his 100 *sāmant* warlords and his court poet Chand Bardai. (This provides an opportunity to praise the greatness of the Ganges River, as well as the beauty of Kanauj's women and its rich markets, in a standard convention of courtly literature.) The *sāmants* remain on the outskirts of the city, while Chand and Prithviraj, disguised as his bard's servant, approach the royal palace. After Chand's identity is verified by a group of poets, he and his ostensible servant are ushered into the presence of the Kanauj king. One serving woman formerly at the Delhi court recognizes Prithviraj despite his disguise and covers her head in modesty before him. This arouses some suspicion but Jaychand nonetheless offers Chand a pleasant palace for the night. When Jaychand comes to Chand's quarters the next morning, Prithviraj cannot maintain the pretense of being a servant and is recognized. Jaychand calls for his men while Prithviraj slips away to warn his 100 *sāmants*.

Telling his warriors to wait for him, the Chauhan king goes back into the city and is entranced by the waters of the Ganges. He is seen by Samyogita, sequestered in her palace on the river, whose female companions confirm his identity. Prithviraj and Samyogita meet and vow their love. The charming

¹⁰ The events summarized up to this point are covered in chap. 2 of Gupta *Rāso*.

scene of the encounter between Prithviraj and Samyogita is presented in the following words, in a shorter version of the *Rāso* epic:¹¹

The lord [Prithviraj] circled the city,
to the shore lapped by the Ganga,
Splashing the water with his hands,
he lost himself in the play of the fishes.

In this (entertainment), the king forgot all about fighting and foes.
Thousands of fish came to take away the pearls he flung at them,
Which became like small areca nuts upon reaching their throats.¹²
Laughing, he dug in the mud for those that fell in the (bed of the) Ganga.

(While) the king, forgetful, was absorbed in the fish,
Jaychand was approaching on horseback.
And, the beauty [Samyogita], hearing the sound of (martial) music,
climbed up (to the roof of) the house.

The beautiful woman [Samyogita] saw the army,
gleaming, as she ascended the house,
(and asked her companions) “Is that man or god, Kama or Shiva,
(who is now) present in the Ganga, laughing?”

One said “he is a demon or god;”
one said “he is Indra or the Snake lord.”
One said “certainly a superior man;”
one said, “the king Prithviraj.”

When the beauty heard (the name of) the excellent (Prithviraj),
her body got sweaty and shaky and her voice got lost,
As if she were a lotus . . . [meaning not clear]

(A female companion says):
“Oh lovely one, show honor to the (ways of the) elders and gurus,
when has a Rajput woman inquired (herself), oh beauty?
Please send an emissary to speak (to him),
(a description of your) good qualities should win him over.”

Jaychand’s daughter filled a tray with pearls (and said to her emissary),
“If he is Prithviraj, he will not turn around and ask (about the pearls).
Consider whether he has all the *lakṣaṇas* [auspicious marks or attributes],
For I have vowed, as long as he remains alive, to marry this king.”

¹¹ The following translation is from verses 6.6–15 of Gupta *Rāso*; I have also consulted N. Singh, *Prithvīrāj Rāso*, vv. 162–77 and Bora *Rāso*, vol. 2, vv. 200–9. Hardly a line can be found that agrees exactly among these three versions of the episode, underscoring the pressing need for text-critical study. As the exact meaning is not always clear, the reader should understand this to be a loose translation.

¹² Mataprasad Gupta suggests that the pearls acquired a red tinge from the color of the fish and thus become like areca nuts in hue (Gupta *Rāso*, p. 148)

The woman rushed (to the river) as commanded, but didn't speak out loud.
 He who (was absorbed in) the waves of the Ganga water, she attended.
 (Her) hands (were) soft like a lotus, fingers like a multitude of buds.
 As if her cupped hands were offering a libation to a brahmin.

Radiant were (her) clasped hands that seemed to be presenting a gift,
 As if Rambha, enthralled in love-play, was worshipping Indra.
 Though her hands got very tired, and the pearls on her tray depleted,
 Still she tore apart her neck(lace) and offered its pile of glass beads.
 Observing them with his eyes, the king noticed her and her intent.
 Agitated, the servant stayed near him fearfully [but said nothing].
 [He says] "You look like a colorfully decorated sacrificial post, lovely one,
 Or an *apsarā* [celestial maiden] fallen into the Ganga from above."
 [She replies] "I am not an *apsarā*, king, I am a servant in Jaychand's house.
 His daughter, forsaking her origins, respects the Delhi lord.
 Oh Chauhan hero, know that she exists like this:
 Resembling the elephant (in her gait), the lion (in her loins),
 the moon (in her face), and the fish (in her eyes).
 Drawn to him who is diamond-like (in luster), resolute in battle, and heroic,
 This proud woman tied me a knot (as a reminder of her message) as I left."
 Upon hearing this, the hero turned his young horse around and urged it on.
 Like a pauper obtaining wealth, he went and embraced (Samyogita).
 (Her body was like) the top grade of gold or a heap of scented garlands.
 Infatuated bees remained swarmed over her, (looking) like a black parasol.
 The locks of her hair covered in nectar and lotuses were swinging around,
 As if Cupid (himself) was dangling a beguiling noose in love play.
 The bracelet in her hands was the thread (that bound them) in marriage.
 Her companions sounded like instruments playing at the ceremony.
 The rites were performed by all the gods, for both sides.
 Their bond was firm and committed, (even if) it transgressed worldly ways.
 Despite the many joys, the longing for war lingered (in Prithviraj).
 So the beloved prepared a *pān*¹³ for her husband and offered it in farewell.

These verses represent a romantic interlude, sandwiched between the account of Chand and Prithviraj's daring adventure into the Kanauj palace and the dreadful scenes of warfare following Samyogita's abduction. Prithviraj is surprisingly carefree as he cavorts with the fish in the river, offering an enchanting picture to the lovesick princess who watches him from afar. Even then, Samyogita blunts the boldness of her actions by using an intermediary in contacting her beloved. Their love is quickly affirmed, once they meet face-to-face. Following this joyful meeting with the Kanauj princess, the *Rāso* tells us

¹³ While *pān*, areca nut wrapped in betel leaf, was often given as a mark of royal favor in premodern India, it could also signify acceptance of a task on behalf of the sovereign. Additionally, it had amorous connotations, as the abundant paintings depicting a lover feeding *pān* to a beloved demonstrate.

that Prithviraj returns to his men. They immediately discern the news of his “marriage” and go back to fetch the princess.¹⁴

But the Kanauj troops are fully mobilized by this time. The beginning of the battle between Prithviraj’s vastly outnumbered 100 *sāmans* and the vast Kanauj army is described in these verses from the shortest *Prthvīrāj Rāso* recension:¹⁵

When the ears heard “Prithviraj” uttered, the war drums were beaten,
Like the wind-driven clouds in Bhadron (month) hide the setting sun.

Just as rivers merge (with one another) in the Sapta-Sindhu (region),
So too did the troops of the two kings come together (on the battlefield).
(Like) the night beginning in Karka and the day beginning in Makara,¹⁶
(In the same way) the fervor of the armies of men grew greatly.

The defenders of the two kings were getting pumped up,
Like clouds building up upon the rainy season’s return.
By the middle of the night the war drums were rumbling,
(Sounding) like mountains falling into the sea.
The *shahnāi* (flute), *nafīrī* (pipe), and *kāhal* (drum),
Aroused the martial sentiments of the heroes.
For hours on end, the gongs rang loudly,
(Spreading) the sense of strife to the heavens and underworld.
Dust and grime dirtied the skies,
The eight directions were lost in the haze.
(But) the assembled swords and spears shone,
Glittering in the midst of the army like a host of stars.
The fourfold army’s thick armor,
Reflected the sun’s beams of light.
The troops appeared to be surging rainclouds,
(Before which) the timid (were as helpless?) as a creeping plant.
Those (men) with enviable moustaches [i.e., who were manly],
Were looked over carefully by the *apsarās*.
Watching this, the king (Prithviraj) divided his army.

When the Rathor [Jaychand], overwhelmed by anger,
said “seize the Chauhan!,”
Upon (Prithviraj’s) 100 (men), (fell) 100,000 (of Jaychand’s).
in endless rows (were another) ten lakh,
Like a shattered hill covers the ground,
(or) a stream’s water pours over land.
All the *apsarās* [celestial maidens] went to heaven
in vehicles (to welcome the heroes as they died).

¹⁴ Chaps. 4, 5, and 6 of Gupta *Rāso* narrate the events in Kanauj up to this point.

¹⁵ This translation derives from Gupta *Rāso* 7.3–7.7, although I also consulted Bora *Rāso*, vol. 2, vv. 230–3.

¹⁶ Karka is the zodiac sign of Cancer, and Makara is Capricorn. This line refers to the summer solstice in June (when the night time is shortest, and thereafter gets longer) and the winter solstice in December (when the day is shortest, and thereafter gets longer).

(The poet) Chand says, strife beset these two armies
 and weapons cascaded onto (their) heads (like) rain-clouds.
 The weight (of the armies) on Shesha, Hari, Hara, and Brahma
 disturbed their meditations on that day.

Hearing the uproar of (the armies) getting ready,
 The three cities [underworld, earth, sky] trembled (like) banana leaves.
 Did Gauri's beloved [Shiva] beat his *damaru* (drum),
 Thinking that the universe was coming to an end? . . .

The hero Ajana Bahu advanced,
 (As if he were) a wildfire proliferating in a thick forest.
 (Like) the water of the Ganga and Yamuna beating against the ground,
 Was the army of the Rathor king Pang [Jaychand].
 King Prithviraj's army was above them,
 Like monkeys howling from (the top of) Lanka.
 The gods and deities were all woken up, sleepless,
 And wretched seemed Indra and Shesha.
 The weight pressing down on the underworld led to an uproar.
 The dust flying up sealed off the sky (from view).
 Who can experience the excitement of the countless horseriders,
 (Due to whose) massive (royal) parasols the earth was not seen?
 (Once) the commotion started who could remain tranquil ?
 Varaha wasn't supporting (the earth) on his shoulders.
 The new armor of the armies (added to their) beauty,
 Like the three-eyed one [Shiva] bearing the Ganga (in his hair) . . .

Hearing (the enemy's) music, the king marched out with much equipment,
 As if he was the king Raghupati [Rama] setting out to attack Lanka.

Metaphors of the monsoon season, with its overflowing rivers and billowing rainclouds, are invoked frequently in this description of the vast array of Kanauj troops that was assembling to fight Prithviraj. The tension and excitement of the scene are expressed through frequent mention of the flute, pipe, and especially drums, which were played to incite warlike sentiments in the men. References to the gods being disturbed and the underworld being crushed serve to emphasize the awesome nature of the coming conflict.

The *Rāso* account continues on with lengthy descriptions of combat. On the third day of the fiercely fought battle, Prithviraj finally agrees to ride toward Delhi with his bride, while the *sāmans* fight a rearguard action in his defense. Prithviraj's heroic champions individually confront the massed horde of their foes, succumbing one-by-one. Many of the *sāmans* have given up their lives before Prithviraj manages to reach his capital safely.¹⁷

¹⁷ The battle against the Kanauj army takes up chaps. 7 & 8 of Gupta *Rāso*.

The loss of so many of his best military commanders in the retreat from Kanauj helps explain how it was possible that a king as great as Prithviraj could be defeated, especially by a foe like Muhammad Ghuri whom he had easily dispatched in battle previously. Had the Chauhan king not embarked on this risky adventure into the heart of his enemy's territory, he would have been better prepared to face the Ghurid army in its next assault on the Delhi kingdom.¹⁸ While he prevailed over Jaychand both militarily and in the more intangible realm of public honor, Prithviraj's rash actions in Kanauj ultimately led to his undoing. In addition to the deaths of half or more of Prithviraj's trusted chiefs, the expedition to Kanauj contributed to Prithviraj's downfall by causing Jaychand to ally himself with Shihab al-Din of Ghur.

The prize Prithviraj had obtained in Kanauj – his beautiful bride Samyogita – also contributed to his lack of preparedness when Shihab al-Din Ghuri next arrived in Delhi territory. A quick synopsis of the *Rāso* story after the couple's return to Delhi reveals the problem. The epic describes the months passing by blissfully for Prithviraj and Samyogita, who experience the raptures of true love. Indeed, Prithviraj is so infatuated with his new wife that he ignores all affairs of state, despite the danger posed to his realm by the aggressive designs of Shihab al-Din Muhammad Ghuri. Prithviraj's neglected subjects are finally forced to seek help from Prithviraj's Rajaguru, who, along with the bard Chand, upbraids the king for his over-indulgence in love. Prithviraj awakens to his royal duty, if rather belatedly, and quickly prepares for battle. But the small army he can muster in a short time is soon overwhelmed by the much larger army of Shihab al-Din, and Prithviraj is taken captive.¹⁹

It is clear from the epic narrative that Prithviraj would not have neglected the foremost kingly duty – defense of the realm – had it not been for his unhealthy preoccupation with Samyogita. The Chauhan king's competition with Jaychand thus led to the unnecessary deaths of his leading warriors in an unprovoked war and to a fatal distraction from military affairs in the form of the Kanauj princess. Bereft of his best fighters and caught off-guard by new developments, the once invincible Prithviraj falls into the hands of an old enemy. The conflict with Kanauj is key to the *Rāso* plot in that it leads directly to Prithviraj's capture by Shihab al-Din and eventual death.

The importance of the Kanauj (or abduction of Samyogita) episode is not limited to the length of its treatment within the epic or to its centrality to the

¹⁸ Mohansimha *Rāso* 61.195; sixty-four *sāmans* are said to have died in the retreat from Kanauj in Mohansimha *Rāso* 61.147.

¹⁹ Prithviraj's dalliance with Samyogita and the remonstrances of his advisors are covered in chaps. 9 and 10 of Gupta *Rāso*, respectively. The final battle with Shihab al-Din comprises chap. 11, while events in Shihab al-Din's capital, Ghazni, are described in chap. 12.

plot. This episode also establishes – in a most emphatic manner – the heroic credentials of both its main hero and his chief champions, the hundred *sāmans* who accompany him to Kanauj. The episode's extremely favorable portrayal of Prithviraj and his men verifies their exemplary character as warriors who were extraordinarily skilled at arms and exceptionally dedicated to upholding the warrior code of behavior. The heroic personalities of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* and their martial ethos, discussed in the following section, are nowhere showcased more effectively than in the struggle against the Kanauj forces.

Prithviraj's Rajput champions

Rather than just being a tale about the king Prithviraj, much of the *Rāso* features his mighty *sāmans*, the famous band of warrior lords who were the mainstay of his kingdom. The Kanauj episode highlights their noble character more than any other occasion in the epic. While fighting on behalf of an overlord was always commendable, the Kanauj battle brings out the selflessness and dedication of the *sāmans* like no other incident, for they gave up their own lives so that their lord could survive. Theirs was a hopeless cause, which many other military servants would have abandoned, and for that reason it was glorious beyond all. The need to emphasize the valor of the *sāmans* who bravely died on behalf of their king on the retreat from Kanauj made it the longest battle scene in *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, at least in the oldest versions.²⁰

The greatness of the *sāmans* is stressed repeatedly in the narrative, as when Prithviraj departs for Kanauj:²¹

The Delhi lord departed, in order to see Jaychand at Kanauj,
Accompanied by Chand Bardai and many *sāmans*,
 a wealth of heroes –
(Of the clans) Chauhan, Rathor, Pundir, Guhila,
 Bargujar, Parmar, Kachhwaha, and Jangra,²² –
Rising dust obscured the sky, when the king marched with them.
(These) hundred Rajputs in his company,
 each with the strength of a hundred thousand warriors.

In the verse above, each of the hundred Rajputs accompanying Prithviraj on his expedition is said to be equivalent to a hundred thousand other warriors in

²⁰ It takes up sixty-eight verses out of the total of 407 in the *Rāso* manuscript from Dharanoj village, representing the shortest recension of the epic, as compared to the forty-six verses on the final battle against Shihab al-Din of Ghur. These figures are based on Rajmal Bora's edition of the *Rāso*, where the Kanauj battle is covered in vol. 2, vv.228–95.

²¹ Gupta *Rāso* 4.1; see also Bora *Rāso*, vol. 2, v.116; Mohansimha *Rāso* 58.76.

²² The Rohillas, an Indo-Afghan clan, are mentioned in Gupta *Rāso* but not in Bora's edition. I have replaced the terms Pamvar and Kurambh (or tortoise) with their better-known equivalents Parmar (Paramara) and Kachhwaha.

ability. They are the epitome of Rajput warriorhood, and several of the prestigious lineages they represent are listed. The incredible prowess of Prithviraj's *sāmans* is a common boast throughout the epic, and explains Prithviraj's confidence in infiltrating enemy territory with such a small warband – ordinarily said to be a hundred in number, although occasionally more. The Kanauj army is said to have been much larger: a hundred thousand cavalry and ten lakh (i.e., one million) other soldiers in one passage, while another verse gives the number of Kanauj soldiers as eighty lakh.²³

Prithvirāj Rāso is unusual among written texts from early modern North India for the number and range of warrior characters who populate its pages. Aside from religious works and treatises on poetics, the most common type of text produced at Rajasthan's courts was a genealogical or dynastic account that narrated the past of a single lineage or dynasty, one hero after another. The famous *Khyāt* chronicle compiled by Mumhata Nainsi, and a few other works of this kind, did bring together the histories of diverse warrior lineages, but these were narrated separately, each as a discrete unit. Only the *Rāso*, among elite literary texts in a vernacular language, envisioned a distant past in which a slew of Rajput chiefs came together in large-scale action over a big expanse of territory.²⁴ The sociological breadth of *Prithvirāj Rāso* is an important factor in its long-lasting popularity, I argue, since it made the epic relevant to an entire community of warriors in later times and not just to a single clan.

Precisely because it encompassed such a large number of warrior lineages and offered them a shared history, I believe the *Rāso* contributed to the consolidation of an aristocratic Rajput identity beginning in the late sixteenth century. What the term Rajput meant prior to the Mughal period is a contentious issue, for scholars disagree about how far back we can trace the existence of the Rajputs as a community. Although the Sanskrit term *rājaputra*, literally “king’s son,” appears in inscriptions from the eleventh century onward, some scholars have interpreted it as a designation solely for the immediate relatives of a king. However, Brajadulal Chattopadhyaya suggests that *rājaputra* was applied to a larger group of high-ranking men who also bore titles such as *rāuta*, *rāvala*, and *rānaka*. His study of inscriptions primarily from Rajasthan led Chattopadhyaya to the opinion that “by the twelfth century the term *rājaputra* had come to acquire the later connotation of the term ‘Rajput,’” who were associated with fortified settlements and the division of land among

²³ Gupta *Rāso* 7.5 and 7.8.

²⁴ *Binhai-rāsau*, a Dingal work that Allison Busch has studied, is a partial exception to this statement in that it covers several battles fought in 1658 by Rajput adherents of Shah Jahan against his rebellious sons. A few other Rajput texts from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries also describe Rajput contingents drawn from several courts that fought together, against Aurangzeb or another Mughal ruler. However, these concern the recent past and do not have the vast scope of *Prithvirāj Rāso*.

kin, among other features.²⁵ Chattopadhyaya also believes that “an element of heredity” was involved in the transmission of the title by 1300 or thereabouts. In contrast, Michael Bednar’s examination of inscriptions from western and central India during the eleventh through fourteenth centuries indicates that *thakkura*, *rāuta*, and *rājaputra* were titles of rank that generally denoted official positions and were often not passed on from father to son.²⁶ Chattopadhyaya may, therefore, be somewhat premature in his assertion that Rajput identity existed in the twelfth or thirteenth centuries, if one understands “Rajput” to designate a clan-based community with a distinctive warrior ethos, rather than a term denoting individual political rank.

Arguing in a different vein than Chattopadhyaya, Dirk H. A. Kolff claims that the label Rajput had previously denoted an open status identity that any successful warrior could acquire. During the Mughal period, however, the Rajputs closed ranks to form an aristocratic class whose membership was strictly circumscribed by birth and could therefore no longer be attained through military prowess alone. As Kolff puts it:

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the top layer of Rajputs, encouraged by the openings presented by the Mughal state and helped by the expertise of their bards, tended to close ranks and to articulate new norms of Rajput behaviour. Bards had always encouraged their Rajput employers to assume aristocratic self-images closely linked with myths of origin that established their status as kshatriyas and traced back their genealogies to, for instance, the great dynasties of ancient Indian history. But now the political power and social status of the more successful lineages tended to be legitimised exclusively in the language of descent and kinship.²⁷

Kolff’s provocative thesis certainly applies to more peripheral groups like the Bundelas of Central India, whose claims to be Rajput were ignored by the Rajput clans of Mughal-era Rajasthan, and to other such lower-status martial communities. In the older kingdoms of Rajasthan, such as Mewar, where kingship was more strongly entrenched and aristocratic pretensions accordingly more elaborate, Kolff may overstate the ease with which Rajput status could be achieved before the late sixteenth century. In any case, Rajput was not a term that figured in Indo-Persian texts prior to the sixteenth century, according to Peter Jackson, supporting the view that there was some change in the meaning of the term or in the importance of the people who used it.²⁸

²⁵ Brajadulal Chattopadhyaya, “Origin of the Rajputs: The Political, Economic and Social Processes in Early Medieval Rajasthan,” in *The Making of Early Medieval India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 59 n6.

²⁶ Bednar, “Conquest and Resistance in Context,” pp. 161–86.

²⁷ Dirk H. A. Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy: The Ethnohistory of the Military Labour Market in Hindustan, 1450–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 72.

²⁸ Jackson, *Delhi Sultanate*, p. 9.

A factor in the growing emphasis on illustrious Rajput ancestry from the sixteenth century onward was the example of the Mughals, who had a considerable interest in their own genealogy. Adding to that were the more restricted avenues for social mobility after the consolidation of the Mughal empire, which ruled out opportunities for military action and made hereditary prestige even more weighty. As Rajput chiefs were increasingly co-opted into the Mughal system, a sharper line was drawn between them and the other, less elite, fighting men of India. One way of doing this was through acknowledging the kshatriya status of Rajputs, as Akbar's historian Abu al-Fazl does when discussing caste in *Ā'īn-i Akbarī*. Abu al-Fazl goes on to "record the names of a few of the most renowned [Rajput lineages], that are now in His Majesty's service," beginning with the Rathors.²⁹ The repeated conflation of Rajput with kshatriya that can be witnessed in *Prthvīrāj Rāso* is thus part of a larger early modern trend of stressing the elite nature of Rajputs, as well as their ancient ancestry.

Prithviraj's *sāmans* were all high-ranking warriors, in the eyes of the *Rāso*, whose Rajput identity is presented as synonymous with kshatriya status. An example comes from the tale of Nahar Ray, against whom the young Prithviraj fights one of his first battles in the long recension. Seeing that he was losing the fight, Nahar Ray declares, "I am a Rajput and will never retreat from a battleground. Like the polestar, my reputation [*nām*] shall remain steadfast." He then turns to his own warriors and exhorts them to be similarly resolute, for changing one's allegiance was not the kshatriya (*chhatri*) way.³⁰ This type of equivalence between kshatriya and Rajput identities is made time and again. The word *rajputī* even appears in the long recension of this epic "in the sense of a kshatriya's pride and prestige," as one scholar of Rajput history has observed.³¹

Prthvīrāj Rāso promoted a sense of Rajput nobility and antiquity by inviting early modern warriors to admire the activities of their ancestors, whose accomplishments in the past served to validate their descendants' elite position in the present. It also fostered a notion of exclusivity, for only certain specified warrior clans had participated in the glories of Rajput warriorhood in the days of Prithviraj Chauhan. I thus concur with Kolff's assertion that "since the late sixteenth century, something like a new Rajput Great Tradition emerged which could recognise little else than unilineal kin bodies as the elements of which genuine Rajput history ought to be made up."³² *Prthvīrāj Rāso* played a part in the making of this Rajput Great Tradition, which accepted only genealogical

²⁹ Translation by Jarrett; Abu al-Fazl, *Ā'īn-i Akbarī*, 3:131.

³⁰ Mohansimha *Rāso* 6.57 and 6.58.

³¹ Kalika Rajan Qanungo, *Studies in Rajput History* (Delhi: S. Chand & Co., 1960), p. 98.

³² Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy*, p. 73.

claims to Rajput identity, by presenting a vision of a Rajput past that included representatives from many, but not all, of the lineages of the Mughal era that called themselves Rajput.

Prithviraj Chauhan's *sāmans*, or “great leaders” as James Tod describes them, continued to be regarded as their forebears by the elite Rajputs he met in Rajasthan ca. 1820. Tod underscores the *Rāso*'s importance for the warrior community of his day when he observes:

In the sixty-nine books, comprising one hundred thousand stanzas, relating to the exploits of Prithiraj, every noble family of Rajasthan will find some record of their ancestors. It is accordingly treasured amongst the archives of each race having any pretensions to the name of Rajput.³³

This quote confirms that *Prithvirāj Rāso* was regarded as a historical document that helped define the category of Rajput by linking it to an ancestral association with Prithviraj Chauhan. The alleged continuity between the society of Prithviraj Chauhan's time and that of early nineteenth-century Rajasthan was the reason Tod spent so much energy trying to identify the various individuals and lineages in Prithviraj's elite band of warriors.

A closer look at Prithviraj's warriors is warranted here, as well, in order to substantiate the claims I have just made about the epic's importance as a heroic charter for the Rajput community of the larger Rajasthan region. The Kanauj episode is especially notable in this regard, as I have already argued, and in the shortest *Rāso* recension, thirty-eight *sāmans* are said to have lost their lives in this incident.³⁴ Longer manuscripts note dozens more and a total of sixty-four *sāmans* who died in order to make possible Prithviraj's abduction of Samyogita.³⁵ As we are nowhere in the epic provided with a full list of the 100 or so *sāmans*, the dead partisans named in the Kanauj episode are our main source for the *Rāso*'s conception of elite warrior society in Prithviraj's age. The roster of Prithviraj's fallen heroes can be read as a catalog of the past and present warrior lineages understood to be most illustrious by early modern Rajput society.

First to die, in all versions of *Prithvirāj Rāso*, was Govindray Guhilot. Guhilot or Guhila is the name of an old, distinguished clan that flourished in southeastern Rajasthan from the seventh century on, with several later

³³ Tod, *Rajasthan*, pp. 297–8 n2.

³⁴ These deaths are recorded in Gupta *Rāso* 7.20, 7.27, 7.31, 8.11–34. I am not counting the Jangli Narendra who appears in 7.28, unlike the editor, because I regard this as one of Prithviraj's titles.

³⁵ Mohansimha *Rāso* 61.147. James Tod also cites the number sixty-four (“Translation of a Sanscrit Inscription, Relative to the Last Hindu King of Delhi, with Comments Thereon,” *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland* 1, no. pt. 1 [1824]: 148).

branches including the Sisodiya dynasty of Chittor and Udaipur.³⁶ Several other heroes who allegedly lost their lives during the retreat from Kanauj came from lineages such as the Guhilas whose existence in the pre-1200 era is reliably attested by inscriptions. Among these *sāmans* were Solanki Sarang, Mal Chandel, and Pahar-ray Tomar. The Solankis (sometimes equated with the Chalukyas or Chaulukyas) controlled parts of western and central India in the tenth through mid-thirteenth centuries from a base in (Anahillapataka/Anhilwara) Patan, Gujarat. The Chandels or Chandellas of Bundelkhand began as tributaries to the Gurjara-Pratiharas, and then became independent kings in the tenth century, with centers at Khajuraho, Kalinjar, and Mahoba. The Tomars (also Tanwar, Tuar) were rulers of the Delhi region in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and then resurfaced at Gwalior during the fifteenth century.

Each of the famous *agnikula* clans believed to have originated from a sacrificial firepit on Mt. Abu in southern Rajasthan – the Paramaras (or Pamwars/ Pramars in the vernacular), the Pratiharas (or Parihars), the Chalukyas, and the Chahamanas (or Chauhans) – had at least one representative among the warriors who sacrificed their lives in the Kanauj episode. While the most famous Paramara kings ruled the Malwa region of Central India, *Prthvīrāj Rāso* features a branch based at Abu led by Salakh Pamar. The Parihars go back to the imperial Pratihara dynasty of the first millennium CE, and in later times ruled western Rajasthan from the city of Mandor. Padhri Ray, said to be a king of the Parihars, did not survive the Kanauj conflict, and neither did a man called Chalukya Vinjhal. Nothing is said about his background in the *Rāso*, although the label Chalukya is frequently applied to the royal family of Gujarat. Prithviraj's own Chauhan clan, which by the fifteenth century boasted numerous branches and a wide geographic distribution, supposedly lost two members in the battle against Jaychand's army. One was Har Singh Chauhan, whose relation to Prithviraj is not specified. The other Chauhan warrior was Kanha, the brother of Prithviraj's father and an important advisor to the young Prithviraj.³⁷

The origins and early history of other Rajput clans represented among the fallen champions of the Kanauj battle are less clear. Bhati, for example, is a label applied to a large and amorphous set of communities found nowadays in Rajasthan, Haryana, the Indian Punjab, and Uttar Pradesh, as well as in

³⁶ Nandini Sinha-Kapur, *State Formation in Rajasthan: Mewar During the Seventh-Fifteenth Centuries* (Delhi: Manohar, 2002), pp. 33–41, 53–81, 106–8. For a panoramic view of Rajasthan's political history, see Rima Hooja, *A History of Rajasthan* (Delhi: Rupa Co., 2006).

³⁷ Krishna Chandra Agarwal, *Prthvīrāj Rāso ke Pātrō kī Aitihāsikā* (Lucknow: Vishvavidyalay Hindi Prakashan, Lucknow University, 1968), p. 169. Kanha's prominence is emphasized in the longest recension of the *Rāso*, when he participates in virtually every major battle that Prithviraj fought before the Kanauj expedition.

Pakistan. The *sāmant* whose death is commemorated in *Prthvīrāj Rāso* is Bhan Bhatti of Thatta, a town in Sind. Similarly, Bargujar is an appellation borne by a number of different communities, including Muslim Rajputs; the *Rāso* verse describing the warrior Kanak Barguja will appear here in a few pages.³⁸ Baghel (derived from Vaghela), the surname of a hero called Lakhān, is another example of a clan whose existence during Prithviraj's twelfth-century lifetime cannot be definitively confirmed.

The Rathor clans of western Rajasthan likewise only become visible in the historical record subsequent to Prithviraj's death. They did not begin to gain power until around 1400, in the power vacuum that resulted from Timur's sacking of Delhi and the subsequent loss of Sultanate control over Rajasthan.³⁹ The Rathor Niddur Ray who figures in the *Rāso* is a particularly interesting character, because he is said to be the brother of Jaychand of Kanauj. The later traditions of the Rathors assert that they are descendants of Jaychand, through his grandsons who fled the Gangetic plains after the Ghurid conquest. In contrast, the twelfth-century inscriptions issued by Jaychand and his predecessors identify their lineage as Gahadavala.⁴⁰ In *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, Rathor Niddur Ray forsakes his allegiance to his brother Jaychand in favor of the Chauhan king, to the point of fighting to death on Prithviraj's behalf. The Rathor warriors of Mughal-era India could, therefore, point to involvement on both sides of this twelfth-century conflict.

The pre-Sultanate past of the Kachhwaha Rajputs is also quite obscure. While the possibility that Kachhwahas were present in Rajasthan in Prithviraj's day cannot be entirely rejected, it is unlikely that they could have mustered much in the way of military strength. In the *Rāso*, however, the Kachhwahas (also Kurambh/Kurma, meaning 'tortoise') figure among the most important of Prithviraj's subordinate allies. Their martial credentials were validated by the three Kachhwaha warriors – Palhan-dev, and two of his relatives – who gave up their lives for Prithviraj in fighting the Kanauj army.⁴¹ In the long-recension version of the episode, much attention is given to the exploits of Kachhwaha Pajjun instead.⁴²

In contrast to the Rajput clan designations I have listed so far – Guhila, Solanki, Tomar, Parihar, Bhati, and so forth – other names mentioned in this

³⁸ William Crooke, *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, vol. 1 (Calcutta: Government of India, 1896), pp. 187–90.

³⁹ Hooja, *History of Rajasthan*, pp. 373, 379.

⁴⁰ Ram Shankar Tripathi, *History of Kanauj to the Moslem Conquest* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsi Dass, 1959), p. 196.

⁴¹ The *Rāso* reference to Kachhwaha deaths has also been understood as meaning "the lord of the Kachhwahas [presumably Pajjun] along with three brothers including Palhan-dev" (Mohansimha *Rāso* 4.754).

⁴² For example, Mohansimha *Rāso* 58.439–40, 58.445–6.

epic were not familiar to Tod's early nineteenth-century informants. Chief among these was Dahima, which Tod notes "was a celebrated tribe, now totally extinct, lords of Biana [Bayana, in Haryana]."⁴³ A Nar Singh of the Dahima clan, who was the commander of Nagaur town, was one of the first *sāmans* to die. Even more notable was the Dahima warrior Chand Pundir, whom Prithviraj had assigned to govern Lahore and the Punjab against the depredations of Shihab al-Din, according to the *Rāso*. Two of Chand Pundir's brothers were also said to be among Prithviraj's inner circle of advisors: the eldest was Prithviraj's chief minister, Kaymas, who in the *Rāso* account was murdered most foully by the king. Chamund Ray is the third Dahima brother with a large role in *Prithvirāj Rāso*, as one of Prithviraj's most trusted military commanders.⁴⁴

Even in *Prithvirāj Rāso*'s oldest manuscript, therefore, we find many illustrious Rajput clans highlighted in the Kanauj episode. The number of clans increases in the longer versions of the epic, which list more than a dozen additional individuals among the dead. Perhaps most important is Hamir of the Hada Chauhan clan, whose descendants ruled the small kingdoms of Bundi and Kota in the Mughal era. Although their territories were not large, the two Hada lineages contributed much manpower to Mughal expeditions in the Deccan and in Afghanistan during the seventeenth century. To the Rajput of the late sixteenth century (or the early nineteenth century, for that matter), the cast of characters in the *Rāso* would have been largely familiar; they would have represented the core of the community regarded as Rajput, whose shared history going back for centuries was attested by the epic.

In addition to fostering a sense of unity among the multitude of Rajput lineages, *Prithvirāj Rāso* also celebrated the heroic ethos that imbued the Rajput warrior and explained his greatness. Although the epic, even in its shortest version, contains numerous verses praising the *sāmans*, the Kanauj chapter is notable for the spotlight it casts on individual men as they confront the enemy. Rather than the more typical scenario of a duel between leading warriors of the opposing sides, here we have single warriors trying to hold off the Kanauj army long enough for Prithviraj to escape safely back to Delhi. Sometimes the combat is described in general terms, followed by the names of several *sāmans* who had been killed. At other times, one or more verses are

⁴³ "Vow of Sunjogta," p. 105 n1. However, Henry Miers Elliot noted not long afterward that a community called Dhahima still survived in Baghpat, now in western Uttar Pradesh state (*Supplement to the Glossary of Indian Terms: A-J* [Agra: Secundra Orphan Press, 1845], pp. 221–2).

⁴⁴ Tod declares that other clans such as the Javala, Nurban, Dhawura, and Dor had also become extinct ("Vow of Sunjogta," pp. 105 n16, 105 n19, 106 n22, 107 n34); *sāmans* from these groups figure in the long recension of the *Rāso*. I have omitted mention of several other lineages that Tod includes among the thirty-six royal clans of the Rajputs, such as the Mori, Sankla, and Jadu.

devoted to the fallen champion, as we see in this verse about Har Singh Chauhan:⁴⁵

Having formally saluted (Prithviraj),
the Chauhan Har Singh advanced.
He'd made the choice of troops (to attack)
and fought alone against a lakh.
As his horse called Agam whirled around,
its sharp hooves churned the ground.
He clashed with one lakh (foes)
and stopped one lakh on the battlefield.
Bit by bit, he was breaking down but did not turn away,
(even) when hurrahs filled the skies.
By this means, says Chand Bardai,
the Chauhan went four *kos* [eight miles] (toward Delhi).

As high-ranking warriors, Har Singh and the other *sāmans* invariably fought on horseback and their valuable animals are occasionally named. Each *sāmant* who, like Har Singh Chauhan, bravely advanced one-by-one to obstruct the enemy army's forward movement did so fully expecting to die. Celestial maidens (*apsarās*) and other divine beings would watch the heroes as they fought, praising those who were exceptionally skilled and brave with cries of “jay, jay” (hurrah). (A hero fallen on the battlefield was often brought up to the heavens on a chariot sent down by a celestial maiden or *apsarā* who desired him as husband.⁴⁶) Har Singh's resolve did not falter even in these conditions and the next verse records that he “fell to the earth.” His sacrifice was not in vain, for while he was fighting the horde of enemies, his overlord covered about eight miles of the remaining distance to Delhi.

As soon as one champion was slain, another stepped forward in his place. Next was the warrior Kanak Bargujar, who also began his combat with a ritualistic farewell to his liege lord:⁴⁷

Kanak Bargujar bowed, (saying),
“Prithviraj, look and listen!
That I will meet you again is unlikely,
Oh master, be (gone) to your own home.
I will pierce the solar disk (in the end) and,
while life lasts, will never abandon virtue.

⁴⁵ Gupta *Rāso* 8.11; see also Bora *Rāso*, vol. 2, v.261; Mohansimha *Rāso* 58.579; Pandya *Rāso* 61.2160. In the long recension, the name appears as Nar Singh.

⁴⁶ Minoru Hara, “Apsaras and Hero,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 29 (2001): 135–53. The parallels between the Indic warrior's heaven and its Islamic counterpart was recognized by *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, for one verse in the long recension informs us that, after a fierce battle, the *apsarās* wanted the dead kshatriya (*chatri*) heroes, whereas the houris (*hūr*) desired the Muslim (*miccha*) heroes (Mohansimha *Rāso* 58.437).

⁴⁷ Gupta *Rāso* 8.14; see also Bora *Rāso* vol. 2, v.264; Mohansimha *Rāso* 58.582.

Once my sword is shattered,
 my head will adorn Shiva's necklace (of skulls).
 No one in my clan knows how to flee,
 I am mired in the mud of my lord('s honor)."
 By this means, (says) Chand Bardai,
 the Chauhan went six *kos* [twelve miles] (toward Delhi).

Kanak Bargujar declares his determination to fight until his sword shatters, that is, to death. The thought of retreating, or “fleeing” from the battlefield as the *Rāso* always phrases it, was inconceivable to a warrior such as Kanak Bargujar, who was serious about his duty to the overlord. The reference to “piercing the solar disk” reflects a long-standing belief that a warrior who died fighting would secure an after-life in the world of the gods.⁴⁸ In the next verse, we are told that Kanak Bargujar went to Vaikuntha, the god Vishnu’s heaven; this was his reward for dying honorably on the battlefield.

Verses like these were intended to honor the fearless men who had fallen in battle. At the very least, therefore, the names of the dead warriors had to be specified, and often a description of their heroic exploits was also included. This was to ensure that the men were remembered for their brave deeds by later generations, a goal that the *Rāso* articulates explicitly. In an account from the long recension of a fiercely fought struggle, we are told:

There fell sixty-four of the Khans of the Gori lord; there fell also thirteen of the warriors (of Chauhan); Chand (the poet) now tells their names. For those who fell corpse upon corpse, entangled in the host (of the enemy), who is to know them unless their tribal and personal distinctions be written?⁴⁹

The names of those who died fighting had to be recorded, orally or in written form, so that they would be “known” – that is, properly recognized and venerated. Another verse suggests that warriors might go to some lengths to make sure they could be identified in the event they died amidst the chaos of battle. It describes Hussain, an enemy warrior, as having tied a paper around his neck that indicated who he was, before taking his place on the battlefield.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Based on a study of the term *yoga*, David Gordon White suggests that there was once a “ritual ideology in which a dying warrior physically or symbolically lashed himself to his chariot in order that his body-chariot with its luminous soul-charioteer could charge up to, or even mount an assault on, the disk of the sun” (*Sinister Yogis* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009], p. 66; on this topic, see pp. 60–9). A warrior who died properly could, while symbolically yoked to his chariot, thus storm the sphere of the sun and get beyond the world of mortality. I am grateful to David for explaining the significance of the solar disk references to me.

⁴⁹ Translation of A. F. Rudolf Hoernle, *The Prithirāja Rāsau of Chand Bardai Pt II Fasciculus 1* (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1881), pp. 54–5. Hoernle explains that he translated the phrase *kaṅka-aṅka*, literally meaning “country and marks,” as local (tribal) and personal distinctions.

⁵⁰ Mohansimha *Rāso* 11.52, Pandya *Rāso* 9.134; Hussain bound around his neck a *sajrā*, literally meaning a genealogical tree, according to Sitaram Lalas’s *Rājasthānī Śabd Koś*.

Only if their identity was known could fallen warriors be honored for sacrificing their lives.

Even more valuable than life, in the rhetoric of the warrior code, was a man's reputation. Indeed, fame was considered more substantial and more tangible than life itself, in the *Rāso*'s words: "This world of *samsāra* is worthless [*asār*]; in the Kali age, only fame [*kitti*] is real [*sār*] ... [one's] name alone remains from age to age."⁵¹ Since death is but a means to everlasting fame, Prithviraj's court poet and confidante Chand Bardai insists during the Kanauj episode that it is a noble fate. While trying to persuade Prithviraj to leave his men behind and escape to Delhi with Samyogita, Chand tells the king, "Should you offer death, O Prithviraj, the kshatriya [*chhatra*] will laugh and enter into it. When death approaches, he says [to it], 'come and sit in my house!'" After thus assuring Prithviraj that the *sāmans* would welcome the glorious death that awaited them, Chand goes on to promise that "as long as the Ganga has water and the sun and moon exist, so long will poems [about their heroism] continue to be told."⁵² Dying dramatically in combat could ensure a most attractive consequence: the immortality of poetic commemoration.

Off-setting this rhetoric of glorious death and everlasting fame are the numerous verses which depict the goriness of battle. Headless torsos that fight on for hours are but one among many gruesome images that abound in *Prthvīrāj Rāso*. Soon after the Kanauj army attacked Prithviraj and his men, the battlefield is likened to a lake of blood, whose mud was made up of human flesh mixed with bones. Hands, thighs, and torsos were separated and strewn about the battlefield, as if they were fishes and tortoises swimming across the lake. The cut-off heads of dead warriors were like lotus flowers (bobbing around the lake), while their tresses were like fronds of seaweed. Vultures lurked around this battlefield, as they did other arenas of combat in medieval Indian literature, eating human entrails and other body parts.⁵³ They were joined at the scene of the Kanauj battle by *yoginīs*, female creatures who were envisioned as semi-divine and witch-like; they used skulls as vessels in which to collect the blood of the dead that they avidly sought to drink.⁵⁴ Yoginis are sometimes conflated with the *apsarās* or celestial maidens who garlanded the fallen heroes and chose their favorites to be their husbands in heaven, as we see in the page from an illustrated manuscript of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* appearing in Figure 4.1.⁵⁵ It shows the streets of Kanauj awash with blood, in which float

⁵¹ Mohansimha *Rāso* 6.60.

⁵² Gupta *Rāso* 8.6; Bora *Rāso*, vol. 2, v.257.

⁵³ Gupta *Rāso* 7.17; Bora *Rāso*, vol. 2, v.244.

⁵⁴ Gupta *Rāso* 7.25.

⁵⁵ Previously published as Fig. 8 in Cynthia Talbot, "Recovering the Heroic History of Rajasthan: James Tod and the *Prthvīrāj Rāso*," in *James Tod's Rajasthan: The Historian and His Collections*, ed. Giles Tillotson (Mumbai: Marg Publication, 2007), p. 105. The caption in that book mistakenly identifies this painting from the Royal Asiatic Society collection as RAS 063.112, but should read RAS 063.047.



Figure 4.1. Illustration from *Prithvirāj Rāso* manuscript; photograph courtesy of Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland

the scattered heads and limbs of elephants, horses, and men. To the left are two women in a boat carrying garlands; to the right are three larger figures of women, labeled *apsarās* in the text on top, who are drinking blood out of cups.

Brides as signifiers of royal status

While the superiority of his fighting men added to Prithviraj's luster as a king, it also meant that mere martial prowess could not set him apart. Prithviraj had to possess some special attribute in order to stand out from the throng of exceptional warriors surrounding him and be worthy of their devoted service. The *Rāso*'s answer was to provide him with a tangible trophy of war – a beautiful, high-ranking bride obtained through a highly risky adventure. The Kanauj episode not only allowed Prithviraj's elite warriors to display their manliness and martial skills, it also emphatically established their lord's heroic credentials and kshatriya status, thereby justifying the allegiance of his *sāmans*. It does so through recourse to an archaic mode of marriage best known to us from India's martial epic *par excellence*, the *Mahābhārata*.

In a famous example from that epic, Bhishma declares “that bride is the best who is carried off by force,” as he seizes the three daughters of the Kashi king at their *svayamvara* ceremony.⁵⁶ This type of marriage was known as the

⁵⁶ J. A. E. van Buitenen, trans. and ed., *Mahābhārata*, vol. 1 (University of Chicago, 1973), p. 228.

rāksasa or demonic, defined in *Laws of Manu* as “the abduction by force of a maiden, weeping and wailing, from her house, after smashing and cleaving and breaking [her relatives and household].”⁵⁷ It was sanctioned only for kshatriyas in the legal literature, presumably because they alone were supposed to acquire objects through force.⁵⁸ Because physical strength was a highly admired attribute in a warrior and his use of force was socially sanctioned, the *rāksasa* marriage is a perfect embodiment of the warrior ideal, as Minoru Hara pointed out years ago.⁵⁹

The warrior was expected to publicly demonstrate his martial abilities in the course of a *rāksasa* marriage, and so was required to fight the young woman’s kinsmen. This need to be open about the act of abduction explains why Prithviraj’s disguise as Chand’s servant in Kanauj had to be unmasked and why he could not simply slip off quietly with the princess. Instead, Chand Bardai proclaims to Jaychand his master’s identity and his desire to engage in warfare, in this manner: “The Delhi lord who is your enemy has come to ruin your sacrifice. Having married your daughter, now he demands from you a battle as a form of adornment [for her].”⁶⁰ Here the battle is construed as an ornament, a form of dowry that must be given to the groom, along with the bride, by her father. The reason for Prithviraj’s repeated refusal to leave his subordinates behind on the battlefield also becomes apparent once we know the requirements of a legitimate *rāksasa* marriage; only after engaging in combat for days and causing many deaths – that is, only after making his virility amply visible – does Prithviraj leave for Delhi, an act that could otherwise be interpreted as a cowardly retreat. And so Samyogita becomes a palpable symbol of Prithviraj’s greatness, attesting to his ability to forcibly take whatsoever and whomsoever he pleased.

The message conveyed by the abduction of Samyogita – that a bride should be acquired through heroic means and that a wife therefore signified a warrior’s masculinity – gets reiterated in longer versions of *Prthvīrāj Rāso*. That is, the linkage between brides and battles is something the epic spends considerable effort establishing time and again. As the *Rāso* text got longer, so too did the list of Prithviraj’s wives. Although Samyogita is the only bride featured in the shortest (*laghutam*) recension, the tale of Prithviraj’s marriage

⁵⁷ Stephanie W. Jamison, *Sacrificed Wife/Sacrificer’s Wife* (Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 218.

⁵⁸ Patrick Olivelle, trans., *Law Code of Manu* (Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 45. Also, 1.67.11 & 13 in V. S. Sukthankar, ed., *Mahabharata*, vol. 1 (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1927).

⁵⁹ Minoru Hara, “A Note on the *Rāksasa* Form of Marriage,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 94, no.3 (1974): 296–306. See also Jamison, *Sacrificed Wife/Sacrificer’s Wife*, pp. 219, 235.

⁶⁰ Gupta *Rāso* 7.2.

to the queen Inchani occupies a good portion of the short or *laghu* recension.⁶¹ Here too a battle is involved, but it is against another of Prithviraj's enemies: Bhim, the Chalukya king of Gujarat, whose proposal to marry Inchani was refused by her father, one of Prithviraj's *sāmans*. The *Rāso*'s medium recension features three more wives won by fighting: one of them is Shashivrata, whose father was a Yadav prince from Devagiri. Prithviraj already desires Shashivrata when he travels to Devagiri upon her request and wins her in battle against the bridegroom chosen by her family; this rival is Virchand of Kanauj, brother of King Jaychand. All five of Prithviraj's wives in the medium recension were thus trophies of war, in essence.

In the long (*bṛhad*) recension, two additional marriages occur after combat, the first against a reluctant father.⁶² The last of the wives earned through force is Padmavati, whose story became one of the most popular episodes in the epic. It was sometimes copied as a separate, stand-alone, manuscript; it also appears to have been one of the last additions to the *Rāso*.⁶³ The basic motif is found in numerous examples of the tale genre – the hero's quest for a beautiful bride in an eastern realm to which he must travel. In *Prithvīrāj Rāso*'s Padmavati story, the praise of a pet parrot causes the princess to fall in love with Prithviraj but her parents have made prior arrangements with prince Kamodin of Kumaun fort. The parrot serves as a messenger to Prithviraj, who makes the long journey to Padmavati's city in time to wage war with the Kumaun prince and successfully wed the princess.

To recapitulate: the *Rāso* stresses Prithviraj Chauhan's martial heroism by depicting his repeated winning of brides through battle, the sole means by which he acquires wives in the shortest, short, and medium recensions. The more challenging it was to get a queen through warfare, the greater the glory that accrued to Prithviraj as a king, and so only a few of his marriages occurred without opposition. The unequal status of the groom and bride's families is signaled in these episodes, which testify to Prithviraj's kshatriya-cum-Rajput identity. Of all forms of marriage, however, it was the *rākṣasa* that displayed the Chauhan's heroic character most clearly, at least in the minds of *Prithvīrāj Rāso*'s bardic narrators. For as the *Rāso* tradition developed over time, it was

⁶¹ However, a couple of episodes in the shortest recension imply that Prithviraj was already married when he set out on his journey to Kanauj, probably to Inchani.

⁶² This wedding with Indravati has an interesting twist: Prithviraj was unavoidably absent, called away at the last moment to militarily assist his brother-in-law, the Mewar king. Prithviraj asks his *sāmant* chiefs to get the wedding performed with a sword as his substitute; while not unknown during times of war, to some Rajputs this type of marriage suggested the much lower status of the bride's family (Varsha Joshi, *Polygamy and Purdah: Women and Society among Rajputs* [Jaipur & Delhi: Rawat Publications, 1995], pp. 21–2).

⁶³ Swami, *Rāso-sāhitya*, p. 88. Note also that Padmavati does not appear on a list of ten wives enumerated in the long recension (Pandya *Rāso* 59.43–9); as elsewhere thirteen are named, including Padmavati, she seems to be a late addition.

not content to imagine Samyogita as the sole princess whom Prithviraj captured in a daring exploit, carried out against considerable odds. Both Shashivrata, who first appears in the medium recension, and Padmavati, a late addition to the long recension, also became Prithviraj's queens after he abducted them.

These three marriages share another element that adds to Prithviraj's appeal as a romantic figure – each princess was already in love with the king and so accompanied him willingly.⁶⁴ In Prithviraj's unions with Samyogita, Shashivrata, and Padmavati, the *rākṣasa* mode is combined with another of the eight forms of marriage in the standard taxonomy: the *gāndharva* or elopement. As Manu's law code puts it: "When the girl and the groom have sex with each other voluntarily, that is the 'Gandharva' marriage based on sexual union and originating from love."⁶⁵ The *gāndharva* marriage is fundamentally a love affair or even a sexual liaison, carried out without any formality or family sanction, as exemplified by the relationship of Dushyanta and Shakuntala in the *Mahābhārata*.⁶⁶ In the brahminical legal literature, it is one of the two forms of marriage permitted only for kshatriyas, along with the *rākṣasa* mode.⁶⁷

The *gāndharva* love marriage was akin to the marriage that resulted from the *svayamvara* or self-choice ceremony, wherein a young woman chose her own groom, because the bride was able to act on her wishes in both situations. Indeed, *svayamvara* is substituted in the place of *gāndharva* in one *Mahābhārata* passage, where the *rākṣasa* and *svayamvara* marriages are said to be the modes approved for warriors.⁶⁸ In the *Mahābhārata* story of Nala and Damayanti, for example, it is she that chooses Nala to be her husband in preference to the gods Agni, Indra and numerous other suitors. Similarly, Samyogita too has the opportunity to express her desire at the *svayamvara* convened by her father. Because Prithviraj was not present at the ceremony,

⁶⁴ Samyogita hears about Prithviraj from a Brahmin woman, Madana, and her husband (who are *gandharvas* in actuality); this couple later goes to Delhi and tells Prithviraj about her. Padmavati has a pet parrot which once belonged to Prithviraj and constantly praises him. A widow who had lived in Prithviraj's territory when she was married is the one who tells Shashivrata about the king.

⁶⁵ Olivelle, *Law Code of Manu*, p. 45.

⁶⁶ An attempt was made in the *Rāso*'s long recension to make Prithviraj and Samyogita's elopement more respectable by having the princess's female companions join the hands of the couple together while they stood on the banks of the Ganges; the text calls this *pānigrahana*, equating it with the ritual of the grasping of the hands in a standard Hindu wedding ceremony (Pandya *Rāso* 61.1176, 61.1197, 61.1199; Mohansimha *Rāso* 58.378). We also find a couple of references to their tying of the knot (*gantha jori*), referring to the ritual during the marriage ceremony where a knot is tied between the clothes of the bride and groom (Pandya *Rāso* 61.1193 and 61.1206; Mohansimha *Rāso* 58.380; Gupta *Rāso* 6.16).

⁶⁷ Olivelle, *Law Code of Manu*, p. 45. A very similar statement appears in Sukthankar ed., *Mahābhārata*, 1.67.10.

⁶⁸ Buitenen, *Mahābhārata*, 1:407.

she was forced to make her choice by garlanding the statue of him that her father had placed at the doorway as an insult.

The most celebrated example of a combined *gāndharva-rāksasa* marriage is that of Krishna and his wife Rukmini, treated at some length in the ninth- or tenth-century Sanskrit text, *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.⁶⁹ Unwilling to marry the man designated by her family, Rukmini sends a message to Krishna inviting him to abduct her. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* tells us that Krishna took Rukmini “as wife in a *svayamvara* marriage ceremony,” underscoring the fact that this was an elopement carried out according to the bride’s wishes.⁷⁰ If not from *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, readers and reciters of the *Rāśo* would have known about Krishna’s abduction of the willing Rukmini from a more recent courtly retelling by the Rajput prince Prithviraj, of the Rathor dynasty of Bikaner.⁷¹ A lyrical poem of 305 stanzas composed in 1580 CE in the Dingal literary dialect, Prithviraj Rathor’s *Veli Krishan Rukamanī rī* survives in numerous manuscript copies. The Krishna-Rukmini union is mentioned several times in the *Rāśo*’s long recension, where it is compared to Prithviraj’s marriages with Shashivrata and Padmavati.⁷² Indeed, a striking uniformity in small details strongly suggests that Prithviraj’s encounters with Shashivrata and Padmavati were modeled on the elopement of Krishna and Rukmini. In both cases, Prithviraj reaches the city of the princess *after* the groom chosen by the family has already arrived, so that the well-guarded future bride could only be captured while she was on her way to or from a temple, just as was true with Rukmini. And like Krishna, Prithviraj has to defeat the aspiring husbands of Shashivrata and Padmavati, whose arranged marriages he is disrupting.

The element of romance was no doubt one reason why these tales of eager brides whisked away by their virile lovers appealed to the storytellers and audiences of pre-modern Rajasthan. They provided an opportunity to inject the mood of erotic love (*śringāra rasa*) into a poem in which the martial sentiment (*vīra rasa*) was more prevalent. But there were ample other occasions in *Prithvīrāj Rāśo* when romantic or sensual passages could be included – the beauty of bride Inchani is, for instance, lauded time and again during the lengthy account of her wedding rituals; the consummation of her marriage with

⁶⁹ Translation by Edwin F. Bryant, in his *Krishna: The Beautiful Legend of God, Śrīmad Bhāgavata Purāṇa Book X* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), pp. 221–36.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 223.

⁷¹ Prithiraj Rathor, *Veli Krishan Rukamanee Ree*, trans. Rajvi Amar Singh (Bikaner: Rajvi Amar Singh, 1996). For an informative comparison of Krishna-Rukmini stories, see Heidi Pauwels, “Stealing a Willing Bride: Women’s Agency in the Myth of Rukmini’s Elopement,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 17, no. 4 (2007): 407–41.

⁷² Prithviraj’s marriage to Shashivrata is said to be like that of Govinda (Mohansimha *Rāśo* 23.279), while Padmavati has her pet parrot summon Prithviraj with the message, “Do not delay even for an instant, come marry and protect me . . . just like Kanha [Krishna] married Rukmani, secretly” (Mohansimha *Rāśo* 17.23; Pandya *Rāśo* 20.34).

Prithviraj is also discreetly but quite clearly narrated.⁷³ Hence, I believe there was more at work here than a poet's desire to display his range of literary skills. Marriages of the *gāndharva*, *rāksasa*, and *svayamvara* types evoked a literary conceit that was highly flattering to noble patrons, the trope of Rajyashri or the goddess of royal good fortune.

Any king who was thriving could be described as possessing the favor of Rajyashri. She was sometimes conflated with the earth personified as a goddess,⁷⁴ thus a king might have acquired Rajyashri forcibly through defeating a more powerful rival in the same manner as he obtained land through victory at arms. The king was often envisioned as *mahi-pati*, meaning not only the ruler of the earth but also its husband; and therefore a king's desire to conquer more territory could be compared to a man's desire for his beloved.⁷⁵ This is most likely the reason why a mighty monarch such as the Delhi Sultan Ala al-Din Khalji could be recast in literary imagination as seeking to conquer the Mewar kingdom because he desired its queen, Padmavati.⁷⁶ Here Padmavati symbolized the royal glory that accrued to any man who could successfully capture and control new lands.

Rather than being taken by force as with metaphors of the earth being enjoyed by a sovereign, Rajyashri was often said to choose a king herself because of his prowess on the battlefield or other positive attributes. Especially charming was the image of the goddess at a *svayamvara* gathering, garlanding the ruler of her choice and thereby publicly endorsing him. This must be why the twelfth-century poet Bilhana fictitiously ascribed a *svayamvara* ceremony as the means by which his patron, Vikramaditya VI of the Western Chalukya dynasty, came to marry his favorite queen Chandralekha.⁷⁷ A successful king deserved to be such, in this line of thinking, for he had earned the affections of Rajyashri through his own merits. The acclaimed Brajbhasha poet Keshavdas

⁷³ On the consummation of Inchani's marriage with Prithviraj, see Mohansimha *Rāso* 14.60–68; on her beauty, see Mohansimha *Rāso* 14.30–34, among other verses.

⁷⁴ While still an adolescent, Prithviraj is visited in a dream by the earth (*bhū, vasumatī*) in the form of a beautiful goddess. She tells him that she loves only heroes and directs him to a buried treasure in the forest, thereby providing him with the material means to become a mighty king (Mohansimha *Rāso* 8.32–39). Prithviraj is informed even earlier by a *yoginī* in a dream-vision that he would someday become the ruler of Yeginipur or Delhi (Mohansimha *Rāso* 3.2–9).

⁷⁵ Minoru Hara, "The King as a Husband of Earth (*mahi-pati*)," *Asiatische Studien, Études Asiatiques* 27.2 (1973): 98, 101.

⁷⁶ Ramya Sreenivasan observes that there was a strong link between queen and territory in a number of early modern Indic texts, but suggests that "it may have been that the real and perceived vulnerability of women in the households of ruling elites impelled contemporary poets to recast the Delhi sultan's imperial conquests of territory as triggered by his desire for queens" (*Many Lives of a Rajput Queen*, p. 51).

⁷⁷ Pathak, *Ancient Historians*, pp. 76–7. Closer to home in Rajasthan, two young women from the Nadol Chauhan family are said to have chosen their husbands in a *svayamvara* ceremony that Dasharatha Sharma believes was never held (*Early Chauhan Dynasties*, 2nd edn. [Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas], p. 143).

warned in 1607 CE that Rajyashri was impossible to detain through physical restraint, for she was fickle in her favors like a bee roving among the lotus flowers.⁷⁸

The notion that powerful kings were worthy recipients of divine favor was quite a compliment to medieval rulers who were eulogized in this fashion. Court poets could represent queens as tangible embodiments of the goddess Rajyashri and thus transform marriages that were in fact political alliances into signs of a king's superior qualities. As a corollary, the more wives a ruler had, the more he manifestly enjoyed the approval of the heavens. It is this courtly trope of the desirable bridegroom selected by Royal Good Fortune that underlies the *Rāso*'s preference for brides such as Samyogita, Shashivrata, and Padmavati who eagerly sought to become Prithviraj's wives.

Through repeated invocation of Prithviraj's exceptional success in attracting and obtaining beautiful princesses – symbols of foreign lands as well as of divine favor – *Prithvīrāj Rāso* sought to highlight the hero's royal dimensions. While Prithviraj takes an active part in most of the epic's battles, victory is generally obtained not so much through his efforts as through the spectacular courage and strength of his men, whose exploits are described individually and with great gusto. With dozens of remarkable warriors among his retinue, therefore, Prithviraj could not be lionized solely for his martial abilities, virile spirit, or resolute attitude. The *Rāso* chose the literary strategy of battles for brides as the means to raise the Chauhan king above the other heroic male characters who inhabit the narrative. It is noteworthy that no other marriages are described in the epic, even in its longest versions, with the exception of his sister's wedding to Samar Singh, lord of Chittor, the only friendly ruler whose status is equivalent to that of Prithviraj. Each time Prithviraj engaged in honorable combat and earned a wife as a consequence, he was thus confirming his possession of superior qualities and divinely sanctioned kingship.

I emphasize this interpretation of Prithviraj's marriages partly in reaction to scholarship that regards the heroic marriages found in epic literature as a reflection of the social realities of medieval and early modern India. In one example, a set of authors read bardic texts as social commentaries that can oppose prevailing norms; thus they claim that the *Rāso* "functioned as counter-hegemony to propaganda by the dominant Rajput clans that hypergamy was the only permissible marriage custom."⁷⁹ Similarly, Rukmini's poetic longing for Krishna should not be construed as a manifestation of female agency, even

⁷⁸ Keshavdas, *Vīrsimhadev Carit*, trans. Kishori Lal (Prayag: Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, 1997), vv. 29.28–29 on p. 518. I thank Allison Busch for informing me that Rajyashri is the topic of the 29th section of this poem.

⁷⁹ Bhatnagar, Dube, and Dube, "A Poetics of Resistance," pp. 246–7.

if it is interpreted this way in Indian popular culture today.⁸⁰ The *rākṣasa* and *svayānvara* modes of marriage were already archaic when the classical Sanskrit epics reached their present form. What their literary presence reveals to us are not the voices or dreams of oppressed women from the past, but rather how the idea of the feminine gets utilized in the making of heroic or kingly paradigms for men.

This is not to say that *Prithvīrāj Rāso* and other early modern literary texts are entirely detached from the social environments that produced them, for we do witness traces of prevailing social practices within them. Consider Prithviraj's six or seven marriages in the long recension that were not preceded by warfare, for instance.⁸¹ Prithviraj wedded the daughters of *sāmant* subordinates who had pledged military service to him, in these peaceful affairs. These literary weddings exhibit the widespread Rajput preference for hypergamous marriages, in which daughters were wedded upwards into a lineage of higher standing.⁸² Because a marriage alliance among elite Rajputs typically entailed obligations such as military service, daughters were often offered as brides for purposes that furthered their father's political objectives. Through creative use of marriage alliances, elite Rajput men could forge new networks of military support with warrior families of their choice, or as in the case of Prithviraj's *sāmantas*, they could wed their daughters in ways that consolidated existing ties of allegiance. At other times, daughters were used to resolve hostilities between competing groups of men, either as a token of a defeated father's submission or in settlement of a prolonged feud. So brides might be offered after a battle or a killing as a means to settle disputes in early modern Rajasthan, but it is highly unlikely that violence was initiated in order to acquire them in the manner of *Prithvīrāj Rāso*. The creation of political networks through marriage is downplayed in the *Rāso*, which casts Prithviraj as the foremost conqueror of the hearts and bodies of coveted princesses in order to showcase the superiority that entitled him for sovereignty.

Other than marking the Chauhan king as inherently royal, women have little role in the *Rāso*. Women characters scarcely appear in it and, when they do,

⁸⁰ An emphasis on Rukmini's yearning for Krishna works better when analyzing a devotional poem like Nanddas's *Rukmiṇī Maṅgala* than with Prithviraj Rathor's *Veli Krisan Rukmiṇī rī*, for the latter features battle imagery, a preoccupation with caste and status, and the parents' consent to the marriage, as Heidi Pauwels notes ("Stealing a Willing Bride").

⁸¹ Narottamdas Swami believes that Prithviraj also married the daughter of Bhoti Bhan of Kangra fort (*Rāso-sāhitya*, p. 131). This would bring the total number of wives to fourteen; I believe thirteen is more accurate. Little is said about these six or seven wives, some of whom figure only in the lists of queens found in the text (vv. 43–9 of chap. 59 and chap. 65, Pandya *Rāso*).

⁸² Joshi, *Polygamy and Purdaḥ*, pp. 21–2. Sometimes, if the bride's side was of markedly lower status, the groom would not even come to her natal home for the wedding; instead, the bride would simply be sent to his place in what was known as a *dolā* marriage after the litter in which she was conveyed.

they usually portend bad news. A case in point is Prithviraj's minister, Kaymas, whose lust for a woman living in the queen's quarters leads to his being killed secretly one night by the king. Another man with a love interest in the epic is the Muslim warrior Husain, a brother of Shihab al-Din Ghuri, who falls in love with one of the latter's concubines. When Shihab al-Din discovers this transgression, Husain has to flee his kingdom and take refuge at Prithviraj's court – Prithviraj's act of providing shelter to Shihab al-Din's errant brother is said to have been the origin of the hostility between them. The stories of Kaymas and Husain, the only two men aside from the king whose sexual relations are noted in the *Rāso*, show what happens when underlings exercise their sexual appetites in an inappropriate and excessive fashion.

It is not only subordinates for whom too much attachment to women is dangerous. It was not even entirely safe for a king such as Prithviraj who had amply demonstrated his qualifications to be the husband of the earth goddess herself, for his extreme infatuation with the Kanauj princess Samyogita ultimately leads to Prithviraj's downfall. Not only did he lose two-thirds of his mighty *sāmans* to her father's forces during the flight from Kanauj, Prithviraj also ignored all signs of Shihab al-Din's gathering strength and was caught unprepared in the final battle that led to his defeat. Like his minister Kaymas, whom Prithviraj punished with death for the crime of being besotted by a woman, Prithviraj too was undone by his preoccupation with love instead of war. The intensely masculine world of *Prithvirāj Rāso* thus exhibits a profound uneasiness about women and the feminine: signifiers of royal stature on the one hand, but also a potential source of danger and a drain on martial virility.

A classical epic for a vernacular age

The Kanauj episode, which I regard as *Prithvirāj Rāso*'s heroic core, is more overt in its appropriation of practices and motifs from the classical Sanskrit epics than any other *Rāso* episode. The *rājasūya* ritual that Jaychand sought to perform is one example of an antiquated practice from the period of the *Mahābhārata* epic, ascribed by tradition to the waning days of the previous Dvapara age. But the *rājasūya* was not a custom of Prithviraj's era, and so the *Rāso* has one of his courtiers say, upon hearing of Jaychand's plans: "In the midst of the Kali age, who is worthy of doing this sacrifice?" Examples of *svayanvara* or self-choice ceremonies like that of princess Samyogita are scattered throughout the *Mahābhārata*, and hardly anywhere else. In casting Prithviraj's elopement with the willing Samyogita as a *rākṣasa* marriage, the composer(s) of *Prithvirāj Rāso* were replicating a heroic pattern that flourished in the *Mahābhārata*, as when the Pandava hero Arjuna abducted Krishna's sister Subhadra in full view of her kinsmen. This conscious borrowing from an ancient kshatriya ethos was one means by which the *Rāso* tried to signify the

upper caste status of its heroes and thereby equate them with the great warriors of ancient times.

The impact of the *Mahābhārata* on the *Rāso* is much more wide-ranging than this simple appropriation of customs associated with the ancient warrior class, however. This is not surprising considering that the *Rāso* was composed in a world where the *Mahābhārata* was the paradigmatic epic of war. The *Mahābhārata* so permeated the *Rāso*'s martial consciousness that the word *bhārath* or *bhārathth* is used in it to mean both battle and war in general, in addition to referring specifically to the war of the *Mahābhārata* epic.⁸³ The *Mahābhārata* war is repeatedly invoked in the *Rāso*'s descriptions of Prithviraj's armed conflicts, particularly his final battle against Shihab al-Din during which almost all of his remaining *sāmant* lords are annihilated.⁸⁴ In both epics, the final outcome is very stark, with most of the protagonists ending up dead. Unlike the courtly *mahākāvya* poem, which typically ends in a clear victory for the hero (and thus on a triumphant note), these two martial epics end with a holocaust (and thus on a dark, ambivalent note). Both Prithviraj and his men are frequently compared to the *Mahābhārata* heroes as well, although this is so widespread in precolonial courtly literature that it would be more notable if it were *not* the case. Another generic similarity lies in the reputed authors of the two epics: like Vyasa in the *Mahābhārata*, Chand Bardai participated in many of the events he recorded in the *Rāso*, primarily as a trusted advisor. The *Rāso*'s battles, its heroes, and even its composer were described, if not actually perceived, through a conceptual framework constructed upon the prototype of the *Mahābhārata*.

The *Rāso*'s sheer bulk is another reason it has been dubbed the *Mahābhārata* of Hindi literature, for the Sanskrit epic is renowned for its size and encyclopedic nature.⁸⁵ While no version of *Rāso* contains anywhere near the 100,000 verses reputedly contained in the *Mahābhārata*, its longer manuscripts could cover more than 800 folio sheets and required the labor of several different scribes to copy.⁸⁶ Although much of the content is taken up with accounts of battles, there are occasional discourses on statecraft, descriptions of female beauty, reports on pilgrimage sites, and the like. James Tod famously described *Prthvīrāj Rāso* as "a universal history of the period"

⁸³ For example, Mohansimha *Rāso* 50.40, 61.284, 61.315; for a definition of the word, see Shyamsundar Das, *Hindi Śabdāśagar*, 2nd edn., p. 3645.

⁸⁴ For example, Mohansimha *Rāso* 61.246 & 61.20.

⁸⁵ See, for example, Jinavijaya, *Purātana Prabandha Saṅgraha*, p. 10; Narendra Vyas, "Kāvya-Sauṣhṭha," in Mohansimha *Rāso* vol.4, p. 34; and Dasharatha Sharma, "Prthvīrāj Rāso," in *Prthvīrāj Rāso kī Vivecanā*, eds. Mohanlal Vyas and Nathulal Vyas (Udaipur: Sahitya Samsthān, 1959), p. 593.

⁸⁶ The *Rāso*'s long recension has about 30,000 stanzas, by which I mean a complete unit of verse ranging from the *doha* couplet to a verse with twenty or more lines (Swami, *Rāso-sāhitya*, p. 78).

whose pages were “invaluable as historic and geographical memoranda, besides being treasures in mythology, manners, and the annals of the mind.”⁸⁷

Aside from resembling the *Mahābhārata* in a number of respects, *Prthvīrāj Rāso*’s importance for its own time and place may also owe something to that Sanskrit epic. In *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men*, Sheldon Pollock highlights the geo-political implications of the *Mahābhārata*, which was “obsessed with mapping out a world relevant to its political vision and to the space within which that vision was to be realized.”⁸⁸ The political resonances of the epic were not lost on Mughal emperor Akbar, who had it translated into Persian three times, nor on the Indo-Persian chroniclers who placed their accounts of the Mughal emperors at the end of a long list of rulers of the region beginning with the *Mahābhārata*’s Yudhishtira.⁸⁹ According to Pollock, the political significance of the Sanskrit epic is why it was often the first Sanskrit narrative to be recast into a vernacular language, as with Pampa’s Kannada *Bhāratam* ca. 950 or Nannaya’s Telugu version from the mid eleventh century. When regional courts sponsored vernacular rewritings of the *Mahābhārata*, they were essentially producing a more localized geopolitical vision – that is, a conception of a world of political action that was limited to their region.⁹⁰

The Hindi-speaking area was late to produce a vernacular *Mahābhārata* compared to other regional cultures of the vernacular age. Not until 1435 CE did one emerge, in the form of the Brajbhasha *Mahābhārata* composed by Vishnudas at Gwalior, whose king belonged to the Tomar line.⁹¹ It may be that the Tomar dynasty was unable to extend its sway over a large enough area or for a long enough time to produce any semblance of a regional identity. Or perhaps it was too difficult to remap or re-inscribe the classical Sanskrit epic in a more regional, vernacular, fashion onto the very same landscape from which it had initially arisen. That was a task which could only be accomplished – we might surmise – by another story and another set of heroes, in *Prthvīrāj Rāso*.

The *Rāso* is obviously not a retelling of the *Mahābhārata*. Nonetheless, I believe that an important factor in the *Rāso*’s popularity was its similarity in function with the Sanskrit epic. The *Rāso* was analogous to a vernacular *Mahābhārata* in the work it performed, in its envisioning of a sphere of

⁸⁷ Tod, *Rajasthan*, pp. 297–8 n2.

⁸⁸ Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), p. 259.

⁸⁹ Truschke, “The Mughal Book of War,” p. 520; Ernst, “Muslim Studies of Hinduism?,” p. 183.

⁹⁰ Pollock, *Language of the Gods*, pp. 356, 360–1.

⁹¹ Hariharinivas Dvivedi, *Mahābhārata (Pāṇḍava-Carita)* (Gwalior: Vidya Mandir Prakashan, 1973). For a discussion of the text’s introduction, see R. S. McGregor, “A Narrative Poet’s View of His Material: Viṣṇudāś’s Introduction to His Brajbhāṣā Pāṇḍav-Carit (AD 1435),” in *The Banyan Tree: Essays on Early Literature in New Indo-Aryan Languages*, ed. Mariola Offredi (Delhi: Manohar, 2000), pp. 335–42.

political action that was meaningful to a regional audience. The space in which the events of the *Rāso* supposedly took place overlapped to some extent with the geographical territory occupied by the Sanskrit epic. Indraprastha, the capital of the Pandavas, was thought to be the same place as Delhi, and both names are used in the *Rāso* in reference to Prithviraj's capital.⁹² In Abu al-Fazl's mind, as we saw in the last chapter, the story of Prithviraj Chauhan's life was not an aspect of Ajmer's history but rather the history of Delhi province, which had begun at Hastinapur with the reign of king Bharat, the eponymous ancestor of the Pandavas and Kauravas. The *Rāso* also evokes the *Mahābhārata* through reference to Nigam Bodh, an auspicious spot along the banks of the Yamuna in Indraprastha where Yudhishtira supposedly held a religious ceremony after the conclusion of the *Mahābhārata* war. Among the activities that take place at Nigam Bodh in the *Rāso* is Prithviraj's coronation as king of Ajmer subsequent to his father's death.⁹³ Thus, the line between the regional world constituted by a vernacular *Mahābhārata* and the supraregional domain of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* is somewhat blurred in the case of *Prithvīrāj Rāso*.

Yet the *Rāso* unmistakably maps out a territory of heroic action that can be broadly correlated with the region inhabited by the aristocratic Rajputs of the Mughal era. To be sure, the geographical references in *Prithvīrāj Rāso* are limited in number and detail, so that only Delhi, Ajmer, Chittor, and Kanauj appear as prominent localities. Prithviraj's movements do serve to roughly delineate the area he and his *sāmans* controlled, however, and it is this sphere of operations that is most salient rather than the actual terrain itself – that is, the region is meaningful because of who wields military power within it and not because of any emotional attachment to the soil per se. Kanauj is the easternmost city reached by Prithviraj and his men, who largely shun the Gangetic region in favor of campaigns further south in Malwa, Gujarat, and even Devagiri in the Deccan, on one occasion. Nagaur, in western Rajasthan, is a site that figures in several *Rāso* episodes from the long recension; Abu and Ranthambhor are two other places in Rajasthan where incidents occur. Mewat, to the south of Delhi, is the scene of some action, as is Hansi fort in Haryana, and Kangra in Himachal Pradesh. The most westerly extent of Prithviraj's influence is Lahore, in the Pakistan Punjab.

⁹² Overall, Delhi is the more frequently used name, but both Delhi and Indraprastha appear in Mohansimha *Rāso* 1.52. The city is also occasionally referred to as Jugginipura (Sanskrit, *Yoginipura*; e.g., Mohansimha *Rāso* 9.21).

⁹³ Mohansimha *Rāso* 35.47. Yudhishtira is said to have taken initiation (*dakṣyā* = Skt. *dīkṣā*) at Nigam Bodh in this verse; the nineteenth-century writer Carr Stephen reports that Yudhishtira had supposedly held a *homa* or burnt offering there (*Archaeology and Monumental Remains*, p. 7).

Just as it demarcates a distinct regional world in spatial terms, so too does the *Rāso* set the parameters of a specific regional elite in sociological terms, with ancestral participation in Prithviraj's wars as a criterion. That is, *Prthvīrāj Rāso* resembled a vernacular *Mahābhārata* not only because it marked off a geographic zone within which power was exercised, but also in populating that space with an array of political actors. Hundreds of different characters appear in the *Rāso*, representing a large number of Rajput clans and lineages grouped together in several coalitions. It was the socio-political network of warrior interactions that comprised a "kingdom" more than any territory, although the exact nature of the ties that bound men to their lords is never specified. In brief, the *Rāso* offered an expansive but coherent vision that was relevant to the concerns of a particular regional political culture.

I digress slightly here to stress that *Prthvīrāj Rāso* was aimed at a notably more aristocratic audience than other regional epics that have attracted scholarly attention in the past few decades. Epics such as those about the Palnadu heroes of Andhra or Pabuji in western Rajasthan are transmitted orally, generally by low-caste performers, and circulate within a limited region. These folk epics invariably include a low-status companion, often a Dalit or Muslim, among the band of male heroes. In addition, these epics differ from their classical counterparts in focusing on local goddesses and on little kings from dominant landed castes. Alf Hiltebeitel believes that the less elite and more localized settings of the oral epics reflect the non-aristocratic Rajput-Afghan society of medieval India that was in large part responsible for their creation and propagation. The "regional oral martial epics" are similar to each other, in Hiltebeitel's view, because they arose out of a medieval warrior culture that spanned much of the subcontinent, but they are unlike the classical epics in adopting the anti-imperial perspective of local landed groups.⁹⁴

Prthvīrāj Rāso's resemblance to oral epics such as those of Pabuji, Alha and the Banaphars, and the Palnati heroes is limited to its martial nature and composition in a vernacular language. The goddess, who is central to the regional oral martial epics, in Hiltebeitel's interpretation, plays a minimal part in the *Rāso*. Overall, the *Rāso* has a notably secular tone, aside from the omens and dreams that frequently foreshadow what is to come in the narrative. In contrast, the recitation of Pabuji and many other oral epics is considered a religious act. In his possession of many wives, Prithviraj is markedly different from the celibate warriors of oral epics whose marriages remain unconsummated. The status of Prithviraj and his companions is uniformly high, compared to the rather dubious standing of oral epic heroes like Pabuji and Alha, who can at most be described as village Rajputs. Pabuji and similar warrior-

⁹⁴ Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking India's Oral and Classical Epics*, pp. 299–310.

ascetics who appear in folklore reflect “the sociological openness of the ancient Rajput character,” in Dirk H. A. Kolff’s words – that is, they are remnants of an era when Rajput identity could readily be earned through participation in a war band and was therefore more widespread.⁹⁵ In contrast, Prithviraj’s heroic associates were all from noble lineages, including some that had supposedly persisted from the twelfth century into the Mughal era, such as the Kachhwahas of Amber, the Bhatis of Jaisalmer, and various branches of the Rathor clan.

It is the presence of so many representatives of Rajasthan’s warrior groups that explains much of the epic’s appeal to an elite audience. The *Rāso* defined the region not only by demarcating its physical space but also by articulating its sociological composition (that is, mapping it as a social universe). James Tod, writing in the early nineteenth century after years of dwelling with aristocratic Rajputs, stated that in the *Rāso*, “nor is there a high family of Rajwara, who cannot point out his ancestors in these volumes.”⁹⁶ Tod’s statement also points to the Rajput community as the main source of patronage for the text. This corroborates the little we can glean from examining extant manuscripts, whose large number testifies to the courtly milieu of this epic’s production. The *Rāso* circulated in a relatively stable written form among patrons who – in the rare instances they can be identified from manuscript colophons – were almost exclusively Rajputs of the noble class. There is very little information available on the patrons of *Rāso* manuscripts, unfortunately; only seventeen can be identified in a database of almost 170 manuscripts that I have compiled. Except in two instances, these patrons all bear the *siṅgh* or *siṅha* suffix that indicates Rajput status – they include kings or princes from the kingdoms of Bikaner, Amber-Jaipur, Kota, Jodhpur, Udaipur and also a chief from one of Mewar’s chiefdoms. It was no doubt recited for their warrior patrons by elite bards on some occasions; a few manuscripts name a young nobleman for whose reading or recitation (*pāṭhan*) the text was copied.⁹⁷ Tod reports that “to read this poet well is a sure road to honour, and my own Guru was allowed, even by the professional bards, to excel therein.”⁹⁸ Tod clearly means reading out loud in the previous statement for he goes on to describe how he rapidly translated the *Rāso* verses read by his guru. Tod’s remark also demonstrates that *Rāso* recitation was not confined to the bardic community, since his guru was a Jain cleric and scholar; it may also have been recited by Brahmins, some of whom were scribes of *Rāso* manuscripts.

⁹⁵ Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy*, p. 74.

⁹⁶ Tod, “Translation of a Sanscrit Inscription,” p. 148.

⁹⁷ In at least one instance, a man copied a *Rāso* text for his own reading – this was Ramlal in ca. 1800 CE (Ms. 2027 4) at Rajasthan Prachyavida Pratishthan, Udaipur).

⁹⁸ Tod, *Rajasthan*, pp. 297–8 n2.

The performance contexts of the *Rāso* were likely also limited to elite Rajputs and their retinues. Tod once notes that when the Mewar nobility “assemble at the feast after a day’s sport, or in a sultry evening spread the carpet on the terrace to inhale the leaf or take a cup of *kusumbha* [infusion of opium], a tale of [the Mewar prince] Prithiraj [from the early sixteenth century] recited by the bard is the highest treat they can enjoy.”⁹⁹ The story of Prithviraj Chauhan may have been told in the same kind of relaxed settings as were the exploits of the later Mewar prince bearing his name, as a form of casual entertainment. This type of evening recital appears to have been a typical venue for the telling of heroic tales by bards.¹⁰⁰ As the Rajput nobility delighted in its references to their alleged ancestors, portions of the *Rāso* may also have been recited on ceremonial occasions celebrating their family, lineage, or clan.

Two centuries before Tod, Abu al-Fazl was similarly fascinated by the exploits of Prithviraj’s *sāmans*, who are highlighted in the *Ā’īn-i Akbarī* version of the Chauhan king’s story. The bards who accompanied Rajputs to the Mughal court no doubt lauded Prithviraj’s *sāmans* with much extravagance, for Abu al-Fazl reports that “their extraordinary exploits cannot be expressed in language nor reconciled to experience or reason.”¹⁰¹ He goes on to list several of the warriors who died in the Kanauj conflict, such as Gobind Gehlot and Palhan-dev Kachhwaha, whose names appear in every recension of the *Rāso*. These exceptional warriors “during the first day’s action, after performing feats of astonishing heroism sold their lives dearly, and all these heroes perished in the retreat.”¹⁰² Although Abu al-Fazl does report on Samyogita’s *svayamvara* and aftermath, the heroic deeds of the elite Indian warriors recorded in the *Rāso*’s Kanauj episode receive his greatest attention. Only the *Rāso* among elite literary texts envisioned a time long ago in which numerous Rajput lineages had interacted in mass combat over a large territory, just as the Pandavas, Kauravas, Panchalas, Yadavas, and other kshatriya lineages had come into conflict at the time of the *Mahābhārata* war.

Conclusion

The Mughal era as a whole, and Akbar’s reign in particular, was a time of acute interest in dynastic history, both for the imperial family and for its many Rajput affiliates. A nobleman’s status in relation to others also became more articulated in this era, in part due to the numerical ranking of imperial office-holders and also the strict protocols relating to rank that were enforced at court. It is in this context of heightened genealogical concern that the *Rāso* portrayed

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 341. ¹⁰⁰ Prabhakar, *Critical Study of Rajasthani Literature*, p. 105.

¹⁰¹ Translation by Jarrett, Abu al-Fazl, *Ā’īn-i Akbarī*, 2:305.

¹⁰² Ibid., 2:306.

its hero Prithviraj Chauhan as acting like an ancient Indian kshatriya warrior in a world that resembled the one inhabited by the epic's audience: the *Rāso* collapsed the ancient epic past of the *Mahābhārata*, the late twelfth-century lifetime of Prithviraj, and North India's late sixteenth century into one timeless heroic world. And it performed the important task of populating this heroic universe with the elite Rajput lineages of the Mughal period. The *Rāso* hence validated Rajput claims to aristocratic status by "proving" that various lineages of the early modern era had long and distinguished pedigrees, as kshatriyas and as valiant champions of a great king.

By placing the Kachhwahas, Sisodiyas, Rathors, and other Mughal-era lineages on the center stage of the twelfth-century arena of Prithviraj's life, the *Rāso*, in effect, provided a version of the past that had strong continuities with the Mughal present. In the center of the *Rāso*'s imagined universe stood Delhi, the city that had indeed been the preeminent political center of North India since Shihab al-Din's Ghurid armies conquered Prithviraj in the late twelfth century, if not actually earlier. Underscoring the fact that Delhi's most immediate and palpable rivalry was with the Gangetic region to its east, the epic in its shorter and older versions devotes more attention to the Chauhan king's enmity with Jaychand of Kanauj than to Prithviraj's eventual nemesis, Shihab al-Din Ghuri. In the episode of Samyogita's abduction and the flight from Kanauj, Prithviraj's noble *sāmant* warlords displayed their dedication to their lord and commitment to honor by sacrificing themselves for his sake. As an epic that envisioned a joint past for the elite Indic warriors of the Rajasthan region, the *Rāso* therefore contributed to the articulation of a regional Rajput identity. Its imagined past was comforting in its semblance to the reality of the Mughal era, not only because Delhi was its political center but also because its bravest warriors came from the region later known as Rajputana.

In contrast to the pan-Indian applicability of the Sanskrit epic, *Prthvīrāj Rāso*'s significance was geared toward a more circumscribed world – a Rajput political culture which arose from a limited geographic region, but wanted to imagine itself in more universal terms. Unlike texts in the *mahākāvya* genre of dynastic history, which kept the spotlight on the royal patron or his ancestors at all times, the *Rāso* abounds with accounts of the bravery and prowess of Prithviraj's high-ranking subordinates. To be sure, the epic expends considerable energy on depicting Prithviraj as an exceptional warrior capable of wreaking extreme havoc on the enemy, but he had to be more than that to outshine his superb fighting men. His many marriages were a literary maneuver that called attention to Prithviraj's kingliness, to the greatness destined for him. They were not the only means to do so – the treasure trove that was recovered due to the goddess's boon (in "Dhana Kathā") and the prophecy that foretold his ascension to the Delhi throne once the Iron Pillar was disturbed (in "Dilī Killī Kathā") are among other notable episodes that signaled his

extraordinary status. But Prithviraj's facility at winning the hearts of physical embodiments of Rajyashri, and his capacity to overcome any male rivals, put him in a special class. He was a superior king, one who was deserving of the loyalty and dedication of his talented followers; and his many queens were tangible emblems of that fact. Like a vernacular *Mahābhārata*, therefore, the *Rāso* re-inscribed a regional world so as to give it classical epic proportions, at least in its significance for the region's inhabitants.

5 Imagining the Rajput past in Mughal-era Mewar

By stringing jewels of sentiment on a thread,
it was made by the poet Chand.
The form of these verses was broken,
stupid poets separated it into parts.
Scattered around here and there,
it couldn't be threaded together again.
The Rana of Chitrakot [Chittor], the king Lord Amar,
gave the benevolent order with his own voice,
Picking through the strands,
(the poet) Karuna-udadhi labored and wrote down the *Rāso*.
Prthvīrāj Rāso colophon¹

Introduction: redacting *Prthvīrāj Rāso*

These lines from the colophon of a well-known *Rāso* manuscript attribute an important redaction of the epic to the command of Maharana Amar Singh. This stanza in *chappay* meter describes a difficult process of collecting and revising *Rāso* verses, an effort likened to the retrieval of jewels on a necklace that had come unraveled. The task undertaken by the poet Karuna-udadhi, which resulted in a discernibly different epic text, was done at the instigation of Amar Singh of the Mewar kingdom, here called the lord of Chittor, the region's first capital. The manuscript to which the stanza is appended is generally dated to 1703 CE, which falls within the era of Amar Singh II's rule (r. 1698–1710) and thereby confirms that he is the king referred to and not his predecessor Amar Singh I (r. 1597–1620).² When James Tod tells us that “the poetical histories of Chand were collected by the great Amra Singh of Mewar, a patron of literature, as well as a warrior and a legislator,”³ he reveals his

¹ Bora, *Prthvīrājrāso*, p. 87.

² This is Ms. 1838 at the Udaipur branch of Rajasthan Prachyavidya Pratishthan; only a relatively small portion of it is dated. Since different parts of this manuscript were written by different scribes, the date is less firm than the secondary scholarship would suggest.

³ Tod, *Rajasthan*, p. ix.

familiarity with the stanza above and its claim that Maharana Amar Singh was responsible for the *Rāso*'s standard Mewar form, which became the standard epic text elsewhere as well.

How do we explain the interest in Prithviraj Chauhan at the Mewar court around 1700? When we last situated the narrative of Prithviraj's life story in a courtly setting, it was within the Mughal imperial milieu – in the Persian-language *Ā'in-i Akbarī* written by emperor Akbar's confidante, Abu al-Fazl, and the Sanskrit *Surjanacarita* commemorating a Rajput lord in Akbar's service. Both accounts of Prithviraj were composed sometime after 1585 but before 1600 – that is, a century prior to Amar Singh's reign. In the late sixteenth century, the Sisodiya dynasty had still not yet capitulated to greater Mughal power, although it was to do so eventually. In contrast, other Rajputs had already joined the imperial service, like Rao Surjan and his Hada lineage from Bundi who were responsible for *Surjanacarita* or the Rathor lineage from Bikaner who sponsored several early *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* manuscripts in the early 1600s. The first retellings of the *Rāso* story and its oldest written copies are thus linked to the Mughal court and its Rajput subordinates, in an elite culture that had a growing interest in history and especially the history of the Delhi region. Given its initial resistance to Mughal rule, as well as greater distance from the city of Delhi, the Mewar kingdom might seem like an unlikely place for the memory of Prithviraj to be assiduously cultivated.

Yet, as we saw in the last chapter, *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* was a work of wide appeal for elite Rajputs, because it told rousing stories from the heroic pasts of many martial lineages. It is precisely the *Rāso*'s broad popularity among Rajput warriors that explains why the Sisodiya kings were so energetic in their efforts to propagate the epic. As the Sisodiya dynasty and its Guhila predecessors had long enjoyed a high status, it made sense that they wanted to take the lead in commemorating one of North India's most famous heroes. But, while admiration for Prithviraj's exploits was no doubt an incentive for Amar Singh and other kings of the Mewar region to patronize the *Rāso*, they had an additional reason to do so. One of their ancestors, King Samar Singh, had reputedly entered into an alliance with Prithviraj by marrying his sister Pritha, and was thus obligated to assist Prithviraj in his wars. Through this marriage relationship, the Sisodiyas could claim a central role in the momentous events of the late twelfth century, which had changed the course of history in North India forever after. Throughout the seventeenth century, the Sisodiyas made a strenuous effort to publicize the achievements of their present and past rulers, in a campaign of self-fashioning that scholars are only now beginning to fully appreciate. Their family's contributions to Prithviraj's valiant career were among the points of pride for the Sisodiyas, which they did not fail to disseminate to the Rajput world at large.

Perhaps because Prithviraj Chauhan is so closely associated with Delhi in popular memory, few have recognized how extensively his story was appropriated and revised by the Mewar court.⁴ Another reason that Mewar's role in the transmission and elaboration of the *Rāso* epic has largely been overlooked may be due to the old assumption in Western scholarship that precolonial Indians lacked an interest in history and therefore did not make active use of the past for present purposes. But far from being a nineteenth-century legacy of James Tod and other colonial officials, the project of idealizing Mewar's warriors originated at the Sisodiya court during the early modern era and relied heavily on the construction of heroic histories. Among these histories was that of Prithviraj Chauhan, whose valiant partisans supposedly represented a wide range of Rajput lineages including the illustrious royal dynasty of Mewar. *Prthvīrāj Rāso* underwent considerable metamorphosis at the hands of the court poets in Udaipur, which had long-lasting consequences because their version of the narrative circulated widely.

The redaction of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* carried out under the auspices of Maharana Amar Singh II became a prototype for future versions of the epic, first in Mewar and eventually also in other areas. Several existing manuscripts are direct copies of the Amar Singh text with its sixty-nine chapters or books, although we occasionally find sixty-seven, sixty-eight, or seventy chapters as a result of scribal error in numbering or because scribes varied in their treatment of short episodes as stand-alone chapters. Other *Rāso* texts from the Mewar region more or less followed the Amar Singh exemplar in contents and form, even if they were not actually copies.⁵ In his early nineteenth-century writings, James Tod on several occasions remarks that the *Prthvīrāj Rāso* in his possession had sixty-nine chapters, confirming that it followed the Amar Singh model as one would expect of a manuscript obtained in Udaipur.⁶ Tod's own manuscript was the main basis for the earliest attempt at publishing the *Rāso*, undertaken by the Asiatic Society of Bengal beginning in 1873.⁷ The first *Rāso* edition to be published in its entirety – by Nagaripracharini Sabha of Benares between 1906 and 1913 – was also primarily based on manuscripts from Udaipur.⁸ The Amar Singh and other Mewar versions of the *Rāso* were thus

⁴ The main exception is Narottamdas Swami (1905–81), a prolific literary scholar from Rajasthan who noted the connection briefly in 1962 (*Rāso-sāhitya*, p. 51). Following his lead, Rajmal Bora went into the matter in greater length in 1974 (*Prthvīrājrāso*, pp. 179, 181, 184–90).

⁵ I base this statement partly on my own examination of some long-recension manuscripts and also on Bora's extensive discussion of several well-known ones (*Prthvīrājrāso*, pp. 63–87).

⁶ *Rajasthan*, pp. 97 n.2, 82 n.1, and 937; also *Travels in Western India*, p. 131.

⁷ John Beames, "Studies in the Grammar of Chand Bardai," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 42, pt. 1 (1873): 167. Although Tod's Amar Singh version of the *Rāso* was apparently in India at this time, I have been unable to locate it either in India or England.

⁸ See the appendix for more on the manuscripts used in preparing several published editions of *Prthvīrāj Rāso*.

extensively disseminated, both as handwritten texts in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and as printed texts in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In this chapter, I both analyze the ways in which the *Rāso* was recast at the Mewar court and explore the socio-political settings which shaped its new forms. I begin with the evidence for royal patronage of the *Rāso*'s long recension and proceed to examine one aspect of the epic's transformation at Mewar: the additional episodes that were inserted relating to Samar Singh, former king of Mewar. Next I look at the political context in which the *Rāso* was being enlarged and embellished: namely, the Mewar's kingdom's desire to regain its position of pre-eminence among Rajputs and the cultural patronage it deployed as one means to that end. I return to the topic of Mewar's version of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* subsequently, to consider two other features of the epic that served to consolidate community identity and articulate social hierarchy: its representations of Muslims and the discourse on *svāmi-dharma*. Along with a greater emphasis on Mewar's role in Rajasthan's pre-Islamic history, the long-recension text produced at Udaipur is notable for its many scenes of armed conflict with Shihab al-Din Muhammad of Ghur and its focus on an ideology of allegiance to the overlord. These changes were likely inspired by the desire to honor Rajput warriors from diverse families while simultaneously asserting the paramount position of the Mewar king.

We have already, previously in this book, witnessed the dynamic process by which different communities remembered Prithviraj at different times for different purposes. The appropriation of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* at the Mewar court ca. 1700 created another layer of memory regarding the Chauhan king, another imagining of the past that amplified and altered the shorter *Rāso* story. That earlier epic of ca. 1600, with its links to the Rajput subordinates of the Mughal empire, was itself a novel envisioning of the twelfth-century past that diverged in trajectory and tone from the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century remembrances of Prithviraj. Time and again, therefore, the past was revisited and reinterpreted to make it meaningful for the present, underscoring the value of history in the formation of social identities, even in the supposedly ahistorical milieu of precolonial India. Some remembrances of Prithviraj have doubtless been lost in the mists of time; others I will touch on briefly in the next chapter. Mewar's version of the Prithviraj narrative was to prove the most influential in shaping modern conceptions, however, especially in characterizing it as a tale of opposition to Muslim military might.

The *Rāso*'s Mewar connection

For the royal courts of precolonial India, literary accounts of kings, both past and present, were an important means to enhance fame. Indeed, the burnishing

of reputations was a central concern around which much of courtly life was oriented, not only in its cultural patronage but also in its public ceremonial. In the retrospective gaze of seventeenth-century Mewar court poets, the epic that told Prithviraj's life-story was noteworthy partly because of its elevation of Rajput warriorhood in general. The *Rāso* demonstrated both the superior quality and the antiquity of numerous Rajput lineages, and provided them with a shared past. Through explicit reference to their linkage with the celebrated Chauhan hero, the luster of the Mewar dynasty could be made even brighter – Prithviraj's narrative was hence harnessed to the quest to further glorify the kings of Mewar. In the process, the tale of Prithviraj and his companions-at-arms was expanded considerably in length.

The *Rāso* manuscript of 1703, which we can attribute to the sponsorship of Maharana Amar Singh II, was the culmination of decades of royal patronage. The reworking of the *Rāso* epic was evidently a prolonged affair, for the colophon to the Amar Singh manuscript seems to describe two separate phases in the *Rāso*'s textual history. The last stanza of the colophon, translated at the outset of this chapter, mentions the work done on the *Rāso* by Karuna-udadhi, a seventeenth-century poet also mentioned in another text. The stanza on Karuna-udadhi in the *Rāso* colophon is preceded by a stanza that refers to a different man, Kakka, who was presumably Karuna-udadhi's poetic predecessor in the compilation of the *Rāso* at the Mewar court. We are not sure exactly when this process began.⁹ Scholars usually date the beginning of the Mewar court's involvement with the *Rāso* to the reign of Maharana Jagat Singh I (r. 1628–52), who initiated an era of royally-sponsored cultural production, after decades of little activity.¹⁰

While the court's involvement with *Prthvīrāj Rāso* probably began in the 1630s or 1640s, under Jagat Singh I, the work must have continued into the reign of his successor Maharana Raj Singh (r. 1652–80). Two works of dynastic history produced at the Mewar court right around the time of Raj Singh's death both mention *Prthvīrāj Rāso* – such references to other poems are rare in the literature of this period, although past poets are often named.¹¹ *Rājvilās*, composed in the literary language Brajbhasha by the poet Man, spends relatively little time on past kings and moves quite rapidly to Raj

⁹ Some scholars believe the translated stanza refers to Amar Singh I, who ruled from 1597 to 1620 (Bora, *Prthvīrājrāso*, pp. 87–95).

¹⁰ Swami, *Rāso-sāhitya*, pp. 54–5. That Jagat Singh took an active interest in the epic is apparent from a colophon in another *Rāso* manuscript, which attributes the revision of the epic to this king rather than Amar Singh (Bora, *Prthvīrājrāso*, pp. 89–90).

¹¹ The earliest mention of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* is said to be in Dalpati Mishra's *Jasvant Udyot* ca.1650 CE (N. Singh, *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, p. 246). The epic's putative author Chand Bardai is mentioned more often than his text, as in *Māncarit*, the poet Narottam's eulogistic account of Raja Man Singh dating from around 1600 (Busch, *Poetry of Kings*, p. 174).

Singh's reign. It cites *Prthvīrāj Rāso* in connection with one of the Maharana's ancestors, Samarsihā Ravar (i.e., Rawal Samar Simha), who had married the Chauhan princess, Pritha.¹² In the conception of the past recorded in *Rājvilās*, a marriage alliance united the Mewar royal dynasty with the Chahamanas of Shakhambhar, signifying their close political ties. Rajputs routinely expected military assistance from lineages related to them by marriage; in fulfillment of that expectation, which often determined the shape of Rajput marriage networks, *Rājvilās* states that Samar Singh fought alongside Prithviraj Chauhan, the lord of Delhi, against King Jaychand.

The second text, Ranchhod Bhatt's Sanskrit *Rājapraśasti*, also brings up *Prthvīrāj Rāso* in relation to the Mewar king Samar Singh, the husband of Prithviraj's sister Pritha.¹³ To paraphrase *Rājapraśasti*:

Due to the affection between them resulting from his marriage to Prithviraj's sister, Samar Singh provided assistance to the prideful Delhi lord, when Prithviraj took his principal chiefs with him to confront Gori Sahibadin, lord of Ghazni, in combat. Accompanying Samar Singh were twelve thousand of his own warriors. After capturing the Gori lord on the battlefield, Samar Singh went to heaven, having broken through the sun's realm by divine means. The details of the war are told in the *Rāsā* book, composed in the vernacular (*bhāṣā*).¹⁴

Here too the Mewar king acted in concert with the *Rāso*'s hero in the larger geo-political struggles of the period, because of the bond he had formed with Prithviraj through his marriage to the Chauhan's sister. *Rājvilās* and *Rājapraśasti* are the first poems from Mewar to mention the royal affinity with the Chauhan hero, although several earlier versions of the Sisodiya genealogy survive.

The Samar Singh mentioned in these two Mewar texts from ca. 1680 is a prominent character in the version of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* propagated at Mewar's capital, Udaipur. Like the majority of *Rāso* manuscripts, the royally-sponsored Amar Singh *Rāso* belongs to the long recension. The preponderance of the long (*brhad*) category is attested in Narottamdas Swami's 1962 inventory of handwritten *Rāsos*, which lists two texts belonging to the shortest category, five in the short category, twelve in the medium, and thirty-four in the long.¹⁵ Since Swami's list omits many *Rāso* manuscripts – there are about 170 copies of all or part of the epic, by my reckoning – it most probably understates the

¹² Canto 2, v.12. Samar Singh also appears in the next verse. There are two editions of Man (Kavi)'s text: *Rājvilās*, ed. Bhagvandin (Kashi: Nagaripracharini Sabha, 1912); and *Rājvilās*, ed. Motilal Menariya (Kashi: Nagaripracharini Sabha, 1958).

¹³ The text has been published twice: N. P. Chakravarti and B. Ch. Chhabra, "Rajaprasasti Inscription of Udaipur," *Epigraphia Indica* 29 (1951) and 30 (1953), Appendix pp. 1–123; and Ranchhod Bhatt, *Rājaprasastī Mahākāyam*, ed. and Hindi trans. Motilal Menariya (Udaipur: Sahitya Sansthan, Rajasthan Vidyapith, 1973).

¹⁴ *Rājapraśasti* 3.24–27. ¹⁵ Swami, *Rāso-sāhitya*, pp. 42–9.

true proportion of long-recension texts, which are not as noteworthy to scholars as the shorter and earlier manuscripts. Even so, Swami's list shows that two-thirds of all *Rāso* manuscripts were of the long recension, some of which were created in locales other than Udaipur or even Mewar. However, the royal redaction from the Sisodiya court soon became the most influential version of the epic.¹⁶

The role of Mewar's king in the events of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* is considerably expanded in the long recension, not only in length but also in significance. The longer versions of the epic have more verses relating to the *Rāso*'s core story and central hero, as well as substantially more in the way of subsidiary stories. These subsidiary stories involve twelve princesses whom Prithviraj acquires as wives besides Samyogita, and many additional battles with Prithviraj's chief enemies in which the heroism of one or another of his Rajput allies is highlighted. Because extra episodes could be inserted into the epic in this manner, it was easy for Mewar bards to produce a version of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* that privileged its own past king, Samar Singh, who is represented as the ally most intimately connected to Prithviraj and most comparable to him in status.

In contrast, Samar Singh does not figure at all in the shortest recension and only briefly in the short one, where he arrives in Prithviraj's capital Delhi right before the final battle with Shihab al-Din; Samar Singh also appears in passing in the final battle scene.¹⁷ These shorter versions of the *Rāso* were produced in northern Rajasthan, in Rajput kingdoms that had quickly become affiliates of the Mughal empire. The medium recension, which has been little analyzed and never published in its entirety, reportedly contains more episodes featuring the Mewar king.¹⁸ Although some medium-recension manuscripts come from Mewar, this version of the *Rāso* was produced in a variety of places, ranging from Ratlam in southwestern Madhya Pradesh to Bikaner in northwestern Rajasthan. However, it is in the long recension, most closely associated with Mewar, that Samar Singh really comes into his own as Prithviraj Chauhan's most valuable ally. Given the emphasis placed on this ancestor of the Mewar kings, it is worth taking a closer look at how he is portrayed in the *Rāso* redaction they sponsored.

¹⁶ N. Singh, *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, p. 243; Swami, *Rāso-sāhitya*, p. 53; Bora, *Prthvīrājrāso*, p. 181.

¹⁷ References to Rawal Samar Singh are found in 14.51–52, 16.4, 16.14, and 16.20 of the short recension, edited by B. P. Sharma (Chand Bardai, *Prthvīrāj Rāso: Laghu Samskāran* [Chandigarh: Vishva Bharati Prakashan, 1962]); henceforth Sharma *Rāso*. More doubtful are references to Savant Singh in 14.107, a Samant Singh Rav in 16.5, and a Samar Raj in 16.59.

¹⁸ Only the first chapter of the medium recension was published in Chand Bardai, *Aslī Prthvīrāj Rāso kā Pratham Samay*, ed. Mathurprasad Dikshit (Benares: Motilal Banarasidas, 1952). As this is the least studied recension, scholars disagree about which manuscripts should be included in it.

Samar Singh, also known as Samarsi and by the title Rawal, is unlike any other of Prithviraj's partisans in the *Rāso* in having a status equal to that of the Chauhan king. The fact that he was thought to be a worthy bridegroom for a member of Prithviraj's immediate family is sufficient to illustrate Samar Singh's high standing in the epic. Only the Mewar king receives a daughter from the royal Chauhans in the *Rāso*, although several of Prithviraj's *sāmans* present their daughters in marriage to Prithviraj. The superiority of the Rawal's position relative to that of Prithviraj's numerous other adherents is made evident by this differential pattern of marriage.

The marriage alliance between Rawal Samar Singh and the Chauhans was considered significant enough to merit an entire *Rāso* chapter. Much is made of the martial prowess, fame, and prestige of Samar Singh and his lineage at the outset of the chapter, which commences in this way:¹⁹

“The lord who is Chittor’s king, he is equal to a lion in strength.”
 (Thinking this), Someshvar of Sambhar, of Manikka Ray’s fortunate clan—
 (after) chief minister Kaymas had a wedding performed (for Prithviraj),
 on the thirteenth of Jyeshtha month, when the sun was moving northward.—
 Taking advantage of the auspicious moment,

decided on her [Pritha’s] union with that foremost house.
 (Thinking), “no disgrace (ever) attaches to the land of Mewar,
 on account of Rawal Samar Singh’s valor.”

“To the lord of Ahar,²⁰ [Samar Singh] (pure like) the northern direction,
 send a letter in which this matter is written.”

(Thus) did Someshvar advise (Prithviraj),
 “so that your sister Pritha can be given (in marriage), oh son.”

“A bridegroom (who is) king of the hill region,
 foremost among men, the Chittor-lord;
 A bridegroom (who is) Ahar king,
 (known as) ‘brave in battle,’ invincible.
 A bridegroom (who) against the Malwa & Gujarat kings,
 takes up arms (and forms) a barrier.
 Should (such) a great match be made, oh son,
 it could mean powerful help (in battle).
 The bridegroom (is) a strong-willed hero, with powerful energy,
 (his) territory steadfast (due to) Shiva’s favor.
 For Pritha’s sake, take care of this today;
 (my) daughter should be married to that man.”

¹⁹ I have taken some liberties in preparing this translation of Mohansimha *Rāso* 18.1–7 (note that there is no verse labelled 18.4), and have consulted some variant readings from Pandya *Rāso*.

²⁰ Ahar, now a suburb of Udaipur, was an early capital of the Guhila clan kings of Mewar.

Then Someshvar's son asked Kanha Chauhan's opinion, (who said):
“This sun among Hindu clans has ever taken the path of dharma.”

“(Like) the sun among Hindu clans,
protector of the excellent Vedic dharma,
(He) took away the weapons of Munja's descendants,
(having) great strength in battle.²¹
To that king who is lord of Chittor,
if Pritha is given, oh Prithviraj,
Gold, horses, elephants, money,
and all manner of gifts will adorn Delhi.
Greatly renowned, this Guhila (clan man) is venerated,
his drum deep (like) a lion roar.
His heroic titles dispel all accusations;
the (whole) world desires this to be done.”

“This sister Pritha being married
is (truly) Lakshmi in all her forms and qualities.
To the Chittor-lord Rawal Samar,
she has been a good wife repeatedly [in other lives].”

These verses describe both Prithviraj's father, Someshvar, and his uncle, Kanha Chauhan, as urging Prithviraj to solicit the marriage of his sister with Samar Singh, who could provide not only an illustrious pedigree but also valuable military assistance. In addition to Pritha's great beauty and the groom's excellent qualities, the text goes on to report on the lavish dowry provided for the bride by her brother, much of it acquired in battle from Shihab al-Din. A tremendous amount of wealth was gifted away during the wedding festivities, we are told in verses such as this, amidst much praise of both bride and groom.²²

After (they) went around (the fire) once, he gave sixty villages in Mewat,
After the second circuit was completed, ten plus one more elephants,
After the third circuit was completed, tax from (the salt) water of Sambhar,
After the fourth circumambulation, innumerable choice goods.
Clever in all ways is that Chauhan hero,
(who) readily brought about the union
Of that best of Hindus, like a sun,
with she (who) surpassed Lakshmi in virtues and form.

That beauty (was) aptly called a temple,
providing a (divine) vision of charm.
Like a god in a god's abode,
the groom sounded the kettledrum and war drum.

²¹ Munja was a tenth-century king of Malwa of the Paramara dynasty.

²² Mohansimha *Rāso* 18.33–37.

On the first day Niddur Ray hosted the king (who was the) Chittor-lord.
 On the second day Govind, a great *sāmant*, invincible.
 On the third day Pajjun, a powerful tortoise,²³ took him (as a guest).
 On the fourth day Narnah Kanha, (who) had acquired great renown.
 On the fifth day the strong Kaymas,
 (who) offered sacrifices equal to (demon) king Bali.
 On the sixth day the wealthy Pundir
 Dhir hosted (the groom) and acquired fame.
 On the seventh day Ram of the Raghu clan, (like) Mt. Meru in his deeds,
 Who had destroyed Nandipur, showed respect to Samar on this occasion.
 On the eighth day Achales, who was possessed of an enduring reputation.
 On the ninth day Pahar (Ray), (who) dispelled the world's wretchedness.
 On the tenth day Panwar Salakh,
 (of the clan of) the Dhar-king, saw to all the rites (of hospitality).
 Each for a day they all kept (the Rawal),
 squandering the five (plus) four treasures (of Kubera).

Thus for twelve days, that king was well hosted by many (different) lords.
 After twelve days, the Chittor-lord had instruments of departure played.

A different one of Prithviraj's subordinate allies (*sāmant*) thus hosted Samar Singh on each of the twelve nights he spent in Delhi, entertaining him as extravagantly as possible. Having the *sāmants* stand in for Prithviraj in this matter of hospitality to the bridegroom indicates their closeness to the Chauhan king; at the same time, it demonstrates their willingness to carry out whatever task their overlord Prithviraj bid them to do. Prithviraj's *sāmants* are often in attendance at the king's court and routinely accompany him on military expeditions.

In contrast, Rawal Samar Singh is an independent sovereign, who is usually far away in Mewar ruling his own kingdom. His military support cannot be demanded as in the case of Prithviraj's *sāmants* but only requested, usually by a high-ranking envoy dispatched from Prithviraj's court.²⁴ He always responds to these requests positively, because marriage between two Rajput families "established an alliance with on-going obligations of support," as Norman Ziegler has pointed out.²⁵ The group of relatives formed through marriage (*saga*) were a second significant social network for medieval Rajputs, every bit as important as the brotherhood (*bhāībandhām*) – the three or four generations of men of shared descent who lived in the same territory. Through a

²³ This is a reference to Pajjun's family name, Kachhwaha, which means tortoise.

²⁴ Samar Singh and his troops do most of the fighting in defense of Prithviraj's fort Ranthambhor in "Marriage to Hansavati" and in defence of Devagiri's Bhan Yadav, uncle of Prithviraj's bride Shashivrata in the "Devagiri War" episode. Samar Singh plays a major role in "The Second Battle of Hansi" as well, when he rescues numerous *sāmants* who are besieged in Hansi fort by the Ghurid army.

²⁵ Saran and Ziegler, *Mertiyo Rāthors*, 1:62.

multiplicity of wives, a Rajput lord could assemble a large and varied network of allies to draw on for military assistance. The Mewar king continues to be a staunch ally until the bitter end, coming to Delhi from Chittor as soon as he hears about the progress of Shihab al-Din's army toward Prithviraj's capital. By the end of the last battle against the sultan, most of Prithviraj's remaining supporters, including the Mewar king and many of his men, are dead. The Mewar royal family's sacrifice for Prithviraj's cause was thus considerable; even before the numerous deaths of its warriors in the final confrontation, Samar Singh's brother and several other kinsmen had lost their lives.

In dying while fighting in the last battle against Shihab al-din, Mewar's Rawal Samar Singh proved himself to be exemplary in every way. He is a model of martial heroism, whose views are repeatedly solicited by others. On one occasion, warriors suggest either avoiding battle or conducting a sneak night raid – Samar Singh rejects these options, and sends the men into battle with the injunction that they should act in such a way as to attain immortality (that is, acquire an everlasting reputation for heroism).²⁶ The Mewar king also instructs the troops on the topic of spiritual liberation (*mukti*), which could be gained through exceptional valor on the battlefield.²⁷ There was no shortage of skilled and brave men among Prithviraj's cohort, but in sagacity there was no equal to Samar Singh. Samarsi's wisdom is partly a consequence of his age – some years before his death he is said to be fifty-five years old to Prithviraj's twenty-two.²⁸

Of all the many aspects of the *Rāso*'s account of Prithviraj's life that a skeptical mind might doubt, however, it is the presence of Samar Singh that can be most definitively rejected. Abundant inscriptional testimony firmly places this king of the Mewar region not in the late twelfth-century lifetime of Prithviraj but a good century later: eight inscriptions relating to Samarsi have been found, dating from 1273 to 1299 CE.²⁹ If Samar Singh could not, and did not, fight in Prithviraj's wars, how did he come to occupy such a prominent place in the pages of *Prithvirāj Rāso*? In order to grasp why the historical memory of Mewar was so creative in its imaginings, we must return to the Mewar court of the late seventeenth century and its socio-political history. The position of the Sisodiya dynasty and their kingdom was perceived to have declined since earlier times, leading to a campaign to elevate its standing through cultural patronage. The appeal of *Prithvirāj Rāso* and the

²⁶ Mohansimha *Rāso* 54.17–21. ²⁷ Ibid., 61.252–265. ²⁸ Ibid., 41.95.

²⁹ D. Sharma, ed., *Rajasthan through the Ages*, vol. 1, p. 661. Since the lord of Chittor is called Samant rather than Samar a few times, some scholars suggest that the epic actually meant to signify the Mewar ruler Samant Singh (r. 1172–79). On the other hand, Narottamdas Swami pointed out that the *Rāso* names Samar Singh's father and sons accurately, thus demonstrating that he was indeed the king being referenced (Swami, *Rāso-sāhitya*, p. 146).

reasons for Samar Singh's inclusion in its narrative have much to do with the competitive nature of royal patronage in this era.

Building fame in seventeenth-century Mewar

Mewar has a long and distinguished history, due partly to the more favorable conditions for agriculture there than in most regions of Rajasthan. Its position as the dominant kingdom of Rajasthan was unquestioned during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Under the militarily energetic and culturally accomplished ruler Rana Kumbha (r. 1433–68), Mewar inflicted defeats on two long-standing rivals, the wealthy kingdoms of Malwa and Gujarat. Mewar's standing was similarly lofty under Maharana Sanga (r. 1509–27), who led the large coalition of armies that confronted Babur, founder of the Mughal empire, at the Battle of Khanua in 1527. Reflecting on the challenges he faced in India in his memoirs, Babur described Rana Sanga as one of the two greatest infidel kings of India, "who had recently grown so great by his audacity and sword" and whose territory was so large that it could support 100,000 horsemen.³⁰

The kingdom's strength deteriorated notably in the late sixteenth century, after the ruling Sisodiya dynasty refused to join other Rajput lineages in acknowledging the Mughals as overlords. As is well-known, Akbar and his troops captured and sacked Chittor in 1568, but a new capital was established at Udaipur. Resistance to the Mughals was continued by the celebrated king Rana Pratap, who fought the mighty army of the Mughals to a draw, at Haldighati in 1576. The Mughals made several more attempts to bring all of Mewar under their control, but it was not until 1615 that a peace treaty with the Mughals was signed by Maharana Amar Singh I, the son of Rana Pratap. The 1615 treaty supposedly restored all of Mewar's territory, some of which had been occupied by the Mughals, but in fact the kingdom was considerably diminished in size.³¹ Mewar was eclipsed – or at least equaled – in power and influence by the younger Rajput kingdoms of Amber and Jodhpur, whose leaders had acquiesced earlier to Mughal hegemony and benefited accordingly. Just as the Sisodiya kings of Mewar routinely sought to expand their territory during the second half of the seventeenth century, through a variety of diplomatic pressures and military actions, so too did they strive to increase their symbolic capital.

Patronage of the arts was an important means by which the Mewar court could display the resources at its command while simultaneously promoting a

³⁰ Translation by Thackston; Babur, *Baburnama*, pp. 332, 387.

³¹ Sunita I. Zaidi, "The Mughals and the Autonomous Rajput Chiefs: Assignment of Jagirs to Ruling Sisodia Chiefs of Mewar," *Islamic Culture* 60.4 (1986): 83–94. I thank Ramya Sreenivasan for bringing this article to my attention. See also Hooja, *History of Rajasthan*, pp. 612–25.

positive image of the royal family. A good example of this strategy is the lavishly illustrated manuscript of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, created between 1649 and 1653 on the commission of Maharana Jagat Singh I, with its approximately 450 large and gorgeous paintings. The court's ability to sponsor such an extravagant work of art was a testament to its superiority, and so too was the subject-matter of the manuscript. For the *Rāmāyaṇa* was not simply a popular tale of past adventures. The Sisodiya dynasty of Mewar claimed to belong to the same ancient race of warriors originating from the sun (*sūrya-vamśa*) as did the epic's hero Rama. J. P. Losty concludes that Maharana Jagat Singh's "commissioning an illustrated manuscript of the *Rāmāyaṇa* on the grandest scale may be seen as a Rajput reaction to and imitation of the ancestor-glorifying traditions of the Mughals."³² When the Maratha king Shivaji was required to prove his kshatriya status in order to perform a royal coronation in 1674, he adopted a Sisodiya ancestry, in a clear testament to the Sisodiya success in advertising their prestigious pedigree.³³

The desire to compete with the Mughals in the arena of cultural accomplishments was a strong incentive for Sisodiya artistic, and especially architectural, patronage from the time of Jagat Singh I onward, as Jennifer Joffee has argued persuasively.³⁴ In addition to the magnificent illustrated manuscript of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Jagat Singh sponsored the construction at the Udaipur palace complex of several structures and gateways, which were stylistically reminiscent of Rana Kumbha's fifteenth-century palace at Chittor. The greatness of the Sisodiya past was directly referenced by such means, just as it had been in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. New artistic trends are also reflected in these palace buildings, which make much use of the white marble that was so prominent in the architectural commissions of Mughal emperor Shah Jahan (r. 1628–58), Jagat Singh I's contemporary. Jagat Singh's best known architectural project is the Jagdish temple completed in 1652. Built adjacent to the palace complex, it was modeled on a temple at Eklingji built by Rana Kumbha, and therefore looked back to a period in Mewar's history when its king was unchallenged in power and prestige.³⁵

The most impressive achievement in the career of Maharana Raj Singh (r. 1652–80), Jagat Singh's successor, was the construction of an enormous lake named after him.³⁶ Rajsamand (Sanskrit, *Raja-samudra*) is a sizeable body

³² J. P. Losty, *Indian Paintings in the British Museum* (Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademy, 1982), p. 12.

³³ Laine, *Shivaji*, p. 31. In a Brajbhasha eulogy to Shivaji, the Sisodiyas' solar descent is lauded in the second verse of the poem; Shivaji's Bhonsle lineage is included among the Sisodiya clan in the fifth verse (Bhushan, *Śivarāja-bhūṣāṇa* [Delhi: Kitabdhara, 1982], pp. 35–6). I thank Allison Busch for bringing this to my attention.

³⁴ Jennifer Beth Joffee, "Art, Architecture and Politics in Mewar, 1628–1710," (PhD dissertation, University of Minnesota, 2005).

³⁵ Joffee, "Art, Architecture and Politics in Mewar," pp. 79–94.

³⁶ The construction of Rajsamand is described in detail in cantos 9–21, plus much of canto 24, of *Rājapraśasti*.

of water, extending more than three miles in length and a mile and a half in width. Located about forty miles north-northeast of Udaipur, this artificial lake was constructed over a fourteen-year period, from 1662 to 1676.³⁷ There was also a good deal of secondary construction at the site: a royal palace was built nearby, and numerous platforms, pavilions, and gateways were erected on the dam itself. Joffee points out that aspects of the more decorative work at Rajsamand lake were seemingly intended to outshine Mughal architectural efforts at Anasagar in Ajmer.³⁸ Anasagar is also an artificial lake, with a circumference of eight miles, built not by the Mughals but rather by one of Prithviraj Chauhan's ancestors between 1135–50 CE. Ajmer had become the major stronghold of Mughal power in Rajasthan by the late sixteenth century, and Emperor Shah Jahan had a palace and other monumental structures created at its lake Anasagar. Among the buildings he commissioned were several marble pavilions with pillars, built on a long marble platform at the edge of the water in 1637.³⁹ Maharana Raj Singh had similar marble pavilions built at his lake, Rajsamand, on platforms that actually projected out over the water; Figure 5.1 shows some of the construction at the site.

In short, Jagat Singh and Raj Singh both consciously sponsored works of art and architecture that would rival the most splendid cultural achievements of the Mughals in the present day. Mewar's cultural production under Jagat Singh and Raj Singh also promoted the Sisodiya past as comparable to that of the Mughals, in having an equally distinguished ancestry and history of accomplishments. While the Mughal emperors were among the audience that Sisodiya cultural patronage was meant to impress, so too were Rajput noble families who were flourishing under Mughal rule. Sometimes this point was made explicitly, as when Maharana Raj Singh sent presents of an elephant, two horses, and expensive garments to his counterparts in Jodhpur, Amber, Bikaner, Bundi, Jaisalmer, and several other kingdoms, on the occasion of lake Rajsamand's inauguration.⁴⁰ By this largesse to other Rajput kings, Raj Singh ensured that they were well aware of the completion of his massive project and simultaneously articulated his claim of pre-eminence among all Rajputs. Indeed, other powerful Rajput lords may have been the chief target of the Sisodiya cultural campaign, according to scholars such as Molly Aitken, who points out that Sisodiya relations with the Mughals were often cordial. While not intentionally oppositional perhaps, the seventeenth-century Mewar court did promote a style of painting that was quite distinct from that of other courts, both Mughal and Rajput, to underscore its uniqueness.⁴¹

³⁷ Chakravarti & Chhabra, "Rajaprasasti Inscription," p. 1.

³⁸ Joffee, "Art, Architecture and Politics in Mewar," pp. 109–16.

³⁹ Sarda, *Ajmer*, pp. 60, 63.

⁴⁰ Bhatt, *Rājaprasastī*, 20.1–28.

⁴¹ Molly Emma Aitken, *The Intelligence of Tradition in Rajput Court Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 64–9.



Figure 5.1. A view of Rajsamand lake and its built environment

Raj Singh's eagerness to grant lands in his territory to two separate branches of the Vaishnava Pushtimarg sect (founded by Vallabhacharya) must also be viewed against a backdrop of competition between several Rajput lords for the privilege. Shrinathji, the most cherished idol of Vallabha's followers, was moved from Govardhan in the Vrindavan region (near Mathura) on account of unsettled political conditions, but did not settle down in a new home immediately. Instead, he resided for short periods in the Rajasthani localities of Bundi, Kota, Jodhpur, and Kishangarh before finally relocating in 1672 to a village about 30 miles from Udaipur that was subsequently renamed Nathdwara. Another branch of the Pushtimarg, who were caretakers of the Shri Dvarkanath image of Krishna, had already made the move to Mewar and were eventually resettled at a new temple at Kankroli on the banks of Rajsamand, at the same time as the lake's inauguration in 1676.⁴² In this manner, the Mewar kings became the most important patrons and protectors of the gods of the

⁴² Maharana Jagat Singh is said to have been initiated into the sect by the leader of this branch (the third house) during a visit to the Braj region in 1647; the branch later relocated to Kankroli. For more details, see Shandip Saha, "The Movement of Bhakti along a North-West Axis: Tracing the History of the Pusṭimārg between the Sixteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 11, no. 3 (2012): 311, 315, n15.

influential Pushtimarg, with its many Gujarati merchant adherents. The greater piety and patronage of the Sisodiya dynasty was made apparent whenever a major festival of the sect was held at Nathdwara, which other gods and kings would attend.⁴³ Aside from the considerable spiritual prestige they gained as a consequence of their sheltering both Shrinathji and Shri Dvarkanath, the Sisodiyas could also count on a sizeable economic boost from the influx of wealthy pilgrims.⁴⁴

During the years that the Mewar court was engaged in this campaign for cultural supremacy, they continued to pursue political goals that could lead to conflict with the empire.⁴⁵ In 1654, soon after Raj Singh ascended the throne, the Mughals sent an expedition into Mewar in response to the rebuilding of fortifications at the old Mewar capital at Chittor. Mewar was invaded again in late 1679, on the order of Aurangzeb, for its involvement in the disputed succession over the Rathor throne of Marwar, which united several Rajput lineages against the Mughals. Raj Singh retreated to the hills, from where the Mewar troops made raids upon the Mughal armies occupying the plains and valleys. The underlying irritant in Mughal-Mewar relations was Mewar's desire to regain dominance over border localities, for "the Ranas of Mewar felt hemmed in by the Mughals, and chafed at the restrictions placed on them leading to a decline in their real position in Rajasthan," writes Satish Chandra.⁴⁶ The recurring efforts by the Sisodiyas to expand the territory over which they could extract revenues reveal their dissatisfaction with the status quo; a similar concern to assert Mewar's primacy within the region may explain Maharana Raj Singh's participation in Marwar's succession dispute, and subsequent conflict with the Mughals, in 1679 and 1680.

Soon after Raj Singh's death in the fall of 1680, his son and successor Maharana Jai Singh (r. 1680–98) made peace with the Mughals. Probably because *Rājaprasāsti* records many details about the construction of Rajsamand lake, Jai Singh had the text of this long Sanskrit poem placed on the site of his father's greatest achievement. *Rājaprasāsti* was inscribed on twenty-five stone slabs which were installed on a terrace at the lake.⁴⁷ Given a permanent

⁴³ I thank Jack Hawley for pointing this out to me. The privilege of housing Shrinathji and Shri Dvarkanath also gave the Sisodiyas prominence over the Kachhwahas, who were primarily followers of the Gaudiya (Chaitanya) form of Vaishnavism.

⁴⁴ Norbert Peabody, *Hindu Kingship and Polity in Precolonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 72–5.

⁴⁵ On political history, see also: G. N. Sharma, *Mewar and the Mughal Emperors, 1526–1707 AD*, 2nd edn. (Agra: Shiva Lal Agrawala & Co, 1962); R. V. Soman, *History of Mewar, from Earliest Times to 1751 A.D.* (Jaipur: C. L. Ranka & Co., 1976); Sri Ram Sharma, *Maharana Raj Singh and His Times* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1971).

⁴⁶ Satish Chandra, *Mughal Religious Policies, the Rajputs, and the Deccan* (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1994), p. 92.

⁴⁷ Chakravarti and Chhabra, "Rajaprasasti Inscription," p. 1.

form on rock and a conspicuous position on the banks of Rajsamand, *Rājapraśasti* consequently became the best known literary work created at the seventeenth-century Mewar court. Among the many celebrated deeds it records is the participation of Samar Singh, ancestor to the region's kings, in Prithviraj Chauhan's wars.

The royal dynasty's history, to which Prithviraj Chauhan was linked in *Rājapraśasti* and *Rājvilās*, was a topic that consumed the energies of numerous Mewar poets in this period. Literature about the past was another medium through which kings could be praised and publicized, and the rulers of Mewar had long cultivated it. We have seen that the Mewar court sponsored a process of revising *Prithvirāj Rāso* that may have begun as early as the reign of Jagat Singh I (r. 1628–52) and continued into the rule of Jai Singh's heir Amar Singh II (r. 1698–1710). Between ca. 1675 to 1685, there was a veritable outpouring of historical narratives from the Mewar court.⁴⁸ No fewer than five historical works from this time span have been published, in addition to *Rājapraśasti* and *Rājvilās*, and at least that many remain unpublished.⁴⁹

The dynastic histories and biographies produced in seventeenth-century Mewar were composed in a variety of languages. Sanskrit was well-represented, but so too were the vernaculars, in a departure from earlier times. Sanskrit had an important advantage over the vernacular (*bhāṣā*), in the mind of Ranchhod Bhatt, the admittedly biased author of the Sanskrit *Rājapraśasti*. He wrote:

The longevity of works in *bhāṣā* is comparable to the lifetime of mortals,
While the longevity of those in divine speech, like the *Mahābhārata*,
is comparable to the lifetime of the immortals.
O Rana, I therefore compose this work in the language of the gods.⁵⁰

The lasting nature of Sanskrit works, as opposed to the allegedly ephemeral fate of those composed in a vernacular language, was clearly a selling point for Ranchhod Bhatt in obtaining royal patronage. In the next verse of the text, he declares:

The Sanskrit poet should be honored by rulers,
For, like Vyasa and Valmiki, like Bana and Shri Harsha,
It is he who establishes the enduring reputation of kings.⁵¹

⁴⁸ *Rājapraśasti* was probably not finished until 1681 or thereabouts (S. R. Sharma, *Maharana Raj Singh*, pp. 4–6). G. N. Sharma dates *Rājvilās* to the years 1677–80 (*A Bibliography of Mediaeval Rajasthan* [Agra: Lakshmi Narain Agarwal, 1965], p. 85). On the literary texts of this era, see *ibid.*, pp. 61–87; and R. P. Vyas, *Mahārāṇā Rājsiṃha* (Jaipur: Rajasthan Hindi Granth Akademi, 1974), pp. 127–38.

⁴⁹ The published texts are Ranchhod Bhatt's *Amarakāvyam*, Giridhar Asiya's *Sagat-Rāso*, *Sisod Vanśāvalī evam Rājasthān ke Rajvārō kī Vanśāvaliyē*, *Mevār Rāval Rāṇāji rī Bāt*, and Sadashiva's *Rājaratnākara*.

⁵⁰ Bhatt, *Rājapraśasti* 2.16. ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 2.17.

In other words, kings who wanted to make sure their deeds were acclaimed through the ages ought to cultivate Sanskrit poets, not those who composed in other languages.

The rulers of Mewar did not abide solely by Ranchhod Bhatt's suggestion, but hedged their bets by also extending patronage to poets of the vernacular. In contrast to *Rājapraśasti*, *Rājvilās* was composed in Pingal, just as *Prthvīrāj Rāso* was. Pingal is a form of the Brajbhasha literary language influenced by Rajasthani, often associated with the Bhat community of genealogist-bards, and used mainly by poets in the eastern and northern areas of Rajasthan. The Udaipur court also sponsored *Rājprakāś* and other works in Dingal, a literary dialect based on the language of Marwar that was widespread in western Rajasthan, and usually associated with Charan bards.⁵² The authors of dynastic accounts in Sanskrit, such as the *Rājapraśasti*'s Ranchhod Bhatt and *Rājaratnākara*'s Sadashiva, seem to have been Brahmins rather than Charans or Bhats, Rajasthan's two main bardic groups.⁵³

The Sisodiyas based in Udaipur were not the only Rajput lords to sponsor works that were genealogical, biographical, and/or dynastic in their concerns. Norman Ziegler has noted the rise of historiographical literature in seventeenth-century Rajasthan, composed in the bardic Dingal language in a variety of genres.⁵⁴ Some of these genres like the *vāṇśāvalī* or genealogy appear in the Mewar region as well, but the prose *bāt* (biographical tale), *khyāt* (lineage narrative), and *vigat* (clan chronicle) flourished primarily in western Rajasthan.⁵⁵ Best known among them is Mumhata Nainsi's *Khyāt*, in which the histories of numerous Rajput lineages were compiled between 1637 and 1666 by this Jain administrator who served the Rathor rulers of Jodhpur.⁵⁶ Scholars have long pointed to the practice of the Mughal court as a stimulus for Rajput historical writing, for the Mughal family not only wrote their own memoirs or chronicles but also had court poets busily engaged in composing lengthy accounts of themselves and their ancestors going back to the distant past. A large number of such works on Mughal history were composed during the reign of Akbar (1556–1605). Akbar's close confidante Abu al-Fazl also included historical narratives of more local significance – such as the story of Prithviraj's conflict with Kanauj – in his gazetteer of the empire *Āīn-i Akbarī*, after soliciting information on their pasts from local kings and chiefs. The reign of Shah Jahan

⁵² G. N. Sharma, *Bibliography*, p. 75.

⁵³ On Sadashiva's family, see Mulchandra Pathak, "Prākkathan (Foreword)," in *Rājaratnākara Mahākāya*, p. 4. On Ranchhod Bhatt, see Chakravarti & Chhabra, "Rajaprasasti Inscription," p. 2; and S. R. Sharma, *Maharana Raj Singh*, pp. 2–4).

⁵⁴ See also Kamphorst, *In Praise of Death*.

⁵⁵ Ziegler, "Marvari Historical Chronicles," pp. 221, 231–2; see also pp. 233–5, 240–4.

⁵⁶ Saran and Ziegler, *Merīyo Rāthors*, 1:10–11.

(1628–58) also witnessed an official emphasis on the compilation of a historical record of the court.⁵⁷

Although the imperial court's high regard for dynastic history no doubt contributed to a greater interest in narratives of the past among their Rajput subordinates, it would be a mistake to view the growth in Rajput historiographical literature as simply a passive and imitative response. On the contrary, the production of historical literature was a competitive activity that could have real-life consequences for the social status of a Rajput lineage, for it was a crucial way of establishing the primacy of one's claim to territory, title, or prestige. After Akbar's subjugation of most Rajput kingdoms, Mughal supervision of the activities of their Rajput underlings meant that armed conflict was no longer a feasible means for contesting the order of ranking between and among different groups. More subtle strategies of improving socio-political standing had to be employed, including literary ones. Consciousness of ranking, and rivalry over it, was accentuated by the formality of the Mughal imperial system, in which the status of officers was hierarchically graded and enacted publicly at court.

The seventeenth century, perhaps more than any other era in Indian history, was marked by an intense rivalry among warrior lineages for prestige, resulting in the growing sponsorship of literary texts that narrated their splendid deeds and glorious past.⁵⁸ The royal dynasty of Mewar had long evinced a pride in its pedigree, which had been enumerated in stone inscriptions going back hundreds of years. An even greater emphasis on the Sisodiya genealogy can be detected by the mid seventeenth century, however. This is the context within which the first references to Prithviraj Chauhan and his story occur at the Mewar court.⁵⁹ By 1680 or so, when the *Rāso* was cited in both *Rājapraśasti* and *Rājvilās*, this epic was evidently well-known to the court elite as a source of information on Samar Singh, a former Mewar king. It is unlikely that *Prthvīrāj Rāso* would have received the attention it did in Mewar – and certainly its name would not have been recorded by the *Rājapraśasti* inscription on the shores of Rajsamand – were it not for the connection between Prithviraj Chauhan and Samar Singh.

Muslims in the long recension

In India today, Mewar is widely remembered as a bulwark of Hindu resistance to Muslim aggression, and admired as the site of great heroism and patriotic sacrifice. While Mewar's heroic reputation is partly an outcome of the

⁵⁷ W.E. Begley and Z.A. Desai, "Introduction," in *The Shah Jahan Nama of Inayat Khan: An Abridged History of the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan*, eds. W. E. Begley and Z. A. Desai (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. xiii–xxxvii.

⁵⁸ Busch, *Poetry of Kings*, pp. 130–201.

⁵⁹ See also, Sreenivasan, *Many Lives of a Rajput Queen*, pp. 65–104.

fascination of Indian nationalists with the ideal Rajput warrior, itself a legacy of James Tod's romantic notions, it is also the fruit of Mewar's early modern propaganda.⁶⁰ From the mid seventeenth century onward, and particularly in the numerous dynastic histories composed when Raj Singh was king, court poets cultivated the image of Mewar as implacably opposed to Mughal rule and hostile to their ways. This belies the considerable interaction between nobles of various ethnicities, including Mewar's princes, which took place at the Mughal court. By the mid to late seventeenth century, there were so many shared elements in elite tastes in food, dress, architecture and the like that we can speak of a composite culture that encompassed the Mughal nobility. To be sure, the inherited great traditions of the Indic and Persianate worlds might still differentiate certain realms of culture, such as religious practice, but there was often considerable overlap at less elite levels.⁶¹

More than at any other Rajput court, Mewar's publicists sought to deflect attention from the kingdom's eventual submission to the Mughal empire and focused instead on its years of opposition. The memory of Rana Pratap and the Battle of Haldighati of 1576 was central to this campaign.⁶² Although details vary from text to text, the main focus of interest in the battle for the Sisodiyas was the personal combat between Rana Pratap of Mewar and Raja Man Singh of Amber, the Kachhwaha Rajput who was the Mughal commander. In the account of *Rājaratnākara* (ca. 1675), Pratap was mounted on a horse while Man Singh sat high up in a howdah on the back of an elephant. Pratap managed to wound Man Singh and force his elephant to flee despite this disadvantage, and the leaderless Mughal troops soon fled the battlefield, to Mewar's triumph.⁶³ Mewar's opposition to the Mughals was also expressed in its refusal to provide daughters in marriage to the imperial family. This point is made in *Rājaratnākara* and other texts by means of an episode involving the Kachhwaha Rajput Man Singh.⁶⁴ On one occasion Man Singh is said to have

⁶⁰ Cynthia Talbot, "The Mewar Court's Construction of History," in *The Kingdom of the Sun: Indian Court and Village Art from the Princely State of Mewar*, ed. Joanna Williams (San Francisco: Asian Art Museum, 2007), pp. 12–33.

⁶¹ For example, William Pinch has shown that there were numerous bands of ascetics whose affiliation was often indistinct as apparent from the terms *jogis* or *fākirs* used interchangeably for them (*Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006], pp. 82–101). Some warrior groups also straddled social categories, as with the Kyam-khanis of Fatehpur and Jhunjhunu, who were Muslim Rajputs of the Chauhan clan (Cynthia Talbot, "Becoming Turk the Rajput Way: Conversion and Identity in an Indian Warrior Narrative," *Modern Asian Studies* 43.1 [2009]: 211–43).

⁶² See the excerpts dealing with Rana Pratap's life from a slew of texts in Devilal Paliwal, ed., *Mahārānā Pratāp Smṛti Granth* (Udaipur: Sahitya Sansthan, Rajasthan Vidyapith, 1969).

⁶³ Sadashiva, *Rājaratnākara Mahākāvya*, ed. and Hindi trans. Mulchandra Pathak (Jodhpur: Rajasthan Prachyavidya Pratishtan, 2001), vv.7.33–7.42.

⁶⁴ This incident appears in *Rājaratnākara* (7.2–7.12), and several other texts; see Talbot, "Mewar Court's Construction of History," pp. 24, 32 n46.

visited Rana Pratap and been offered a lavish meal. Rana Pratap did not partake of the meal himself, as he explains later, because pure warriors (*pavitra-vīra*) could not share food with those who invited Muslims (*yavana*, a common Sanskrit term for people from Afghanistan, Central Asia, and further west) to their homes and gave them daughters in marriage.

Given the reputation for resistance to the Mughal empire that the early modern Mewar court purposefully promoted, one might expect Mewar's *Rāso* redaction to be antagonistic toward Prithviraj Chauhan's Ghurid opponents. After all, the argument that the Sisodiyas were superior to other Rajput lineages because they fought harder against the Mughals and would not intermarry with them – often assumed to be a colonial construction – was actually articulated while the Mughal empire was flourishing. While *Prthyvīrāj Rāso* has been widely understood in modern times as a “counter-epic” that expresses Hindu defiance to Muslim dominance, I argued in Chapter 4 that it was fundamentally a regional epic, which focused on Delhi's rivalry with Kanauj, at least in its shorter renditions. Did the long-recension *Rāso* tradition produced at Udaipur differ in its emphases from the earlier versions of the narrative? An analysis of the royally sponsored redaction's attitudes towards its Muslim characters is essential if we are to understand the changing meanings of the epic over time, and particularly the later nationalist interpretation of it as an anti-Muslim work.

Rather surprisingly, considering the widespread impression today, the long-recension *Rāso*'s portrayal of Shihab al-Din is largely positive. He possesses in abundance the most crucial quality for a warrior: courage. The man the *Rāso* usually calls Patisah or Sah (*badshāh/shāh*), Gori/Gauri (of Ghur), the lord of Gajjan (Ghazni), or Sahabdin (Shihab al-Din) is decidedly not a coward. Even when most of his troops have fled the battlefield, Shihab al-Din remains and fights – this is why he is repeatedly captured by Prithviraj and his men. In one battle near Nagaur, Shihab al-Din is urged to leave the battlefield by his generals, but refuses to do so. He and Prithviraj engage in one-on-one combat, with so much prowess that the host of deities in the sky begin to sing of their fame. The Sultan is seized, however, when his warriors abandon their pride and desert.⁶⁵ So too on another occasion, when Prithviraj Chauhan loudly commands his troops to capture Shihab al-Din, the Ghurid forces rapidly retreat, leaving their leader behind.⁶⁶

This worthy adversary could even act with chivalry towards his foe. Once, when Prithviraj was hunting in the forest with only five of his lords, he is secretly surrounded by Shihab al-Din and his men. Instead of pouncing on the Chauhan king immediately, the Shah sends a message announcing his

⁶⁵ Mohansimha *Rāso* 22.76–91.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 10.50–52.

presence and provides Prithviraj's group with weapons. Now able to defend themselves, Prithviraj's small warband keeps the Ghurids at bay long enough to alert the main Chauhan army; the Ghurid attack is then repulsed, as usual.⁶⁷

Only toward the end of the epic is Shihab al-Din cast as a villain, when he imprisons Prithviraj Chauhan and blinds him. This heinous act is particularly reprehensible, the *Rāso* implies, because Prithviraj had scrupulously followed the conventions of warfare in their previous encounters. On each of the seven or more times Shihab al-Din was taken captive, he was treated as an honored guest by Prithviraj and released unharmed.⁶⁸ Prithviraj is so honorable in his treatment of the enemy that he once refused his allies' request to execute Shihab al-Din and instead supplied him with an escort, thereby protecting the sultan from an attack on the road back to Ghazni.⁶⁹ On the single occasion when Shihab al-Din is successful in capturing Prithviraj, on the other hand, the sultan not only keeps him captive in unpleasant circumstances but also harms him physically. A jailor's complaint about Prithviraj's merciless (*karūr*) gaze is what supposedly impelled the sultan to have his enemy's eyes removed – an act that would prevent Prithviraj from ever acting as king again.⁷⁰ The issue of Prithviraj's blinding was clearly a sore point or Abu al-Fazl would not have omitted it from his retelling of the *Rāso* story in the 1590s. In contrast, *Surjanacarita*, a Sanskrit text also written toward the end of Akbar's reign, comments at length on this act. It was sharply critical of the blinding, saying that killing an enemy was preferable to mutilating him in this way.⁷¹

The heavy metaphorical overtones of Prithviraj's blindness add a level of complexity to any interpretation of its significance in *Prithvirāj Rāso*. We saw in Chapter 2 that the theme of his insensibility, due to excessive sleep and lethargy, was prominent in the pre-Mughal Jain stories. It is integral to the *Rāso* epic too, where the blinding of the Chauhan king is a kind of karmic retribution for his injustice in killing minister Kaymas stealthily, in the dark. The two times when Prithviraj shoots his arrow while not being able to see, first at Kaymas and later at the sultan, are inextricably linked and must both be present in the narrative for aesthetic reasons. It is possible, therefore, that the motif of Prithviraj's blinding was originally meant to be a commentary on Prithviraj's moral deficiencies and not an indictment of his opponent. While

⁶⁷ Ibid., 12.12–27. Shihab al-Din does contravene the norms of international relations when he has an envoy sent by the Gujarat king killed. Angered by the envoy's continued praise of his own king, the Shah shoots him with an arrow, despite his advisor's admonition that the conventions of both Hindus and Turks held messengers to be inviolable (Ibid., 20.46).

⁶⁸ Prithviraj generally seized the sultan's insignia of kingship, such as his war drums, fly-whisk, royal parasol, and throne, and thereby deprived him of his lordly status (ibid., 21.73, 22.92). It was also expected that the defeated king pay a fine (*dānda*) to the victor – in the *Rāso*, this was typically in the form of war-horses or elephants (ibid., 10.58, 26.71, 29.40).

⁶⁹ Ibid., 27.3–40. ⁷⁰ Pandya *Rāso* 66.1628.

⁷¹ Chandrashekha, *Surjanacarita* 10.139; see also the discussion of *Surjanacarita* in Chapter 3.

this would explain the generally favorable treatment of the sultan, the episode remains enigmatic and deserves more nuanced consideration.

In the same way that Shihab al-Din figures primarily as a worthy opponent in battle, so too are his troops generally depicted as honorable warriors and formidable fighters. Their leading warriors often engage in one-on-one combat with Prithviraj's *sāmans*, in time-honored fashion. The Ghurid forces, especially when they are on the battlefield, are most often collectively called *khān* or *mīr(a)*, both titles of respect indicating elite rank and implying that these troops were honorable opponents.⁷² When referring to Shihab al-Din and his men, the *Rāso* also frequently uses vernacular variants of the Sanskrit *mleccha* (barbarian), a very widespread term for Muslims from Prithviraj Chauhan's lifetime onward, which mainly served to highlight their cultural "otherness."⁷³ Words denoting demons such as *asura*, which we might surmise were more pejorative, appear far less often.⁷⁴ Those who fought against the *khāns*, *mīrs*, and *mlecchas* in the *Rāso* are frequently called *hindū*, which I would translate as "Indian" in this context. The binary of Hindu and Turk (*turaka*) also figures once in a while, but not as commonly.⁷⁵

In brief, the language of *Prthvīrāj Rāso*'s long recension implies that the Ghurid king and his warriors were worthy enemies who were culturally and linguistically different. Seldom is religious affiliation foregrounded: the use of the word *musalmān* is rare, and there are only a few allusions to Muslim religious practice.⁷⁶ Occasionally, cultural diversity is signified through mention of the armies of the two *dīn(a)* – while we would translate *dīn* as religion today, its semantic range in early modern literature has yet to be carefully studied.⁷⁷ The version of the epic redacted in Mewar is, therefore, not notably antagonistic in the terminology it uses for Shihab al-Din and his warriors. My quick survey of this terminology suggests that there is considerable variance in the exact words used from chapter to chapter even within the same recension, but without much fluctuation in tone. Nor does a cursory comparison of recensions reveal any obvious divergences. That is, there is no easily

⁷² For *mīr(a)* used to designate large groups of Ghurid fighters in the long recension, see Mohansimha *Rāso* 27.18, 27.27, 27.36. *Mīr(a)* also appears in the shortest recension, see v.246 of Bora *Rāso* vol. 2. Khan similarly is used as a collective name in vv. 82 and 84 of the Revatata episode (Chand Bardai, *Prithirāja Rāsau*, trans. Hoernle, pp. 53–4).

⁷³ See list of terms for Muslims found in Sanskrit inscriptions in Chattopadhyaya, *Representing the Other*, pp. 94–7. Examples of the use of *mecha* and *miccha* are Mohansimha *Rāso* 11.13, 13.2, 20.39.

⁷⁴ For example, ibid., 10.56, 12.27, 26.67. When seen from the perspective of the Gujarat king, however, the opposing armies are identified as those of the Chauhan and the sultan (ibid., 20.76).

⁷⁵ For example, ibid., 18.46, 20.46, 61.284.

⁷⁶ For example, *musalmān* appears in ibid., 26.63; the call to prayer (*bāmg*) in ibid., 20.48; the *Quran* (*kurān*) in ibid., 25.8.

⁷⁷ For example, ibid., 10.47 and 22.33.

discernable difference in attitude towards Prithviraj's Muslim opponents in the long recension, associated with the Mewar court, from the shortest and oldest recension, associated with Rajput lineages that joined the Mughal imperial service early on.⁷⁸

Thus, the thesis that *Prithvirāj Rāso* – in either its shorter or longer versions – has a strong anti-Muslim message cannot be sustained on the basis of either its characterizations of Shihab al-Din and his men nor the terminology applied to them. If we turn from an analysis of *how* the Ghurids are represented to *how much* they figure as hostile combatants, however, we find a distinct change over the course of the epic's development. Shihab al-Din Muhammad of Ghur and his troops have a notably bigger presence in the long recension than in the shortest recension. That is, Shihab al-Din also appears more *frequently* as an armed adversary in the long recension, relative to Prithviraj's other main enemies, Jaychand of Kanauj and (Bhola)bhim of Gujarat. The growth in Shihab al-Din's part in the epic has the effect of magnifying the level of menace he represents, and perhaps also the sense of opposition between Rajputs and Muslims.

How and why did this amplification of Shihab al-Din's character as antagonist occur? Already in the short (*laghu*) recension, we find two more episodes involving the sultan than in the shortest (*laghutam*) recension. But in this recension, Prithviraj engages in combat against his three main enemies in more or less the same degree. The situation changes dramatically in the long recension, where instances of armed conflict between Prithviraj and the Sultan far outnumber those between Prithviraj and his other rivals for power: battles with the Ghurids occur in twenty chapters, as compared with six episodes of combat involving Jaychand's Kanauj army and five with the Chalukyas of Gujarat.⁷⁹ Prithviraj's hostility toward Shihab al-Din consequently receives much more attention in this version of the *Rāso* than does his enmity with the kings of Gujarat and Kanauj. In most of the new episodes in the long recension in which he is featured, Shihab al-Din is taken captive on the battlefield but is soon ransomed and returns to his homeland. None of the extra instances of warfare with Shihab al-Din alter or advance the overall plot in any fashion; it is a cyclical rather than linear pattern of development. In effect, the sultan serves as a generic, or default, enemy in the long recension, as a result of the repeated clashes with him and also because Prithviraj's other enemies often call on him for assistance.

⁷⁸ I base my statement on the comparison of several chapters in the shortest (*laghutam*) and long (*brhad*) recensions, but a more systematic analysis would be desirable in order to definitively settle this issue.

⁷⁹ Swami enumerates 23 battles against the Ghurids (*Rāso-sāhitya*, pp. 74–6), whereas my count is 20. I do not include the “Rainsi Battle” episode fought after both the Sultan and Prithviraj were dead, nor the battles in the “Pajjun Chalukya” and “Marriage to Hansavati” episodes because the main opponents were not the Ghurid troops.

If the long recension is no more negative in its overall characterization of Shihab al-Din and other Muslims than shorter versions of the *Rāso*, how do we account for the dramatic increase in the frequency of conflict with the Ghurid armies? One explanation is that these incidents allowed more opportunities for the greatness of Prithviraj's allies and subordinates to be displayed. Of the eight new instances when Shihab al-Din is taken captive – a highly laudatory act that testified to the captor's skill and courage – only once is the person responsible Prithviraj himself. In the other seven cases, the credit and the glory go to one of Prithviraj's elite subordinates: his uncle Kanha, his minister Kaymas, or a *sāmant* lord such as Jait Pramar (Paramar), Pahar Ray Tanwar (Tomar), the son of Pajjun Kachhwaha, and Chamund Ray of the Dahima clan.⁸⁰ Even in shorter versions of the *Rāso*, the valor of Prithviraj's *sāmans* and allies was stressed by having them capture Shihab al-Din on seven other occasions.⁸¹

There is a strongly formulaic character to the long recension's battle episodes, which are essentially showcases for the martial prowess of elite warriors. Inserting more battles against Shihab al-Din did not improve the plot of *Prithvirāj Rāso*, but it may have increased the epic's appeal to the Rajput lineages of the Mughal era who heard their ancestors in action in its verses. The extent of Prithviraj's dependence on his noble allies and subordinates is made evident through the naming of several chapters after individual *sāmans*.⁸² Particularly prominent is Pajjun of the Kachhwaha lineage, later of Amber and Jaipur, after whom four chapters are named in the Mewar redaction of the long recension. Prithviraj also routinely distributed the spoils of war to the noble warrior who played the most conspicuous part in any given Chauhan victory, in another sign of appreciation for his subordinate lords.⁸³

Through the provision of additional episodes featuring elite warriors from a variety of Rajput lineages, longer versions of *Prithvirāj Rāso* thus served as testimony to the greatness of the Rajput community in the past. A desire to extol the greatness of past Rajput warriors explains, more than any other factor, why the number of victories against the Ghurid sultan on the battlefield kept growing as the epic evolved over time. The long-term effect of the proliferation of battle episodes may well have been an intensified antipathy

⁸⁰ Instances of Shihab al-Din's capture that are new to the long recension appear in the Padmavati, Anangpal, Jaitra-ray, and Pahar-ray chapters; also in "On the Rewa's Banks," "Kaymas's Combat," "The Ghagggar Battle," and "Pajjun Fights Patshah."

⁸¹ These occur in "Madho Bhatta's Tale," "Husain's Story," "Salakh's Battle," "Tale of Treasure," and "Battle of Pipa," along with the chapters on Dhir Pundir and Durga Kedar.

⁸² Examples are "Salakh Fights the Patisah," referring to Salakh Pramar (Paramara) and "Battle of Pipa," referring to Pipa Pratihar. These names are provided in the colophons to the various chapters in long-recension manuscripts and appear in the Pandya *Rāso* edition.

⁸³ For example, Mohansimha *Rāso* 10.58, 22.97–98, 26.71, 29.40.

toward the only Muslim enemy of Prithviraj. Shihab al-Din and his men are a more pervasive threat in the long recension than previously: if not actually present in a particular scene, they are always figuratively lurking just off-stage in this version of Prithviraj's life-story. Whatever the intention of Mewar's seventeenth-century redactors may have been, the *Rāso* narrative they fashioned featured the Ghurids of Afghanistan as the unrelenting adversaries of the Chauhans and their Rajput allies.

Violence and the rhetoric of political allegiance

Prithvīrāj Rāso's positive representation of high-ranking warrior subordinates accounts for much of its popularity among the Rajput elite, as James Tod's observations from the early nineteenth century make clear. The long recension, largely formulated at Udaipur between ca. 1635 to 1703, quickly became the dominant form of the epic. It was the culmination of a century-old trend: the adding of more and more episodes highlighting the prowess of warriors other than Prithviraj Chauhan. One hero who received an exceptional amount of attention was the king of Mewar, Samarsi or Samar Singh, who plays a major role in nine of the long recension's sixty-eight chapters and appears in several others.⁸⁴ The martial exploits of Prithviraj's aristocratic *sāmant* warriors, who are constantly in attendance to the king, are also extolled in the long recension's numerous battle scenes. The *sāmans* embody all the best qualities of warriorhood: they combine matchless fighting skills with unsurpassed courage, and, of course, they represent the epitome of *svāmi-dharma* or duty to the overlord.⁸⁵

The concept of obligation to a political superior has a long history among the martial classes of India, and is by no means new or unique to the Mughal era. Yet the rhetorical insistence on *svāmi-dharma* in early modern Rajput literature is unprecedented in its intensity and prevalence, a phenomenon that scholars have yet to appreciate. Norman P. Ziegler has observed that, during the period from the late sixteenth to early eighteenth centuries, Rajput society and polity developed a more defined hierarchy within which all individuals were situated in terms of master-servant relations.⁸⁶ The capacity to mobilize

⁸⁴ The main episodes in which he figures are: "Pritha's Wedding," "Tale of Treasure," "At Devagiri," "Kahrera Battle," "Marriage of Hansavati," "Second Hansi Battle," "Samants Fight Jaychand," "Samarsi Fights Jaychand," and "The Great Battle."

⁸⁵ The term *sāmi* appears in some Rajasthani and Brajbhasha texts, rather than the Sanskrit *svāmi*. In *Prithvīrāj Rāso*, while *sāmi* is not unknown, *svāmi-dhramma* is the most common form of the phrase.

⁸⁶ Norman P. Ziegler, "Action, Power and Service in Rajasthani Culture: A Social History of the Rajputs of Middle Period Rajasthan" (PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 1973), pp. 147–8, 160–1.

the support not only of their kinsmen but also of other warriors was critical to the ambitions of Rajput nobles in a world where political power was becoming more centralized.⁸⁷ The allegiance of elite fighters – who brought their own troops along with them – was needed in order to maintain a position of leadership against internal challenges and to supply contingents for the expansionist Mughal empire's armies. Because it established their right to command the military labor of other men, *svāmi-dharma* was clearly an ideological tool in the effort of Rajput kings to consolidate their authority over subordinate chiefs and warriors.

The full import of *svāmi-dharma* is not immediately apparent in *Prthvirāj Rāso*, where most references to it are brief. Warriors are praised for being engrossed in *svāmi-dharma*,⁸⁸ or they are warned that forsaking *svāmi-dharma* will lead them to hell,⁸⁹ whereas observing it will result in liberation.⁹⁰ When more of a context is provided for the term, it becomes evident that *svāmi-dharma* is primarily about fighting on behalf of the master. The typical translation of *svāmi-dharma* as “loyalty (or fidelity) to the lord” is somewhat misleading, because it was ultimately about a warrior’s obligation to die in battle, thereby discharging his debt to the overlord.⁹¹ Anyone refusing to do that, especially if it meant leaving the master behind on the battlefield, was considered entirely contemptible. Conversely, dying while fighting alongside one’s lord was particularly commendable.⁹² Those who went against the overlord’s wishes were labeled *svāmi-drohī* (*sām-doha*) or traitor, as happened to Pavas Pundir, a young member of a prominent warrior family, who had disgraced himself by looting a conquered town. His reputation was redeemed when he killed an enemy of the king in battle, and Prithviraj subsequently honored him for his observance of *svāmi-dharma*.⁹³ If a chief rejected a demand to perform service, the overlords would most likely exact revenge in the form of an armed attack, as Mungal of Mewat found out to his regret in the *Rāso*.⁹⁴

The case of *sāmant* Niddur Ray Rathor underscores the point that a warrior’s duty to the overlord should supersede any other obligation. Niddur Ray is called a brother (meaning a close male kin) of Prithviraj’s enemy Jaychand, whom the *Rāso* identifies as a member of the Rathor clan that was widespread in western Rajasthan during the Mughal era. When Niddur Ray encountered Jaychand’s brother Virchand in battle, it could not be considered a crime against relatives (*bandhu dos*), the *Rāso* reassures us, for Niddur Ray’s honor

⁸⁷ On military service to a Rajput lord, I consulted Richard D. Saran, “Aspects of Military Retainership in Seventeenth-century Marvar, Rajasthan: Pt. 1 Cākars, Gair Cākars, and Cīndhars,” unpublished manuscript.

⁸⁸ For example, Mohansimha *Rāso* 11.32 and 37.8. ⁸⁹ Ibid., 15.20–21.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 29.15 & 31.21. ⁹¹ Ibid., 61.300. ⁹² Ibid., 50.56. ⁹³ Ibid., 61.270–272.

⁹⁴ Ibid., chaps. 7 and 15, especially 7.3, 15.3, and 15.7.

lay in upholding *svāmi-dharma*.⁹⁵ Kinship loyalties had been paramount in an earlier age, and *gotra-hatyā* or the killing of a kinsman has been described as “a heavy sin to be atoned for by pilgrimage or charity.”⁹⁶ By the late seventeenth- or early eighteenth-century present of *Prthvīrāj Rāso*’s long recension, the stress was rather on the military service a warrior owed his lord to the point of death, in return for lands and/or sustenance. Duty to one’s kin was now out-trumped by obligation to the overlord.

The rhetorical stress on *svāmi-dharma* left little recourse for the warrior who was reluctant to lose his life in a hopeless cause, at least in theory. Only once in the entire long recension do any of Prithviraj’s warriors abandon a position, in this case the fort of Hansi. Besieged by Shihab al-Din Muhammad of Ghur and his army, Prithviraj’s high-ranking warriors are literally offered a way out by the enemy. This was the *dharma-dvār*, a small doorway within a larger fort gateway through which a fort’s defenders could safely depart, without fear of attack or retaliation from the besiegers.⁹⁷ “Leaving through the dharma-door” – the option of withdrawing safe from attack – was an actual practice, even if the door was sometimes just metaphorical. It is recorded in Nainsi’s *Mārvāṛ rā Parganām rī Vigat*, composed in the mid seventeenth century, as well as by James Tod in the early nineteenth century.⁹⁸

In the *Rāso* episode of Hansi fort, some of Prithviraj Chauhan’s greatest warriors desert the fort in a panic, after one of them has an enigmatic dream in which a goddess seems to tell him the situation is hopeless. *Prthvīrāj Rāso* describes the warriors who avail themselves of the opportunity to avoid combat as having lost their virtue (*sat*), but it does not condemn them as cowards, even though this is the only time any of Prithviraj’s adherents forsake their posts or retreat from battle. Instead, the epic makes the point that even great men make mistakes, for did not Rama chase the golden deer, Nala abandon his chaste wife Damayanti, and the like.⁹⁹ Those who left the fort are rounded up by their overlord Prithviraj and brought back to Hansi, where they fight bravely and successfully against the sultan’s army, so that their

⁹⁵ Ibid., 23.244. The kinship relation between Niddur (*nīḍdur*) and Virchand, his opponent on the battlefield, is reiterated in 23.261–262.

⁹⁶ Qanungo, *Studies in Rajput History*, p. 75.

⁹⁷ Variants of the term *dharma-dvār* (e.g., *dharma-duāru*) figure in Mohansimha *Rāso* 50.3, 50.13, 50.31.

⁹⁸ Saran and Ziegler, *Mertīyo Rāthors*, 1:134; Tod, *Rajasthan*, p. 1006. Some warriors of the Chauhan lord Kanhadade also resorted to the *dharma* door before the fall of Siwana fort to Khalji forces in the early fourteenth century, according to the text *Kānhaḍade Prabandha* (Dasharatha Sharma, “Life in Rajasthan in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries,” *Journal of Indian History* 38 [1960]: 105). I am grateful to Rick Saran for this reference.

⁹⁹ *Sat* appears in 50.14–15 of Mohansimha *Rāso*, and the mistakes of the great in 50.12; king Prithviraj consoles his subordinates with a list of incidents in the classical epic when heroes were unable to fulfill their duty of protection, as when Sugriva could not defend his wife Tara, in 50.40.

honor is restored. But the epic makes it clear that deserting the fort was less than admirable, for it lavishes extravagant praise on a hero who came out of the fort to confront the enemy, instead of leaving through the *dharma* door; this hero died a glorious, if pointless, death.¹⁰⁰ As Richard Saran and Norman Ziegler note, while it was acceptable for a Rajput to exercise this option, it was not considered entirely honorable.¹⁰¹

Svāmi-dharma helped inculcate young men with martial ideals and dissuaded them from retreating or avoiding battle altogether. It was not the only cultural incentive for fighting, for the idea that warriors gained great rewards from dying in battle had a long history in India, going back to ancient times. *Svāmi-dharma* appears to be a newer notion than the warrior heaven and is widespread in Rajput literature of the Mughal period. We find *svāmi-dharma* being celebrated as the epitome of the martial sentiment (*vīra-rasa*) in a text composed in Mewar in 1589, for instance, confirming that military service was the core duty owed to the lord.¹⁰² It becomes a central value in the renowned chronicle of Rajasthan, Nainsi's *Khyāt*, dating to the mid seventeenth century.¹⁰³

It was not always the case in early modern India that a king needed to inflame his men with more warlike attitudes; instead, it was sometimes necessary to curb their aggressive instincts. *Svāmi-dharma* could also, in other words, be yoked to the project of royal control over the use of force. A *Rāso* story involving Prithviraj and his father's brother, Kanha Chauhan, illustrates this most aptly.¹⁰⁴ The episode begins with seven brothers from the Chalukya royal family, cousins to king Bholabhim of Gujarat, who were model warrior subordinates – powerful, brave, and obedient. The *Rāso* tells us that “only after getting the command from their master did they fall upon their enemies, the way a falcon swoops down on a partridge.”¹⁰⁵ It is a revealing simile, for the falcon is a bird of prey trained to pursue game under the discipline of its human master. Although they were noted for their dedication to the king – they are said to be engrossed in *svāmi dharma*¹⁰⁶ – the brothers caused trouble by raiding the countryside. Then two of the brothers killed the king’s favorite

¹⁰⁰ The hero was Devkarn (or Devraj) Pramar, who said that anyone who left through the dharma-door could not be called the son of his father (ibid., 50.13, see also 50.19–24).

¹⁰¹ Saran & Ziegler, *Mertiyo Rāthors*, 1:134–35 n433.

¹⁰² This is found in Hemratan's text *Gorā Bādala Padmīnī Caupāī* (Sreenivasan, *Many Lives of a Rajput Queen*, pp. 85–9, 209). Sreenivasan is one of the few scholars who have commented on the growing importance of *svāmi-dharma*.

¹⁰³ Ziegler, “Action, Power and Service in Rajasthani Culture,” p. 71.

¹⁰⁴ “Kanha Patī” is partially narrated in Tod’s *Travels in Western India*, 194–6; and in John Beames, “The Prithviraja Rasau of Kavi Chand Bardai: Extract from the Kanhapatti Prastav–Fifth Book,” *Indian Antiquary* (1873): 22–3.

¹⁰⁵ Mohansimha *Rāso* 19.3. ¹⁰⁶ *Svāmi-dhramma ratte*, ibid., 19.8.

elephant while hunting in the woods one day, thereby incurring the king's great displeasure.

Hearing about the incident, the young prince Prithviraj invited the brothers to stay at his court, where he showered them with horses, clothing, and other tokens of his favor. But one day Prithviraj was sitting with several of his *sāmant* subordinates and the seven Chalukya brothers, listening to rousing tales of past battles. Stirred by martial emotion, the eldest Chalukya – Pratapsi – put his hand to his moustache,¹⁰⁷ an act witnessed by Kanha Chauhan, Prithviraj's uncle. Rajput culture strongly associated facial hair with a man's fitness to be a warrior, an association reinforced by the *Rāso* in its repeated declarations that those who let their masters down in battles were unworthy of having moustaches.¹⁰⁸ A moustache was virility made tangible, differentiating boys from men. Since stroking one's moustache signified a heightened state of masculinity, a kind of hyped up belligerence aimed at the world at large, doing so in public in front of a superior could be interpreted as an act of defiance.¹⁰⁹

To return to the *Rāso* narrative: Kanha Chauhan, thus seeing Chalukya Pratapsi put his hand to his moustache, took it as an insult and fell into a murderous rage. He slew the Chalukya prince with his sword and a bloody melee ensued, as first the six other Chalukya princes, and then their personal retinue, entered the fray against Kanha and other Chauhan subordinates. The gory fighting went on for hours, until all the Chalukyas and their warriors were annihilated. Prithviraj, who was still a child, had removed himself from the assembly when the violence began and was furious with Kanha in the aftermath. He reproached Kanha for his unjustified killing of men who had come to Ajmer as honored guests. By his impulsive act, Kanha could very well have initiated a *vair* or vendetta between the Chauhans and the Chalukyas, because avenging the murder of a close relative was considered essential for maintenance of Rajput honor.¹¹⁰ Therefore, when Kanha explained that to him the sight of another man touching his moustache was unbearable, Prithviraj insisted that Kanha always wear a bandage around his eyes from then on, except when on the battlefield or in the women's quarters.¹¹¹

A more explicit symbol of restraint could hardly be found than this blindfold, which was meant to contain the impetuous, erratic violence of a macho warrior. Just as a falcon had to be hooded until the master needed its predatory

¹⁰⁷ I am following Tod's reading of the passage here (*Travels in Western India*, p. 195). This verse is among several omitted from Mohansimha *Rāso*; it is 5.39 in Pandya *Rāso*.

¹⁰⁸ For example, Mohansimha *Rāso* 15.21 and 29.21.

¹⁰⁹ Tod, *Travels in Western India*, p. 195.

¹¹⁰ Qanungo, *Studies in Rajput History*, pp. 68–79; Norman P. Ziegler, "Some Notes on Rajput Loyalties During the Mughal Period," in *Kingship and Authority in South Asia*, ed. J. F. Richards (Madison: South Asian Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1978), p. 232.

¹¹¹ Mohansimha *Rāso* 19.44–47.

power to be unleashed, so too did Kanha Chauhan require the blindfold in order to stifle his natural instincts.¹¹² Violence itself was not the problem, but rather the use of it in an impulsive and unauthorized fashion. Violence needed to be harnessed to the wishes of the overlord, and not exercised independently at the whim of an individual warrior. The young Prithviraj, therefore, chastised his uncle Kanha and, by curbing his ability to fight, brought Kanha firmly under royal control. This was the very essence of *svāmi-dharma*: a willingness to fight when and where the master, and only the master, desired. Making sure that the point was not missed, the episode has two iterations of the inappropriate use of violence – first by the Chalukya brothers when they raided the countryside and killed their king's elephant, and second, by Kanha, when he slew them.¹¹³ And so the Chalukya brothers, because of their failure to maintain *svāmi dharma* by restraining their violent impulses, ultimately come to an unhappy end.¹¹⁴

The balance of power between kings and their chiefs was an issue of considerable concern at the Mewar court during the decades when the long recension of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* was being redacted. The kingdom had lost much territory over the course of its long struggle against Mughal domination, some of it to newly independent chiefs. Regaining this territory was a central preoccupation with the kings of Mewar throughout the seventeenth century. After Maharana Amar Singh I submitted to the Mughals in 1615, the Sisodiya dynasty also made it more difficult for their warrior chiefs to build up an independent power base, by adopting the Mughal practice of transferring *jāgīrs* – that is, periodically rotating the lands assigned to warriors in compensation for their military service.¹¹⁵ In addition to the desire to strengthen the position of royalty, the increasing size of armies must have been another factor in the growing emphasis on self-control on the part of warriors. With larger numbers of fighters coming together on military campaigns, greater coordination of action was necessary and this required more discipline on the part of the leaders of the various contingents.¹¹⁶

¹¹² I thank Sumit Guha and Michael Bednar for pointing out this analogy to me.

¹¹³ Another *sāmant*, the mighty Chamund-ray, is also disciplined by Prithviraj for his use of violence. After Chamund-ray killed a royal elephant that was causing damage, he was forced to wear iron fetters and observe a form of house arrest. Prithviraj freed him immediately before the final battle, where he died and thereby discharged his debts to his parents and master (Mohansimha *Rāso* 55.4–8, 61.81–121, 61.300).

¹¹⁴ This episode is said to be the cause of the enmity that soon led to the death of Prithviraj's father, Someshvar, in battle against king Bholabhim, and to several subsequent armed conflicts between the Chauhans and the Chalukyas.

¹¹⁵ Hooja, *History of Rajasthan*, pp. 614–15, 697.

¹¹⁶ For a fascinating discussion of military expansion among North Indian ascetics, see Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics*, pp. 59–103. He observes growth in both the numbers and weaponry of ascetic armies during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Although ultimately most beneficial to the early modern rulers who promoted it vigorously, *svāmi-dharma* was a cultural value that could also be deployed to commend those who served rulers with appropriate, virtuous behavior. This is not to deny the *Rāso*'s insistence on an overlord's right to regulate the use of force by his underlings. Still, the *Rāso* and other Rajput texts provided a venue for the valorization of numerous warrior lineages within the rubric of *svāmi-dharma*. In an astute analysis of early modern narratives from Mewar about the legendary queen Padmini, Ramya Sreenivasan has shown how different texts varied in their treatment of the fourteenth-century siege of Chittor. Royally sponsored texts focused on the role of the king's sons in defending the fort, making them the heroes of the story. Texts composed by Jain authors, presumably for patrons who were chiefs or nobles, cast two chiefs as the main actors in the narrative. In these versions, it was the chiefs who saved the kingdom through their unwavering commitment to *svāmi-dharma*, in spite of an earlier quarrel with the king.¹¹⁷ Irrespective of the caliber of an individual ruler, therefore, the righteous performance of one's duty toward him could elevate the reputation of a military servant to the highest levels.

Unlike the texts described by Sreenivasan, which upheld either the royal family or their nobles, *Prthvīrāj Rāso* was able to depict both its king and his high-ranking warriors in a positive light. The poetic effort expended on lauding the excellence of the various *sāmans* meant that the *Rāso* was relevant not only for a single royal lineage, as was the case with most dynastic histories, but rather for an entire set of warrior lineages. *Prthvīrāj Rāso* was thus unusual among early modern texts in its ability to address both dynastic and chiefly concerns. Its promotion of *svāmi-dharma* is a case in point: this is an ethical value that served the interests of Rajput rulers but could also be a source of pride for military subordinates. By emphasizing that a warrior's obligations to his lord were larger than, and extended beyond, his responsibilities to family and kin, *svāmi-dharma* also helped lay the foundation for the modern conception of selfless service to one's country, which could similarly be expressed through martial means. It was a discourse that contributed to the mobilization of large-scale identities, a sentiment that we can designate proto-patriotic in essence.¹¹⁸ In addition to encouraging proto-patriotic sentiments, *svāmi-dharma* also foreshadows the future nation-state's claim to exclusive authority over the application of force.

¹¹⁷ Sreenivasan, *Many Lives of a Rajput Queen*, pp. 65–92.

¹¹⁸ *Svāmi-dharma* might therefore be added to the political ideals that fostered patriotic sentiments in C. A. Bayly's formulation ("Patriotism and Political Ethics in Indian History," in *Origins of Nationality in South Asia* [Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998], pp. 11–18).

Conclusion

Even in its shorter versions, the *Rāso* epic provides us with a vision of the past that is far more sweeping in its scope than the more common dynastic narrative, whose perspective is limited to local events and personalities. The *Rāso*'s action spans much of northwestern India, from Kanauj to Delhi to Gujarat; its numerous, named, actors are drawn from an array of families, kingdoms, and regions. Virtually all the characters are from elite martial backgrounds, but in the shortest recension they come primarily from northern and western Rajasthan. Only in the longer versions of the Kanauj events, do we witness the participation, for the first time, of the Hada Chauhans of Bundi and Kota, as well as two minor Chauhan families (of Bedla and Kotharia) who were in service to the Sisodiya king of Mewar. The Mewar kings are conspicuously absent from the shortest recension and only mentioned in passing in the short version of *Prithvirāj Rāso*.¹¹⁹ That no direct forefather of Mewar's royal dynasty is included, in any recension, among Prithviraj's band of 100 *sāmans* – and, therefore, did not participate in the events surrounding the abduction of Samyogita, the epic's central heroic episode – is persuasive evidence that the epic's roots lie outside Mewar.

It may have been inconceivable to the Mughal-era rulers of Mewar that their forerunners did not participate in Prithviraj's epic conflict with Shihab al-Din Muhammad of Ghur. At any rate, the main redactors of the long recension, who were based at the seventeenth-century Mewar court, had every incentive to cast Samar Singh as Prithviraj's most powerful and most essential ally. Samar Singh represented Mewar in the heroic past imagined by the *Rāso*, a past that was populated by many of the same Rajput lineages as the Mughal present. Thus, Prithviraj's story was not just the story of a single Rajput hero but, as I argued in Chapter 4, the history of the entire elite Rajput community. For a Mewar court trying to assert its paramount status in the present time, a proven leadership role among Rajputs in their shared past was a requisite. *Prithvirāj Rāso*'s long recension demonstrated – to the world of elite warriors in the early modern era – that the ruling lineage of Mewar had long shaped Rajput history in significant ways, thereby testifying for posterity to its valor, wisdom, and superiority.

Prithvirāj Rāso and other “histories” produced at Mewar provided the Sisodiya kings an opportunity to promote their views on kingship, as well as

¹¹⁹ A Guhila *sāmant* does die during the Kanauj episode, but no attempt is ever made to connect the Sisodiya kings of Mewar with this man. The term Guhila designates a large and amorphous Rajput clan with numerous branches; the Sisodiyas claim descent from a junior branch of the royal Guhila Rawals who ruled Chittor in the thirteenth century (Talbot, “Mewar Court’s Construction of History,” pp. 16–20).

on the past. Particularly notable is the ideology of *svāmi dharma*, or the warrior's duty to put his overlord's needs above his own. Neither the willingness to die in combat nor a sense of obligation to a political superior were new sentiments, of course. But there is a new emphasis in Rajput literature in the seventeenth century on the authority of a lord over his fighting men and, conversely, on the devotion that military servants should display toward their masters. It is noteworthy that the exact phrase never figures in the shortest recension of *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, where devotion to the overlord is only inculcated two or three times.¹²⁰ Within the *Rāso* tradition, the insistence on *svāmi-dharma* is principally a feature of the long recension.

Although the *Rāso*'s model of political relations was definitely hierarchical, it also acknowledged the value of Prithviraj's aristocratic subordinates. In order to exhibit their daring exploits and unwavering courage for public acclaim, more and more battle episodes were added to the epic over time, and the opponent was usually Shihab al-Din of Ghur. Because he was so often the enemy against whom Prithviraj's brave Rajputs fought in the long recension, Shihab al-Din – and possibly, by extension, all Muslim kings – came to represent the face of the foe. From at least the middle of the seventeenth century, the Sisodiya dynasty of Mewar made a point of emphasizing their opposition to the Mughals both militarily and culturally.¹²¹ Ramya Sreenivasan concludes, therefore, that "the official perspective in Mewar increasingly posited its anti-Mughal politics as defense of a besieged 'hindu dharma' against Muslim aggression, particularly from the later seventeenth century onward."¹²² Some reflection of that may be observed in the redaction of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* coming out of the Mewar court, finalized during the reign of Amar Singh II, in its magnification of the conflict between Chauhan and Ghurid.

That Amar Singh's interest in Prithviraj Chauhan was more than just a monarch's routine support for literature is suggested by the inscribed portrait of the Maharana shown in Figure 5.2. In this painting from ca. 1700, a Rajput lord sits and smokes a hookah on a moonlit marble terrace, while musicians play on both sides of a small fountain in the foreground.¹²³ An attendant waves a peacock fan to the left of the lord, while seated on the right are two men and a

¹²⁰ For example, Bora *Rāso*, vol. 2, vv.242 and 260.

¹²¹ Sadashiva's *Rājaratnākara* (1.15) describes Mewar as a land free from the depredations (*upadrava*) of Muslims (*yavana*).

¹²² Sreenivasan, *Many Lives of a Rajput Queen*, p. 111.

¹²³ This painting has been published as Fig. 11 in Talbot, "Mewar Court's Construction of History," p. 27. It also appears in: Andrew Topsfield, *Paintings from Rajasthan in the National Gallery of Victoria* (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1980), Fig. 55 on p. 60; and Andrew Topsfield, *Court Painting at Udaipur: Art under the Patronage of the Maharanas of Mewar* (Zurich: Eberhard Fischer, 2001), Fig. 100 on p. 125.



Figure 5.2. Maharana Amar Singh II listening to music at night c.1700.
Udaipur, Rajasthan, India; opaque water colour and gold paint on paper; 36.3
× 23.3 cm (image) 39.2 × 26.1 cm (sheet); National Gallery of Victoria,
Melbourne; Felton Bequest, 1980

boy with their hands together in respectful salutation. Although we can identify the lord in question as Amar Singh II, whose face is familiar to scholars from numerous other works, an inscription on the back of this painting informs us otherwise. It names the central figure as the king of Delhi, Prithviraj Chauhan.¹²⁴ Prithviraj is said to be seated in his summerhouse with son Prince Renasi (or Rainasi), as well as his father's brother Kanha and (his subordinate) Pamari Ray. There is nothing specific in the scene to associate it with Prithviraj, yet someone at the Mewar court chose to label the picture of their own ruler as an image of the Chauhan king. According to Molly Aitken, the inscriptions "reiterate what must have been regarded as the salient content of contextual portraits" made in Mewar from Amar Singh's reign onward.¹²⁵ Prithviraj Chauhan's reputation was evidently sufficiently celebrated by 1700 that equating Amar Singh with him was considered a flattery.

We might dismiss the correspondence drawn between Maharana Amar Singh and Prithviraj Chauhan as a mere fluke, a momentary fancy on the part of some courtier perhaps, if not the king himself. Amar Singh II was visually conflated with Prithviraj Chauhan on yet another occasion, however – this second painting shows the Mewar king on horseback in the rain, while several attendants and musicians surround him on foot. Here too, an inscription on the back declares the likeness of Amar Singh to be in fact the Chauhan hero.¹²⁶ Maharana Amar Singh's tribute to Prithviraj Chauhan through the medium of portraiture in his own guise was an unusual gesture, although it was to be replicated by at least one other Rajput king.¹²⁷

By 1700 or thereabouts, when Maharana Amar Singh II had his portrait equated with that of the twelfth-century Prithviraj Chauhan, the Sisodiya dynasty had spent decades in the struggle to increase the kingdom's territories and elevate its reputation. Perhaps Amar Singh wished to suggest by means of these paintings that he resembled the Chauhan king in being paramount among all Rajput lords of his age. Or perhaps he wanted to replicate Prithviraj's ability to bring together a large coalition of elite Rajput warriors. In any case, it is certain that the Sisodiya kings wished to control the construction of a broader history of the Rajput community, leading to the production of the 1703 manuscript that became the standard version of the *Rāso* epic. Amar Singh himself was to exhibit both the qualities of leadership and of solidarity in relation to other Rajputs, shortly after the death of Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. In 1708, Amar Singh joined a military alliance with the rulers Ajit Singh of Marwar and Jai Singh II of Amber, both of whom had been ousted from power by

¹²⁴ For the text of the inscription and a loose translation, see Topsfield, *Paintings from Rajasthan*, p. 60.

¹²⁵ Aitken, *Intelligence of Tradition*, p. 120.

¹²⁶ Topsfield, *Court Painting at Udaipur*, pp. 123–4 and Fig. 95.

¹²⁷ See Figure 6.1.

Aurangzeb's successor. With Amar Singh's aid, these Rathor and Kachhwaha lords secured their thrones, while Mewar regained control over some peripheral areas. In recognition of Mewar's dominant position, Jai Singh accepted Amar Singh's daughter in marriage and promised that the Amber throne would pass to her offspring.¹²⁸ The heroic past as imagined in the long recension's *Prthvīrāj Rāso* – full of conflict, intrigue, and steadfast allies – thus had its counterpart in its own present time.

Mewar's appropriation of the *Rāso* was another factor in the epic's continuing popularity and growing circulation, along with the imaginings of Delhi as Prithviraj's capital and the casting of his *sāmant* warlords as ancestral Rajputs. The Mewar connection was to prove especially consequential in the nineteenth century among those who sought to recover the heroic histories of pre-Muslim or non-Muslim India. As we will see in Chapter 6, the seventeenth-century campaign to publicize the greatness of Mewar's warriors and their Sisodiya kings continued to bear fruit well into the colonial period, mediated by Colonel James Tod and others. Firmly embedded in the Mewar perspective on the Rajput past, Prithviraj Chauhan and his epic were carried forward into a new age.

¹²⁸ Hooja, *History of Rajasthan*, pp. 666–7, 697–8.

6 Validating *Prthvīrāj Rāso* in colonial India, 1820s–1870s

I have in contemplation to give to the public a few of the sixty-nine books of the poems of Chand, the last great bard of the Last Hindu emperor of India, Prithviraja. They are entirely heroic: each book a relation of one of the exploits of the prince, the first warrior of his time

James Tod, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*¹

Introduction: James Tod and the last Hindu emperor

“Last Hindu emperor” is a label that has been widely applied to Prithviraj Chauhan in modern times, not only in books but also in public memorials such as the bronze statue of the king erected at Ajmer in 1996. The phrase can be traced back directly to James Tod, who used it in the quote above from *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* and in many other passages. Tod was not entirely original in ascribing a special status to Prithviraj, for Indo-Persian historiography clearly regarded the Ghurid victory over him as a watershed event leading to the sovereignty of Muslims over India. Prithviraj, in this reckoning, represented the pre-Islamic past of India that had been superseded by its Islamic rulers. This conception is apparent in Abu al-Fazl’s *Ā’īn-i Akbarī* account of Prithviraj, due to whose defeat “the choicest portion of Hindustan passed into the hands” of the Ghurid leader Shihab al-Din Muhammad.² A Persian work produced outside the courtly context, the Sufi hagiography *Akhbār al-Akhyār* (1618 CE), exhibits a similar view of Prithviraj Chauhan when it reports that “it was from him that the Muslims seized the domain of Hindustan.”³ That is, while Indo-Persian texts had previously interpreted the beginning of Muslim rule in the subcontinent as marking a new era in its history, they did not routinely designate Prithviraj as the last Hindu emperor – this distinction belongs to James Tod, who repeatedly used the phrase to describe the Chauhan king. In addition to characterizing Prithviraj Chauhan

¹ Tod, *Rajasthan*, p. 82 n1. ² Translation by Jarrett; Abu al-Fazl, *Ā’īn-i Akbarī*, 2:307.

³ Carl W. Ernst and Bruce B. Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love: The Chishti Order in South Asia and Beyond* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 152.

as the last Hindu emperor, Tod also accepted the *Rāso* as an eyewitness account of Prithviraj's career.

These assumptions on Tod's part were to have long-lasting effects on Indian society's understanding of the Chauhan king. As the first British political agent assigned to any Rajput court, Tod could claim a level of expertise about this elite warrior community and its territories that was unmatched by any other Westerner, all laid out at length in his two volume compendium, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* (originally published in 1829 and 1832). In these early days of colonial knowledge, when British notions about the various peoples and regions of India were still in a formative stage, the assessments of a single individual could have a disproportionately large impact and so it proved to be with James Tod and his views on Prithviraj Chauhan.⁴ Prithviraj's historical significance in popular consciousness still derives from the status of "last Hindu emperor" ascribed to him by Tod almost two hundred years ago, for the Chauhan king often serves today as a symbol of the subcontinent's pre-Islamic past. Tod's belief in *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*'s historicity was also widely adopted for over a half century, although it came under challenge in the 1880s – an issue that will be covered at length in the next chapter. The *Rāso* is even now considered a credible historical document in some quarters, and Tod's opinion has often been cited in support of this stance.

In brief, we cannot analyze the changing meanings and deployments of Prithviraj's life-story over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries without taking James Tod's endorsement of the *Rāso* into consideration. At a time when Orientalist scholars were focusing their attention on texts in the classical languages of Sanskrit and Persian, Tod's lavish praise of the historical merit and cultural value of a vernacular-language epic was unusual. As a consequence of Tod's repeated recourse to the *Rāso* in his massive work on Rajasthan, this "heroic history" was made known to a Western academic world that might otherwise have overlooked it for decades longer. Tod spread awareness of the text in new circles far beyond its earlier reach and helped confirm the *Rāso*'s authenticity as a work of the twelfth century. This point cannot be stressed too much. During the bulk of the nineteenth century, while the colonial knowledge of India was in the process of being constructed, *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* was regarded as a genuine account of the events of Prithviraj Chauhan's life.

In this chapter, I explore how *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* became the dominant narrative on the Chauhan king throughout North India during the nineteenth century, a process that began with James Tod. The prevalence of the *Rāso* in modern times was not a foregone conclusion, for there were competing visions of

⁴ On Tod's general impact on both Western and Indian audiences, see Freitag, *Serving Empire, Serving Nation*, pp. 131–96.

Prithviraj's life being generated elsewhere than in the elite Rajput community of Rajasthan of whom James Tod was so enamored. Even within Rajput circles of the Mughal era, there were numerous variants to the *Rāso* story as well as a major redaction sponsored by the Mewar court, as we have seen; and, outside these circles, we can safely assume the presence of numerous alternative modes of remembering Prithviraj. Many of these other narratives on Prithviraj that were once widespread among different audiences and different localities are difficult to recover, for they have now largely been forgotten. Others I have not remarked on thus far, because of my focus on how today's image of the Chauhan king was formulated or, to put it another way, on tracing the genealogy of the modern-day Prithviraj as a symbolic figure. Yet, it is important to keep in mind that there were always multiple communities of memory, for whom the events and individuals of the past have divergent meanings; consequently, social memory "represents a constantly shifting and fragile consensus, dependent for the form it takes at any given time upon the relative power and interaction of a number of different memory contingents."⁵ In the case of *Prithvirāj Rāso*, Tod's credence in its purported twelfth-century date established the epic as a reliable historical "source" in the estimation of colonial scholars. Subsequent English-language scholarship on India therefore privileged the *Rāso* over alternative ways of thinking about Prithviraj that were embodied in Sufi hagiography as well as in orally transmitted folk traditions.

In elevating *Prithvirāj Rāso* to the status of an authentic historical document, I argue here that Tod and subsequent Western scholars of the epic encouraged its dissemination to areas beyond Rajasthan and among social groups other than Rajput warriors. As the nineteenth century wore on, and the imagined communities of North India grew in size, the *Rāso*'s significance was correspondingly construed in larger terms. Rather than being a rousing narrative that was meaningful primarily to the elite martial lineages of Rajputana whose ancestors' deeds were recorded in it, as was the case in the Mughal era, in the colonial period the *Rāso* came to be regarded as a linguistic artifact that was relevant for the entire Hindu population of North India or at least the segment of it who spoke the Hindi language. Its alleged age made it unique among the vernacular texts of North India, which – as I show in this chapter – eventually led to the *Rāso*'s inclusion in the Hindi literary canon.

An expansion in the scale and scope of the audience of a text deemed valuable, such as we witness in the case of the *Rāso*, was one of the most important consequences of the appropriation of indigenous knowledge into the body of colonial knowledge on India. There were also, of course, substantial changes in the contents of the knowledge, as it was filtered through a Western

⁵ Bill Niven and Stefan Berger, "Introduction," in *Writing the History of Memory*, eds. S. Berger and B. Niven (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 11.

epistemic system. What Prithviraj and his epic meant to James Tod or later British people was not at all the same as what they meant to a Rajput noble of the precolonial or early colonial periods. On the other hand, despite the many transformations that occurred in the nineteenth century, earlier conceptions from the *Rāso* epic continued to color the newer meanings of the Chauhan king. Certain *Rāso* scenes, symbols, and associations were reused in colonial India in ways that were different, but that carried with them hues or resonances of older, precolonial interpretations. The new layers of remembering that accrued during the nineteenth century within the site of memory that was Prithviraj Chauhan thus bore the traces of earlier conceptions and symbolic usages.

The infusion of indigenous forms of knowledge was no doubt a result of the central role of Indian intellectuals like Tod's guru, Gyanchandra, who both collected and interpreted information for the sake of their Western patrons.⁶ Indeed, much of what Tod narrated as history in *Rajasthan* was the elite Rajput view of their own past, as formulated at Mewar between the mid-seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries. While Tod's love of Udaipur has frequently been noted by scholars, the extent to which the Udaipur court's historiography influenced his views has received far less attention.⁷ The rendition of Prithviraj's biography that Tod, and subsequently other British scholar-officials, propagated throughout the northern part of the subcontinent was based on a distinctively Mewari version: the long-recension epic text that had been produced at the instigation of the Udaipur court. When Tod wrote about the *Rāso* in his *Rajasthan*, therefore, he was promoting a particular indigenous understanding of Prithviraj Chauhan and, by extension, of Rajput history – a historical imaginary that was specific to the area of Mewar.

While Tod may have introduced the figure of Prithviraj to the world of modern scholarship, the significance of the Chauhan king continued to develop and diversify throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The transmutation of earlier indigenous knowledge into an authoritative body of Western scholarship on India was not a straightforward nor finished process, but rather a series of complex entanglements that played out in a variety of ways.⁸ It involved a diverse array of actors, a multiplicity of encounters, and differing degrees of cultural dialogue. Particularly salient for this study is the fact that all forms of knowledge have an “afterlife” of “implementation,

⁶ Gyanchandra's role resembles that of the South Indian scholars who worked for Colin Mackenzie in the early nineteenth century; see Phillip B. Wagoner, “Precolonial Intellectuals and the Production of Colonial Knowledge,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45, no. 4 (October 2003): 783–814; and Rama Mantena, *The Origins of Modern Historiography in India: Antiquarianism and Philology, 1780–1880* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012).

⁷ For more on this topic, see Talbot, “Mewar Court's Construction of History.”

⁸ See Peabody, *Hindu Kingship and Polity*, especially pp. 168–70.

reception, and transmission” that follows their initial production, as Indra Sengupta and Daud Ali have pointed out.⁹ Recent scholarship on India has tended to focus on the formation of colonial knowledge, with little consideration of how that knowledge was used, passed on, and transformed in subsequent years. Instead, here I trace the ways in which the meanings and uses of Prithviraj continued to be reformulated throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This chapter considers the period from the early 1820s through the 1870s, during which time *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* was accorded the status of authentic historical source by colonial scholarship. The following chapter will explore the divergent and often conflicting understandings and deployments of the *Rāso* that emerged from the 1880s to the 1940s, as the epic’s historicity came under challenge in an era of growing nationalist sentiment.

From bardic to colonial knowledge with Tod

References to Prithviraj and the epic commemorating his deeds abound in Tod’s *Rajasthan*, revealing the importance of the Chauhan king in his rendition of the Rajput past.¹⁰ Prithviraj is explicitly named at least ninety times and referred to indirectly on another dozen occasions; the poet Chand is similarly cited by name in seventy-five instances. It is surprising that Tod never presents his life-story in full, considering the frequent allusions to the Chauhan king. This omission may be due to Tod’s intention of publishing parts of the *Rāso* in translation at a future date, although only the translation of the Kanauj episode was in fact completed before his death.¹¹ Whatever his reason for not presenting the full narrative, Tod does allude to certain *Rāso* episodes from time to time. So, for example, we find mention of Prithviraj’s accession to the Delhi throne as the daughter’s son of Anangpal Tomar, as well as Prithviraj’s blinding at the hands of Muhammad Ghuri.¹² The longest extract from *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* in Tod’s *Rajasthan* is a late accretion to the epic cycle: the tale of the war between the Chauhan ruler and the Chandel kingdom, whose greatest champions were the Banaphar heroes Alha and Udal. Known as the Mahoba chapter, this is essentially the Alha epic told from the perspective of Prithviraj’s partisans; I will have more to say about it shortly.

⁹ Sengupta and D. Ali, “Introduction,” pp. 7–8.

¹⁰ Only a few scholars have noted Tod’s extensive use of *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*, notably Mayaram, *Magic of Prithviraj, Padmini and Pratap*, pp. 8–12; Sreenivasan, *Many Lives of a Rajput Queen*, pp. 131, 135–6. Also, Talbot, “Recovering the Heroic History of Rajasthan.”

¹¹ Tod’s translation of one portion of the epic – the abduction of Samyogita – had been circulated among his friends and they published it posthumously (Tod, “Vow of Sunjogta”). In the course of writing *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*, Tod refers several times to his intention to translate the *Rāso* (*Rajasthan*, pp. 82 n1, 1036 n1, 1665 n1).

¹² Ibid., pp. 104, 299, 682.

It was not admiration for Prithviraj as a person nor the attraction of the *Rāso*'s epic narrative that led Tod to mention them so frequently. In most of the many instances where he is invoked in *Rajasthan*, little is said about Prithviraj himself. To be sure, whenever he is described as something more than the "last Hindu emperor," it is always in positive terms: as a "chivalrous" and "illustrious" hero, "the first warrior of his time," and "the model of every Rajput," whose "life was one succession of feats of arms and gallantry."¹³ However, for Tod the main appeal was not Prithviraj per se, but rather the fact that his epic "forms an useful history of the period, and contains much of geographical description."¹⁴ Tod elaborates on this point elsewhere, writing that "the wars of Prithiraj, his alliances, his numerous and powerful tributaries, their abodes and pedigrees, make the works of Chand invaluable as historic and geographical memoranda, besides being treasures in mythology, manners, and the annals of the mind."¹⁵

Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso's status as a unique historical document was its principal attraction for Tod, it would therefore seem. He believed the *Rāso* was the sole work of its type that had survived from the era of increased Islamic incursions into the subcontinent, beginning with Mahmud of Ghazni ca. 1000 and culminating with Shihab al-Din Muhammad Ghuri's victory over Prithviraj in 1192.¹⁶ The epic provided an unparalleled vantage point into a long-gone era, "when Hindu customs were purer" because Muslims had not yet become dominant.¹⁷ In Tod's estimation, "no finer picture of feudal manners exists than the history of Prithwiraja, contained in Chand's poems."¹⁸ The *Rāso* was also a mine of information on the warrior families that had flourished in northern and western India during the twelfth century, many of whom Tod regarded as the predecessors of the elite Rajput lineages of his day. Consequently, the greatest number of references to Prithviraj and Chand Bardai occur in one of the first sections of *Rajasthan*, titled "History of the Rajput Tribes."

James Tod's high regard for *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* as a repository of Rajasthan's ancient history and culture had diverse roots, some that were European in origin while others were more local. An obvious impact on his thinking was Romanticism, the literary movement that from its inception valued the heroic tales and ballads that had traditionally been transmitted by bards.¹⁹ Among the earliest and most influential works of European Romanticism were James Macpherson's publications of the 1760s, which purported to be translations from a third-century Gaelic poet, Ossian. The Ossian poems were thought to

¹³ These quotes come from ibid., pp. 715, 529, 82, 807, and 937, respectively.

¹⁴ Tod, "Translation of a Sanscrit Inscription," p. 146. ¹⁵ Tod, *Rajasthan*, pp. 297–8 n2.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. lvii. ¹⁷ Ibid., p. 723. ¹⁸ Ibid., p. 164.

¹⁹ Freitag, *Serving Empire, Serving Nation*, pp. 114–19.

reflect a true Scots spirit – and history – that had been transmitted down the centuries by bards.²⁰ Bardic poetry and folk ballads were considered by Romanticists of Tod's early nineteenth-century era to be forms of literary expression that were more natural and emotional, and thus more revealing of a people's character, than the formal and artificial styles of classical literature. Tod, therefore, insisted that "bards may be regarded as the primitive historians of mankind," and that the texts produced by Indian bards had historical merit, despite their flaws.²¹ Not coincidentally, when Tod's translation of an episode from *Prithviraj Raso* was published posthumously, the British editor remarked that "its Ossianic character cannot escape notice."²²

While European Romanticism's appreciation of bardic literature must certainly have influenced Tod's estimation of *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, so too did the attitude of the Rajput elite among whom he lived for so many years. *Prthvīrāj Rāso* was a widely copied text during the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, as attested by the survival of about 170 manuscripts that contain all or part of it.²³ Although the distribution of manuscripts suggests that the *Rāso* circulated among Rajputs throughout much of Rajasthan, Tod's heavy reliance on it can be traced more specifically to the royal court in Udaipur, whose patronage of the text over several reigns was described in the last chapter. The Mewar court's fondness for the *Rāso* is underscored by its ample presence in the royal library: in the 1940s, the royal family possessed nine *Prthvīrāj Rāso* manuscripts, out of a total of 958 texts in the Hindi or Rajasthani languages.²⁴ Tod clearly possessed a Mewar version of the epic, for he boasts that "I possess the most complete copy existing" and mentions its sixty-nine books or chapters – the standard number found in the long-recension text produced at Udaipur.²⁵ This is only to be expected, because Tod had visited Udaipur as early as 1806 and subsequently made it his home base during his tenure as Political Agent to the Western Rajput States, from 1818 to 1822.²⁶

²⁰ Dafydd R. Moore argues that the impact of the Ossian poems on English romanticism has been underrated ("The Critical Response to Ossian's Romantic Bequest," in *English Romanticism and the Celtic World*, ed. Gerard Carruthers [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003], pp. 38–53). Michael J. Franklin points out the connection between Orientalism and the late eighteenth-century Welsh renaissance based on bardic literature ("Sir William Jones, the Celtic Revival and the Oriental Renaissance," in *English Romanticism and the Celtic World*, pp. 20–37).

²¹ Quote from Tod, *Rajasthan*, p. lviii; see pp. lviii–lx for Tod's discussion of the issue.

²² Tod, "Vow of Sunjogta," p. 101.

²³ These figures are based on my own survey of manuscript catalogs.

²⁴ The royal family's *Rāso* manuscripts are listed in M. L. Menariya, *A Catalogue of Manuscripts in the Library of H. H. The Maharana of Udaipur (Mewar)* (Udaipur: Itihas Karyalaya, 1943), pp. 228–9. Only Tulsidas's *Rāmcaritmānas*, Keshavdas's *Rasikpriyā*, and Biharlal's *Satsai* had been collected in greater numbers by the Mewar rulers.

²⁵ Tod, *Rajasthan*, pp. 68 n1 and 207.

²⁶ On Tod's official career, see Freitag, *Serving Empire, Serving Nation*, pp. 51–101.

The daring exploits of the Chauhan king were not only recited in the courtly circles within which Tod moved, but also imagined in visual forms.²⁷ Among the paintings from Udaipur that Tod brought back with him to London is the illustration from a *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* manuscript depicting blood flowing in the streets of Kanauj (Figure 4.1). The fateful scene at Shihab al-Din's court in Ghazni when Prithviraj shot his arrow at the sultan was a particularly popular topic for illustration, as several images from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries attest.²⁸ They show Shihab al-Din – first seated in a balcony high above, and also falling down after being shot – as well as the seven metal gongs Prithviraj was supposedly targeting. Another set of paintings displays Prithviraj from the side, kneeling on the ground with one knee up, holding a bow and arrow, and with a quiver dangling from his waist.²⁹ In one iteration of this image (Figure 6.1), made in the early nineteenth century, the face borne by Prithviraj Chauhan is identical to that of the reigning ruler of Kota, Maharao Kishor Singh; recalling the Mewar king Amar Singh II's similar ascription of his own likeness to the Chauhan king.³⁰ Such portraits of a kneeling Prithviraj, also seen on the cover of this book, invoke the slaying scene more indirectly, through their reference to his famed skill at archery. Rajput acclaim for the *Rāso* thus surely reinforced any Romanticist inclination Tod may have had to regard this bardic product as a fount of ancient knowledge.

The prominence of *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* at the Mewar court was likely the inspiration for Tod to begin studying the epic. In this endeavor, as in most of his studies of Rajasthan's history and culture, he relied heavily on his

²⁷ Molly Aitken notes that the Mewar artist Chokha created images of Prithviraj and Rana Pratap in the first decades of the 1800s that made them look alike, “as if they were manifestations of a single hero,” in a visual appropriation of the Chauhan king into the Sisodiya past (*Intelligence of Tradition*, pp. 239–40).

²⁸ Several visual renditions of Prithviraj slaying Shihab al-Din have been published: one from Devgarh (Fig. 4 in Milo Cleveland Beach, and Rawat Nahar Singh II, *Rajasthani Painters: Bagta & Chokha, Master Artists at Devgarh* [Zurich: Museum Rietberg, 2005], p. 27), another from Dungarpur (Fig. 10 in Talbot, “Mewar Court’s Construction of History,” p. 26), and a third from Baroda (Plate 31 in O. C. Gangoly, *Critical Catalogue of Miniature Paintings in the Baroda Museum* [Baroda: B. L. Mankad, 1961]).

²⁹ Two are from Devgarh: Fig. 156 in Raj Kumar Tandan, *Indian Miniature Painting: 16th through 19th Centuries* (Bangalore: Natesan Publishers, 1982); and the image on this book's cover, previously published as Fig. 54 in Daniel J. Enbohm, *Indian Miniatures: The Ehrenfeld Collection* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1985). This second image has been attributed by Andrew Topsfield to the Mewar artist Chokha, who was active in the early nineteenth century. At least one more similar painting is in a private collection (Topsfield, *Court Painting*, p. 241 n88).

³⁰ This painting is the frontispiece to a *Rāso* manuscript completed in 1826 and donated soon afterwards to the Royal Asiatic Society by Major James Caulfield, Tod's successor as political agent in Kota (Ms. 120, Tod Collection, Royal Asiatic Society, London). The likeness of the portrait to Maharao Kishor Singh of Kota, who commissioned the manuscript along with Maharana Bhim Singh of Mewar, was pointed out by Norbert Peabody (*Hindu Kingship and Polity*, p. 43 n61).



Figure 6.1. Portrait of Prithviraj Chauhan from Kota; photograph courtesy of Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland

foremost assistant, Gyanchandra, a Jain *yati* or lay cleric.³¹ We can get an idea of their method of collaboration by looking at Figure 6.2, an illustration of the two men together that was reproduced in William Crooke's 1920 edition of Tod's *Rajasthan*.³² It shows Gyanchandra at one end of a table, gesticulating with his left hand while his right hand holds a writing implement marking a particular passage in a manuscript. At the other end of the table sits James Tod, busily writing in a large notebook, presumably recording the sense of the passage being explained by Gyanchandra. Discussing his study of the *Rāso* with Gyanchandra, Tod notes in *Rajasthan* that “as he read I rapidly translated about thirty thousand stanzas.”³³ This statement confirms what the painting implies, that Gyanchandra read Indian texts out loud to Tod, who wrote down their gist in English.³⁴ In fact, Tod may have been almost entirely dependent on Gyanchandra in his efforts to comprehend the *Rāso*. This is suggested by several of Tod's notebooks preserved at the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, which contain his draft translations of the *Rāso* all dating from his time in India.³⁵ Since his access to the history of the region was so heavily mediated by local scholars and assistants, it was inevitable that Tod's perspective on Rajput history would bear their imprint.

The most conspicuous result of his Mewar-oriented view of the *Rāso* was the ample praise given to the “wise prince of Chitor,” as Tod calls Samar Singh (or Samarsi), the Mewar ruler whom the *Rāso* casts as the brother-in-law of

³¹ On Gyanchandra, see Talbot, “Mewar Court's Construction of History,” pp. 13–14 and 29; and Lawrence A. Babb, “Tod and Traders,” in *James Tod's Rajasthan: The Historian and His Collection*, ed. Giles Tillotson (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2007), pp. 112–14.

³² William Crooke, “Preface by the Editor,” in Tod, *Rajasthan*, p. xiii. Discovered in the Udaipur area in the early twentieth century, the whereabouts of this painting are no longer known. See Henry Cousens, “The Late Lieutenant-Colonel James Tod,” *Annual Report for 1907–8*, Calcutta, 1911, p. 222, for the first mention of this painting, generally believed to be the work of the artist Ghasi, who was employed by Tod.

³³ Tod, *Rajasthan*, pp. 297–8 n2.

³⁴ Additional support for this comes from Tod's comment that “I had read to me a great part of the works of the bard” (“Comments on an Inscription upon Marble, at Madhucarghar,” *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland*, vol. 1 pt. 2 [1827]: 217).

³⁵ I am indebted to Jason Freitag for alerting me to the existence of these materials. The draft translations are contained in vols. 1 and 2 of Tod's notebooks, the first of which bears the annotation, “Udaipur, April 1822” and the second “Baroda, October 1822.” *Travels in Western India*, a posthumously published book of Tod's journal entries, makes it clear that Gyanchandra accompanied Tod on his final journey from Udaipur to Baroda in the summer of 1822; in Baroda the two men said their farewells (Tod, *Travels in Western India*, pp. 444–5). Tod subsequently went to Bombay and departed for England in February 1823. Also at the Royal Asiatic Society are some loose papers that were published posthumously by Tod's friends under the title “The Vow of Sunjogta.” These pages in Tod's handwriting bear a close resemblance to the draft translation of the Kanauj episode that he had prepared with Gyanchandra's help shortly before he left India. The fact that Tod did no more than slightly revise the wording of his translation afterward suggests that he was unable to read the text on his own, even if he could manage to converse in the spoken languages of Rajasthan.



Figure 6.2. James Tod reading texts with Gyanchandra, attributed to Ghāsi, ca. 1820

Prithviraj Chauhan.³⁶ Samar Singh's reign was a milestone, in Tod's estimation, for it placed Mewar in the midst of events that were critical "not only in the history of Mewar, but to the whole Hindu race; when the diadem of sovereignty was torn from the brow of the Hindu to adorn that of the Tatar."³⁷ Tod thought Samar Singh to be so exceptional that he merited comparison with the Homeric hero Odysseus (Ulysses in Latin), who was renowned for his cleverness, diplomatic skills, and other virtues. Indeed, as Tod explains, "had Prithiraj listened to the counsel of the Ulysses of the Hindus (in which light Samarsi was regarded by friend and foe), the Islamite never would have been lord of Hindustan. But the indomitable courage and enthusiastic enterprise of Prithiraj sunk them all."³⁸

Occasional explicit comments by Tod on local attitudes toward *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* help us understand why it remained important to the Rajput society of the early nineteenth century. Evidence like this concerning the reception of a text by a local audience on the cusp of the colonial era is rare, making Tod's observations even more valuable. What the *Rāso* meant to Rajputs is described by Tod in the following passage:

In this, every noble family of India can trace some of his ancestry, amidst the foes or warriors of Pr̥thwīrāja: it becomes accordingly the grand volume of faith and knowledge, in every Rājput's hands; for he amongst them, who cannot quote Chand on occasion, must be a dolt. The poem is the authority for every action of his life; and from which he may glean passages applicable to every transaction.³⁹

All Rajputs were expected to exhibit some familiarity with the epic, according to Tod, since it was considered an authoritative text that provided guidance on proper behavior. The main reason Rajputs revered the *Rāso*, however, was because it was considered a history of their own community. Consequently, Tod treated the *epic* as a detailed historical record of the elite Rajput lineages with whom he was interacting in early nineteenth-century Rajasthan. Whenever possible, therefore, he sought to identify the various characters appearing in the epic as the forefathers of the warrior families that had flourished in the Mughal period and continued to have a presence into his era.⁴⁰

Tod's acceptance of the epic as historical fact enabled him to cast the Rajputs of his day as members of a warrior elite that had persisted, largely unchanging, for hundreds of years. While certain Rajput families may have come and gone since the twelfth century, others had survived down to the present and thus possessed, in Tod's eyes, an unquestionable right to sovereignty in the Rajasthan region. The legitimacy of Rajput claims to kingship is

³⁶ Tod, *Rajasthan*, p. 302. ³⁷ Ibid., p. 281. ³⁸ Ibid., p. 1801.

³⁹ Tod, "Translation of a Sanscrit Inscription," p. 146.

⁴⁰ Tod, *Rajasthan*, p. 133 (Catti [Kathi] "tribe"), p. 136 (Jhalas), and p. 138 (Bhattis, also pp. 299, 1252–3), for example.

stressed repeatedly by Tod, who asserts: “If we compare the antiquity and illustrious descent of the dynasties which have ruled, and some which continue to rule, the small sovereignties of Rajasthan, with many of celebrity in Europe, superiority will often attach to the Rajput.”⁴¹ Moreover, Tod believed that the heroic traits exhibited during the lifetime of Prithviraj were the true qualities inherent in every Rajput, obscured though they might be in the early nineteenth century as a result of the depredations of the Marathas and Mughals. Hence, *Prīthvīrāj Rāso* attested not only to the antiquity of the Rajput nation, but also to its superior character.

This interpretation of the *Rāso* and of Rajput history suited Tod’s own political objectives.⁴² As a British political officer, Tod was charged with the task of pacifying the territory of Rajasthan and making it productive. He believed this could be accomplished by restoring the various Rajput kingdoms to their ancient, pristine condition; that is, the way they had been before the vast changes wrought by “Mahratta cunning, engrafted on Muhammadan intolerance.”⁴³ The strong kings, loyal vassals, and long-standing rights to landed income that Tod envisioned in the Rajput past and sought to revive in the present would, not coincidentally, help bring political stability and economic prosperity to this territory on the margins of the East India Company’s ever expanding domain. *Prīthvīrāj Rāso* and similar texts assisted Tod in this goal by “proving” that the Rajputs had formerly been both powerful and of high moral character, something that might have been in doubt during Tod’s day, after decades of subjugation to Maratha military might. Rajput history as envisioned in the *Rāso* was congenial both to Tod’s own sentiments and to his political project and so he embraced it enthusiastically.

This is not to suggest that Tod simply transmitted the *Rāso* and other Rajput tales without transforming them in any way. He may not even have been conscious of the changes in tone and meaning that were injected into the various “annals” he summarized for the reader, yet these changes were considerable. Two intellectual preconceptions in particular shaped his construction of Rajasthan’s history in ways that made it diverge from the traditional Rajput understanding. One of these was the notion that a type of feudalism which had also been prevalent in medieval Europe was fundamental to Rajput society.⁴⁴ It was not entirely a coincidence that feudalism had flourished in both regions, for Tod believed the Rajputs shared a similar Scythian origin with many European peoples. Thus, the Rajputs exhibited a martial spirit and chivalric

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 160.

⁴² For more on Tod’s political objectives, see an important article I have relied upon heavily: Norbert Peabody, “Tod’s *Rajast’han* and the Boundaries of Imperial Rule in Nineteenth-Century India,” *Modern Asian Studies* 30.1 (1996): 201–11.

⁴³ Tod, *Rajasthan*, p. 154. ⁴⁴ Peabody, “Tod’s *Rajast’han*,” pp. 198–200.

sense of honor that had also once characterized the European feudal elite.⁴⁵ The study of Rajasthan's present could offer insights into the European past and could also satisfy the nostalgia for earlier ages that Tod and others of a Romantic bent experienced.⁴⁶

Tod's second assumption about Rajputs is especially important in that it had long-lasting consequences for the future reception of the *Rāso*. Employing the language of the early nineteenth century which did not sharply differentiate between race, nation, and people, Tod categorized the meat-eating and alcohol-drinking Rajputs as a nation of their own. In his excellent analysis of Tod's ideas, Norbert Peabody emphasizes the many distinctions that Tod drew between different groups of people in India, who did not necessarily have even a common origin.⁴⁷ The Rajputs were a nation quite separate from others, like the despotic Mughals and predatory Marathas, to whom Tod constantly compares them favorably. Just as Europe possessed a diversity of peoples, so too was India inhabited by a multitude of distinct peoples. Although Tod introduced the notion of nations, and a kind of nationalism, into the discourse on Rajputs, it is important to note that neither he, nor anyone else in this era, conceived of all Indians as comprising a single community. Yet his insertion of nationalist categories into the analysis of Indian history made it possible for that leap of imagination to be made in the decades to come.

Tod's conception of nations did not fit well with actual conditions in Rajasthan. For one thing, he believed "that the nation consists of a single community," as Peabody explains.⁴⁸ But Rajputs were far from being the uniform and unified community that the notion of a nation implies. Furthermore, Tod ignored the existence of many other types of people in Rajasthan: merchants, herders, and peasants of various castes and clans. While he ostensibly presents the "annals" of several Rajasthani kingdoms – Mewar, Marwar, Bikaner, Kota and the like – in reality we get only the history of their ruling dynasties. In other words, Tod equated the history of a sub-region of Rajasthan with the history of its Rajput elite. Rajputs thus came to stand in for all the people of Rajasthan in Tod's formulation.

Also problematic in terms of on-the-ground reality in Rajasthan was Tod's belief "that the nation should be territorially bounded."⁴⁹ A nation, according

⁴⁵ Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph point out that Tod's *Rajasthan* "contributed to a burgeoning feudal medievalism" in British India after 1857, manifested in a changed attitude toward India's princes who were now regarded as loyal vassals of the British crown; it was also instrumental in the articulation of a new imperial theory of martial races ("Writing and Reading Tod's Rajasthan: Interpreting the Text and Its Historiography," in *Circumambulations in South Asian History: Essays in Honour of Dirk H. A. Kolff*, ed. Jos J. L. Gommans [Leiden: Brill, 2003], pp. 273–4).

⁴⁶ It could also serve as a critique of present European society, as Jason Freitag notes (*Serving Empire, Serving Nation*, 118; see also pp. 44–6).

⁴⁷ Peabody, "Tod's *Rajast'han*," pp. 201–4. ⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 206. ⁴⁹ Ibid.

to this perspective, should be a homogeneous group of people living within a contiguous area of land. In early nineteenth-century Rajasthan, by contrast, the formerly dominant class of Rajput nobles was subject to the tributary demands of an upper tier of Maratha chiefs, upstart marauders from outside who had no right to rule or tax the people of Rajasthan, in Tod's view. For this reason, he was anxious to restore power to the Rajput elite, whom he regarded as indigenous residents with an ancient right to the land's resources. The Marathas were not the only group whom Tod judged severely, for he castigates Muslims as "ruthless and barbarous invaders."⁵⁰ A corollary to Tod's definition of a nation – the community of people who occupied a bounded territory – was hence the inherent right to sovereignty.

The Mewar kingdom's sustained effort to maintain its territorial integrity over the centuries was a major factor in Tod's high opinion of it. Yet Tod's narrative of Mewar history downplays its many internecine conflicts with other Rajput realms, a point that has not been sufficiently appreciated in the secondary scholarship. What matters about Mewar is not its overall record of military successes, but rather its armed resistance "when a new religion, propagated by the sword of conquest, came to enslave these realms."⁵¹ Tod repeatedly identifies the foe against whom Mewar warriors displayed their courage and prowess as Muslim, while ignoring the more local enemies over whose defeat Mewar's own chronicles rejoice. To be sure, dynastic histories produced at the court of the Sisodiya kings made much of their period of resistance to the Mughals, as a point of pride, but not to the extent of Tod. In Tod's imagination, Mewar had enjoyed 800 years of "proud independence," until the inevitable submission to the Mughal empire during the reign of Jahangir.⁵²

If Tod's emphasis on Mewar's historic opposition to Muslims exaggerated one aspect of the precolonial court's public fashioning of its self, his explanation of the motivation behind that opposition was entirely novel. Tod construed Mewar's armed resistance to conquest not as a pragmatic desire to retain power in local hands or as a matter of honor, but rather as a reflection of its desire for "freedom." This was even more anachronistic than his classification of the Rajputs as a type of nation, because the notion of political freedom did not exist in the India of his era. Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph note that the on-going struggle by the Greeks to become independent from the Ottoman empire made a great impression on Tod and others with Romanticist leanings. Believing that both Muslim regimes, the Mughals and the Ottomans, were equally despotic, Tod regarded Mewar's past struggle against the Mughals as inspired by the same motive as that of the Greeks in his day.⁵³ Once again, by projecting a more modern way of thinking from the European

⁵⁰ Tod, *Rajasthan*, p. 302. ⁵¹ Ibid., p. 164. ⁵² Ibid., p. 418.

⁵³ Rudolph and Rudolph, "Writing and Reading Tod's *Rajasthan*," pp. 267–72.

present onto Rajasthan's medieval past, Tod set the stage for the appropriation of *Pr̥thvirāj Rāso* by Indian nationalists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

We have seen that Tod's historical sensibilities were not entirely European or modern. He adopted some aspects of the Mewari perspective on Prithviraj, including its notion that the Mewar king had been the Chauhan's foremost ally, as well as the belief that the *Rāso* was a twelfth-century work. The *Rāso*'s representation of Rajputs as a noble class of horse-riding warriors who had valiantly defended their honor and their homeland time and again was another indigenous view that Tod was eager to embrace. The knowledge that Tod propagated in his *Rajasthan* thus cannot be neatly categorized into the common binaries of the traditional versus the modern, the local versus the cosmopolitan, or the indigenous versus the colonial. As Jason Freitag points out in his monograph on Tod, "Tod distinguished himself from his early nineteenth century intellectual milieu through his steadfast adherence to the notion that the Indians had a historical sense and his willingness to enter into Indian discursive practices in order to understand the materials he encountered."⁵⁴ Because of his openness to Indian ways of thinking about the past, Freitag argues that Tod operated on two planes, as both a Western historian and an Indian bard, which helps explain his wide and lasting appeal.

However, Tod had his own reasons – in pursuit of his political objectives and the satisfaction of his Romanticist impulses – for transmitting some of the bardic lore of Rajasthan to an English audience. Tod's appropriation of the *Rāso* is, in brief, another instance of what Charles Hallisey calls "elective affinity" or "intercultural mimesis" – a situation in which a particular indigenous representation resonates with the conceptions or desires of a foreign analyst and is therefore adopted by the latter.⁵⁵ Although he might appear on the surface as an heir to the long historiographic tradition of Rajasthan, and of Mewar in particular, Tod consistently interpreted the bardic material through Western eyes and in a manner that was compatible with the long-term goals of the East India Company.⁵⁶ At times, when he imposed the norms of chivalric feudalism onto a Rajput conflict, for example, Tod read meanings into a text that approximated or were compatible with local understandings. At other times, Tod read radically new meanings into the Rajput chronicles: imagining nations in the place of communities, construing armed conflict between differing warrior groups as the aspiration for freedom, and casting Muslims

⁵⁴ Freitag, *Serving Nation, Serving Empire*, p. 103.

⁵⁵ Charles Hallisey, "Roads Taken and Not Taken in the Study of Theravada Buddhism," in *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism*, ed. Donald S. Lopez (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 43.

⁵⁶ Here I agree with Mayaram, *Magic of Prithviraj, Padmīni and Pratap*, p. 20.

as invariably hostile and foreign. Through these transformations, Tod paved the way for the later nationalist deployment of the *Rāso* epic, and of Rajputs as a class, for the propagation of new ideals.

Other imaginings of the Chauhan king

James Tod's *Rajasthan* brought *Prithvirāj Rāso* to the attention of an audience of Western scholars who came to regard it as the definitive text on the life of Prithviraj Chauhan. Having received the approbation of Tod, the *Rāso* was recognized in the realm of colonial knowledge as an authentic historical document of India's middle ages – a privileged position that was not questioned for a good half century. A corollary of this development was the suppression – in the realm of accepted scholarly wisdom – of other ways of imagining Prithviraj Chauhan that had flourished in circles outside the Rajput elite of Mewar and elsewhere in Rajasthan. Many of these alternative remembrances of the king are forever lost to us as a consequence, but the traces that remain serve as an important reminder of the diversity of conceptions about the past that once existed. As a master narrative of Indian history was steadily constructed during the colonial era on the basis of a restricted number of texts and artifacts deemed valid, these other ways of remembering the past were gradually discredited and discarded.

The approach of memory studies has recently been criticized for a tendency to present collective memories as uniform and the communities producing them as homogeneous. To counter this “pernicious stress on unity and homogeneity,” scholars have called for greater attention to the “plurality of memory at any given moment” and to the many competing groups that are engaged in constructing the past.⁵⁷ We have seen that there were a variety of historical traditions about Prithviraj in the first few centuries after his death: the influential accounts of the Battle of Tarain in Indo-Persian chronicles, the remembrance of a flawed king in short tales preserved in Jain texts, and a recollection of him as a significant ancestor in Chauhan dynastic narratives. In my discussion of the early modern era in the last three chapters, however, I have concentrated on the single tradition of the *Rāso* epic and said little about alternative recollections of the Chauhan king. This is due to *Prithvirāj Rāso*'s major role in shaping later conceptions and not because other ways of remembering Prithviraj did not exist or are not worth mention. We need to acknowledge that the *Rāso*'s imagining of Prithviraj is but one among many that existed at some point in the past, and that there are specific socio-political circumstances which

⁵⁷ Gregor Feindt et al., “Entangled Memory: Toward a Third Wave in Memory Studies,” *History and Theory* 53 (2014): 26, 32. See also, Steinbock, *Social Memory in Athenian Public Discourse*, pp. 8–13.

explain the *Rāso*'s longevity and ultimate ascendancy. While the memory community that cherished *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* in the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries had elite Rajputs and their retainers at its core, people with other social allegiances – whether of religion, caste, language, or region – would likely have remembered the Chauhan king in a notably different manner.

This is certainly true of one rich vein of memory about Prithviraj that extended over centuries in written form. In a series of texts composed from the late fourteenth century on, the Chauhan king figured as the indigenous ruler of Ajmer at the time when Khwaja Mu'in al-Din Chishti, the founder of the Chishti order of Sufis in South Asia, migrated to the subcontinent and settled in the city.⁵⁸ The saint is described as an energetic proselytizer who overcame considerable local opposition, epitomized by Prithviraj, and successfully converted many residents of Ajmer. In contrast to the Indo-Persian historiographic tradition, where Prithviraj was mentioned almost solely in the context of the two battles of Tarain that he fought against Shihab al-Din Muhammad Ghuri, the Persian-language hagiographies of the Chishti order situate him in his capital at Ajmer amidst the presence of holy men and gods. In its cultural orientations and patterns of transmission, this hagiographic literature is even more distant from *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* than *Tabaqāt-i Nāṣirī* and other Indo-Persian chronicles, which likewise focused on the affairs of kings and nobles.

Although the specifics of Mu'in al-Din Chishti's career are murky, in later centuries he came to be regarded as a “pioneer of Islam in India” who was closely linked to the Turkish military conquest of North India.⁵⁹ An early hagiography, the *Siyar al-Awliyā* of 1388 CE, has the saint arrive in Ajmer while Prithviraj Chauhan's control over it was still unchallenged. Opposed to Mu'in al-Din's propagation of Islam, Prithviraj harasses followers of the saint, who then prophesizes: “We have caught Rai Pithaura alive and have given him to the army of Islam.” The text goes on to state “accordingly in those days Sultan Mu'izz al-Din [i.e., Shihab al-Din] came with his army from Ghazni and fought with Pithaura who fell alive into the hands of the Sultan.”⁶⁰ Similar language implying a causal connection between the saint's utterance and the Ghurid army's conquest of the Chauhan king appears in *Akhbār al-Akhyaṛ*, a famous biographical compendium completed in 1618.⁶¹

Prithviraj's disrespectful treatment of the Chishti saint led not only to his own death but also to the conquest of India, which the Sufi hagiographies suggest was undertaken “to avenge Mu'in al-din's sufferings at the hands of

⁵⁸ Texts differ on whether Mu'in al-Din Chishti, who was born along the border of Iran with Afghanistan, came to Ajmer before, during, or immediately after Shihab al-Din Muhammad of Ghur seized it in 1192 or 1193 (Currie, *Mu'in al-din Chishti*, pp. 40–1).

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 85. ⁶⁰ Translation by Currie; *ibid.*, p. 30.

⁶¹ Ernst and Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love*, p. 149.

the Hindu ruler,” in P. M. Currie’s opinion.⁶² If Prithviraj Chauhan’s opposition to Mu’in al-Din Chishti’s preaching represents the obstacles facing the Islamic community as it sought to spread its faith in a land of unbelievers, the Ghurid army’s victory over the king signifies the triumph of Islam in the new territory. After all, “it was from him [king Pithaura] that the Muslims seized the domain of Hindustan,” asserts the author of *Akhbār al-Akhyār*.⁶³ From this specifically Sufi viewpoint, therefore, the military conquest of North India was undertaken as a form of support for the spiritual conquest of North India, which preceded it both in time and in priority.

That Prithviraj is linked to Ajmer in the Sufi narratives, rather than to the city of Delhi, is only to be expected, since the memory community that recollected and transmitted these stories about the past revered the saint Mu’in al-Din Chishti, whose presence had made Ajmer into a sacred space for Muslims. Variants of these Sufi tales continue to be disseminated around Ajmer to the present day, in small booklets and videos about the life of the Chishti saint that are sold around his tomb-shrine.⁶⁴ The persistence of this strand of memory about Prithviraj, despite notable divergences across texts, can be attributed to the continued existence of a devotional community centered on the first Chishti saint and also to the fact that it was a written tradition. Other remembrances of Prithviraj – circulating within smaller, less powerful, or non-literate memory communities – were transmitted only in oral form, and cannot be traced any further back than the nineteenth century, when colonial scholars began to record stories about caste origins, local deities, and folk heroes. That is, the nineteenth-century Western interest in folklore, popular religion, and ethnography is largely responsible for our knowledge of non-elite memories of Prithviraj, which presumably flourished in earlier times as well.

Sometimes Prithviraj figures in oral traditions recorded since the nineteenth century as the reigning king at a past time of momentous social or political change. This is the case for the Mers or Mairs of Rajasthan, who inhabit the hilly tracts of the Aravalli range between Ajmer and Kumbhalgarh formerly known as Merwara.⁶⁵ Various groups of Mers all trace their origins to a young tribal woman who was abducted by Prithviraj and given in marriage to one of

⁶² Currie, *Mu’īn al-dīn Chishtī*, p. 85.

⁶³ Translation by Ernst and Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love*, p. 152.

⁶⁴ Prithviraj is not always specifically named in these popular hagiographies of Mu’in al-Din Chishti, which are loosely based on the elaborate version of the story provided in *Siyar al-Aqtāb*, composed in 1647 CE. In it the saint engages in spiritual competitions with a local Hindu deity and a powerful yogi, who both convert to Islam after being decisively defeated (for the complete story, see Currie, *Mu’in Al-Din Chishti*, pp. 72–81).

⁶⁵ Tod, *Rajasthan*, p. 12.

his sons.⁶⁶ Several generations later, some of their descendants converted to Islam,⁶⁷ and today the several types of Mers occupy different positions along a spectrum of practices that extend from Hindu at one end to Muslim at the other. Stories about the origins of local communities are often set in the time of a famous ruler from the past, perhaps to enhance the aura of historical veracity, so there is nothing particularly unusual about this type of remembrance. Yet the fact that Prithviraj's name is still invoked in the area around his former capital of Ajmer highlights the endurance of memories of a local king, even for a social group of modest status.

Oral traditions from other areas of North India often remember Prithviraj as the emperor of Delhi rather than Ajmer, just as in *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*. He appears in this guise in the cycle of stories about the folk hero Guga, which are prevalent throughout much of Rajasthan, as well as in Haryana, Punjab, and western Uttar Pradesh.⁶⁸ In one version of the Guga epic, the Chauhan king is tricked into supporting the cause of Guga's wicked maternal cousins, who conspire to get a share of Guga's ancestral lands. The gullible, but not intrinsically evil, Emperor Prithviraj marches forth from Delhi with his huge army but is stopped by the magical power of Guru Goraknath.⁶⁹ In these tales of Guga's exploits, Prithviraj is essentially a generic overlord situated in the imperial center of Delhi, a stock figure whose place could be occupied by other kings. Despite the lack of specificity regarding Prithviraj, the Guga epic illustrates how popular memory in much of North India linked him to the region's political center.

The most significant challenge to *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*'s portrayal of the Chauhan king comes from another oral epic of North India, the Alha cycle of stories. The Alha epic, described in the nineteenth century as "without doubt, the most popular poem of its kind in Hindostan,"⁷⁰ was told from Delhi to western Bihar and southward into the Bundelkhand region of Central India. Its main heroes are Alha and Udal, who fought on behalf of king Parmal of the Mahoba

⁶⁶ I am grateful to Shail Mayaram for sharing this information with me. See Shail Mayaram, "Recognizing Whom? Multiculturalism, Muslim Minority Identity and the Mers," in *Multiculturalism, Liberalism, and Democracy*, eds. Rajeev Bhargava, Amiya Kumar Bagchi, R. Sudarshan (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁶⁷ C. J. Dixon, *Sketch of Mairwara* (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1850), pp. 7–11.

⁶⁸ Guga's epic is recited throughout much of Rajasthan as well as in Haryana, Punjab, and the westernmost districts of Uttar Pradesh (Stuart Blackburn, et al., "Guga," in *Oral Epics in India* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989], p. 224).

⁶⁹ Elwyn C. Lapoint, "The Epic of Guga: A North Indian Oral Tradition," in *American Studies in the Anthropology of India*, ed. Sylvia Vatuk (Delhi: Manohar, 1978), pp. 289–303. For a variant of the story, see William Crooke, "A Version of the Guga Legend," *Indian Antiquary* 24 (February 1895): 49–56.

⁷⁰ George A. Grierson, "Introduction," in *The Lay of Alha: A Saga of Rajput Chivalry as Sung by Minstrels of Northern India*, trans. William Waterfield and ed. George A. Grierson (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), p. 9.

kingdom in Bundelkhand. While the Mahoba heroes fight a series of local rulers earlier on, Emperor Prithviraj from Delhi is their final and most formidable foe. The Alha epic thus offers a fascinating perspective on Prithviraj from the vantage point of those whom he vanquished, for his unprovoked invasion of Mahoba supposedly led to the death of its local heroes and the extinction of their kingdom. The Prithviraj of the Alha tradition is not the admirable ruler whose martial feats are to be lauded, as in the *Rāso*, but rather an aggressive foreign king whose attacks leave ruin and devastation in their wake. This vilification of the Chauhan king was apparently troubling enough to adherents of the *Rāso* tradition that they eventually created a counter-narrative in order to contest the Alha version of the past, a topic to which I will return shortly.

The Alha epic also departs from the *Rāso* in observing the Chauhan king from the perspective of low-ranking warriors. The central heroes – Alha, Udal, Malkhan, and Sulkhan – belong to the Banaphar clan, whose credentials to be considered Rajput are constantly questioned by neighboring kings. The Banaphar heroes lack autonomy as well, for they are dependent on the greater lords around them for subsistence and authority. Despite their modest status, they are exemplary warriors – skilled in fighting, brave to a fault, and scrupulous in observing the Rajput code of honor. Rather than valuing family pedigree like the high-born lords featured in *Prithvīrāj Rāso*, the Alha epic prizes the martial ability of warrior underlings. Its outlook is essentially that of warrior leaders or “little kings,” in opposition to imperial regimes such as that of Prithviraj Chauhan.⁷¹ The more humble social appeal of the Alha epic is reflected in the exclusively oral nature of its circulation in earlier times, in contrast to the many written manuscripts of the more courtly *Rāso* tradition.

Although the oral nature of the stories has resulted in multiple variants that differ in dialect, plot details, and length, most scholarly analysis of the Alha epic has centered on the first version to be published, in 1873.⁷² It is called the Kanauj version because the stories were collected in the vicinity of Kanauj, and perhaps also because it highlights the role of the Kanauj kingdom.⁷³ According to this rendition, the main heroes – Alha, his brother Udal, and their cousins Malkhan and Sulkhan, collectively known as the Banaphar family – fight a series of battles in order to acquire brides for themselves and their two noble friends, prince Brahma of Mahoba and prince Lakan of Kanauj. So great is the combined force of the young Mahoba champions that

⁷¹ Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking India's Oral and Classical Epics*, pp. 130, 132.

⁷² Charles Alfred Elliott, ed., *Ālhakhaṇḍ* (Fatehgarh, U.P.: Dil Kusha Press, 1873). *The Lay of Alha: A Saga of Rajput Chivalry as Sung by Minstrels of North India* (trans. William Waterfield and ed. George A. Grierson [London: Oxford University Press, 1923]) provides a detailed English description of the text compiled by Elliott.

⁷³ George A. Grierson, “The Song of Alha’s Marriage: A Bhojpuri Epic,” *Indian Antiquary* 14 (1885): 209.

they are able to obtain Bela, the daughter of Prithviraj Chauhan, for Brahma, the heir to Mahoba's throne. But the marriage is not consummated, since Prithviraj insists that his daughter remain with him in Delhi for the time being.

Meanwhile, the wicked Mahil, brother to the Mahoba queen, seeks to undermine king Parmal and manages to get Alha and Udal banished from Mahoba. The two heroes move to the Kanauj realm and enter the service of its king, Jaychand. Prithviraj Chauhan then invades the newly vulnerable Mahoba territory; the kingdom is saved only when Udal temporarily returns to rescue it. Sometime later, Prithviraj leads another expedition against Mahoba. Alha and Udal are persuaded to return from Kanauj to succor Mahoba, and King Jaychand of Kanauj sends a large army and his nephew Lakhan in support, forcing Prithviraj to return to Delhi.

Following the advice of his ill-intentioned uncle Mahil, Mahoba's prince Brahma decides to retrieve his bride Bela from Delhi without any help from others. Although Brahma manages to fight off a Delhi army, he is seriously wounded by a mean trick devised by Prithviraj. It is left to the Banaphar hero Udal and the Kanauj prince Lakhan to bring Bela from Delhi to meet the dying Brahma in Mahoba. She decides to become a *sati* but her father Prithviraj attempts to prevent this. A terrible battle ensues in which Udal, Lakhan and many other heroes on both sides die, along with Bela. At the end, Prithviraj is defeated, but the Mahoba realm is also devastated: Alha disappears into an immortal realm, and king Parmal starves himself to death.

The Alha epic presents Prithviraj in unflattering terms, as a king who stooped to deception on occasion in order to achieve his goals. Yet, because every other king whose daughter's hand was sought by the young heroes similarly engages in lying and deceit while trying to prevent the marriage, such dishonorable conduct is not unique to Prithviraj. Moreover, the fact that Prithviraj often risks his safety on the battlefield displays him in a more favorable light than Parmal of Mahoba and Jaychand of Kanauj, who relegate all their fighting to others. In this folk epic about the martial abilities and honor of low-ranking warriors, all the overlords are presented as flawed in comparison.

Given our interest in Prithviraj's history as an iconic figure, the most striking thing about the Alha stories is their casting of the Chauhan king as a non-native intruder, as someone who belonged to another region. If the Alha epic was indeed "found in almost every dialect current in Hindustan" in the late nineteenth century,⁷⁴ *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*'s imagining of the king must have been quite restricted in its geographical, and perhaps also sociological, circulation. Centered on the city of Delhi and its warrior hinterland, the *Rāso* pertains

⁷⁴ Grierson, "Song of Alha's Marriage," p. 208.

primarily to the areas of modern Rajasthan and Haryana, and – as I continue to argue later in this chapter – was most familiar to the people of that region prior to the late nineteenth century. In much of North India, especially within non-Rajput communities, Prithviraj Chauhan's name would have evoked quite a different response than in Rajasthan. To the people of the Gangetic area who delighted in the Alha narrative, the Chauhan king represented the expansionistic ambitions of imperial Delhi.⁷⁵

The testimony of modern scholars about the wide distribution of the Alha epic is supported by the existence of a counter-narrative on the Delhi–Mahoba war, commonly referred to as *Mahobā Samay* or *Mahobā Khand* (division, chapter, or book), that is partisan to the Chauhan cause. The Alha epic must have been well known, for why else would anyone have bothered to contest its contents with another version that retold the story with substantial changes? Despite claims in *Mahobā Samay* manuscripts that they were authored by Chand Bardai, an account of the Delhi–Mahoba war is not an integral component of the standard *Prthvīrāj Rāso* tradition.⁷⁶ Most *Mahobā Samay* manuscripts come from the nineteenth century, although the oldest one dates back to 1769 CE.⁷⁷ Its relatively late appearance adds strength to the supposition that *Mahobā Samay* was created in response to the Alha epic's vision of the conflict between the Chauhan and Chandel kingdoms.⁷⁸ Unlike the Alha epic, which casts Prithviraj as an outside aggressor, *Mahobā Samay* is consistently partial to the Chauhan lord and sheds a favorable light on his actions.

Mahobā Samay's sweeping revisions to the plot of the Alha epic commence with its account of the events that ultimately led to war.⁷⁹ The first contact

⁷⁵ These oral traditions may preserve the memory of a military conflict in 1182 or 1183 between the Chauhan king Prithviraj/Chauhan king Prithviraj and the Chandella/Chandel king Paramardi who ruled over the territory of Jejakabhukti or Bundelkhand, but inscriptions testifying to the war do not associate Prithviraj with Delhi (Cunningham, *Reports of a Tour in Bundelkhand and Rewa in 1883*, pp. 173–5).

⁷⁶ It does not appear in any of the twenty-one *Rāso* manuscripts whose contents were tabulated by Narottamdas Swami (*Rāso-sāhiya*, pp. 94–5). Nor did I find it in any *Prthvīrāj Rāso* manuscript in the collections of the Royal Asiatic Society, the Bodleian Library at Oxford University, or the British Library.

⁷⁷ Ms. 9334 at the Rajasthan Prachyavidya Pratisthan, Jodhpur. *Mahobā Samay* exists as an independent text in at least seven other manuscripts and is featured along with another *Rāso* episode in four manuscripts.

⁷⁸ The editors of the first complete printed edition of *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, published by Nagaripracharini Sabha of Benares in the early twentieth century, must have realized that *Mahobā Samay* was a late addition to the *Rāso*-affiliated corpus. It appears there only as an appendix (Pandya *Rāso*, pp. 1963–2047).

⁷⁹ This synopsis is based on the lengthy summaries of the Mahoba episode published in Pandya *Rāso* by Asha Gupta, *Ālha Khanḍ: 19yāñ Śāti Prakāśanom mēm Kathā Vaividhya* (Delhi: Vani Prakashan, 1999), pp. 371–8; and Loknath Dvivedi Silakari, *Mahākavi Jagannīk: Unkā Lok-Gāthā-Kāvya Ālha* (Sagar, M. P. [India]: Hindi Vibhag, Sagar University, 1969), pp. 57–63.

between the two kingdoms occurs as Prithviraj's army is returning from an expedition to a far-off land. Faced with an intense rainstorm, a contingent of Delhi troops unknowingly took refuge in what turned out to be the royal garden of Mahoba; this angered Parmal Chandel, who ordered them captured and executed. News of the Mahoba king's severe treatment of his men incensed Prithviraj and made him decide to attack Mahoba in retaliation, a perfectly justifiable and even commendable act according to the medieval warrior code. The responsibility for the Mahoba–Delhi war can therefore be laid at Parmal's feet in this rendition of its origins. Parmal's use of excessive force against unintentional intruders was the root cause of the conflict, rather than Prithviraj's lust for power or greed for territory, as in the Alha epic. Prithviraj continues to be portrayed in a positive fashion in *Mahobā Samay*'s description of the war between Mahoba and Delhi. He chivalrously suspends military action against the enemy, for instance, until Alha and Udal return to Mahoba from Kanauj.

Mahobā Samay's most conspicuous deviation from the Alha epic is the absence of Bela, the daughter of Prithviraj, who marries the Mahoba prince Brahma. This marriage demonstrates the prowess of the Mahoba partisans who fight to obtain her hand, and – in the hypergamous milieu of North India where the status of the groom's family is typically higher than the bride's – also testifies to the superiority of the Chandel dynasty and its Mahoba warriors over Prithviraj Chauhan and his champions. By its elision of this major component of the Alha cycle, *Mahobā Samay* rejects any possibility that another lineage or constellation of warriors superseded the stature of Prithviraj Chauhan and his noble champions. Along similar lines, in this version of events the Chauhan army and its mighty warlords ultimately prevail on the battlefield and occupy the Mahoba territory. *Mahobā Samay* thus rewrites the Alha stories in such a way as to accord the final victory to the Delhi realm rather than Mahoba. There can be no doubt as to Prithviraj's paramount status in the perspective of *Mahobā Samay*, a late accretion to the *Rāso* corpus that is entirely faithful to the *Rāso*'s point of view.

The striking divergences between the two narratives in *Mahobā Samay* and the Alha epic can best be understood as a reflection of their differing regional origins. *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* was a product of the elite martial milieu of a specific territory, bounded by Kanauj in the northeast, Lahore in the northwest, and Gujarat to the south (as explained in Chapter 4). It was only in this region of prestigious warrior lineages with pretensions to aristocracy that Prithviraj Chauhan's name came to be revered for its role in the imagined past of the evolving Rajput community. Elsewhere, in the different cultural milieu of the kingdoms extending over the large plain on either side of the Ganges River, the recollection of the Chauhan king was of a hard-hearted, arrogant, and

imperialist overlord, based in the distant Delhi.⁸⁰ However, it is worth noting that in the Alha stories, as in the core episodes of *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*, Prithviraj appears as a powerful warrior who fought fiercely against other Hindus; this reinforces my argument that he was not remembered solely or even primarily for his battles with Shihab al-Din Muhammad prior to Tod's intervention.

Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso as language artifact

The few examples of alternative conceptions that I have just surveyed must represent but a fraction of the multiple memories about the Chauhan king that once existed, yet none of these other ways of imagining Prithviraj were taken into consideration by nineteenth-century Western scholars as they formulated their own historiography of medieval India. The Sufi hagiographies that mention Prithviraj were manifestly religious works, whose reports of miracles and supernatural interventions were too fanciful and partisan to be taken at face value. The oral character of the Guga and Alha epics, as well as the narratives linking Prithviraj to the origin of various communities, kept them from scholarly notice until the last few decades of the nineteenth century, when ethnography and folklore studies started to become fashionable. Throughout much of the 1800s, therefore, the *Rāso* was the sole claimant in the scholarly arena to the status of authentic historical source for the reign of Prithviraj Chauhan. Believing in its alleged twelfth-century date, Tod valued *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* as a rare window into the pristine state of Rajput culture before corruption by outside influences, as well as for the Indian perspective it provided on the Ghurid conquest of North India.

Although its authenticity remained unchallenged, the *Rāso*'s scholarly significance underwent a shift in the 1860s and 1870s, from the realm of historiography to that of literary artifact. In contrast to Tod's day, when scholars had focused mainly on texts in the classical languages of Sanskrit and Persian, there was much more study of the vernaculars in the second half of the nineteenth

⁸⁰ The Kanauj version features its local king, Jaychand, more than do other versions of the Alha epic, in another manifestation of the regional bias of epic narratives. For example, the Kanauj version makes Jaychand the paramount overlord to Mahoba's king Parmal (Waterfield & Grierson, *Lay of Alha*, pp. 57–8). In an intriguing example of intertexuality, moreover, the Kanauj version shares with the *Rāso* the notion that its princess Samyogita had previously been abducted by Prithviraj. This incident is cited as the underlying source of Jaychand's antagonism toward Prithviraj, which led the Kanauj king to support the cause of Mahoba (Waterfield & Grierson, *Lay of Alha*, pp. 254, 272). The tale of Samyogita's abduction appears to have been told independently in Kanauj on occasion, for C. A. Elliott collected such a story and published it in his 1873 Alha edition, as a kind of appendix. It differs in several ways from the standard *Rāso* episode – all of Prithviraj's champions die in defense of their lord and his bride, for one thing. A sense that Delhi and Kanauj had historically been opposed to each other was thus evidently quite deeply rooted in the Kanauj region.

century. *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* had been touted as the earliest surviving example of Hindi literature at least as far back as 1827, when William Price – a professor at the College of Fort William, the East India Company's school in Calcutta – categorized the “writings of Chand” as the “oldest upon record” of any works in the Hindi language.⁸¹ This meant that the *Rāso* was not simply the record of an exemplary past warrior, as Tod had represented it, but also a relic of India’s pre-Muslim linguistic history. As the nineteenth century progressed, this aspect of the epic’s identity became more and more prominent, resulting in a flurry of scholarly attention to the *Rāso*, after decades of relative neglect during which academic interest had been focused on the study of texts in the cosmopolitan languages of Sanskrit or Persian, rather than on vernacular literature of more restricted circulation.⁸²

In identifying the *Rāso* as the oldest text in Hindi, Price was differentiating Hindi, written in Nagari script, from Hindustani, written in Perso-Arabic script. Yet he regarded both Hindi and Hindustani as dialects of the same language or, in his words, as “various forms of one common tongue.”⁸³ Whether this was true or not in Price’s time is a controversial issue that has still not been resolved.⁸⁴ The salient point for our purposes is not whether Hindi and Urdu actually constituted two different languages – a distinction that is notoriously difficult to make, in any case – but rather the growing perception that they did. From the 1860s onwards, the notion that Hindi and Hindustani/Urdu were two distinct languages, with separate genealogies, became more and more appealing to non-Muslim residents of North India. This was a result of the increasing number of people who felt, first of all, that they belonged to a widespread community sharing a common Hindu religion and, second, that a unique language was the characteristic marker of such social groupings. For them, *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*, the sole piece of vernacular North Indian literature thought to have been composed prior to extensive Muslim influence, was the only possible proof that Hindi was an independent language more ancient than Hindustani/Urdu.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Cited in Krishnacharya, *Hindī ke Ādi Mudrit Granth* (Calcutta: Bharatiya Jnanpith Publication, 1966), p. 188.

⁸² A few Western scholars did try to gain at least cursory knowledge of *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*’s contents prior to the 1860s. They include the Sanskritist H. H. Wilson and the translator of Indo-Persian chronicles Sir Henry Miers Elliot. The *Rāso*’s massive length was clearly an impediment to study, necessitating measures such as the creation of a prose summary for Wilson (now at the British Library) and a compilation of select verses for Elliot (now in the Royal Asiatic Society collection).

⁸³ Krishnacharya, *Hindī ke Ādi Mudrit Granth*, p. 187.

⁸⁴ Harish Trivedi, “The Progress of Hindi, Part 2: Hindi and the Nation,” in *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, ed. Sheldon Pollock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 967–8.

⁸⁵ Vasudha Dalmia, *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions: Bhāratendu Hariśchandra and Nineteenth-Century Banaras* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 193–5, 200.

In addition to its implications for community identity, the question of the relationship between Hindi and Hindustani/Urdu had practical implications in the public life of North India. In the 1830s, the East India Company had decided to replace the Persian language with English at the higher levels of administration and with local vernaculars at the lower levels. The vernacular language was used in government offices, law courts, and also in schools, and thus mediated the variety of encounters that the population had with the state. The choice of language also affected the employment possibilities of different communities, since scribal groups tended to have their own spheres of expertise. The vernacular language that initially took the place of Persian in much of North India was “Hindustani,” written in Perso-Arabic script and using much of the same official terminology that had previously been employed in Persian. The official use of “Hindustani” meant that it became the preferred language of study above the primary level of schooling, because knowledge of it was required to obtain government jobs. There were numerous complaints about the difficulties for the common person in understanding the highly Persianized language and script used for state purposes, and beginning in the 1860s a movement developed to either substitute or complement Hindustani with the Hindi language and Nagari script, which its adherents regarded as the true language of the majority of North Indians.⁸⁶

Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso’s status as “the most ancient Hindvi work extant,”⁸⁷ was at the forefront of an acrimonious academic dispute that played out in the pages of the esteemed *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* in the years 1869 and 1870. While disagreements between scholars in the nineteenth century were often expressed more sharply than might be acceptable today, the animosity between F. S. Growse and John Beames was notable even in its time.⁸⁸ The two men, both members of the Bengal Civil Service, had commenced the study of *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* independently at around the same time, and each went on to publish several major articles on it in the Bengal Society’s journal and elsewhere. The similar timing of their engagement with the text attests to the greater significance it had acquired by the 1860s and 1870s.

⁸⁶ The standard study of this topic is Christopher King, *One Language, Two Scripts: The Hindi Movement in Nineteenth Century North India* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1994). See also, Dalmia, *Nationalization of Hindu Traditions*, pp. 146–221, which I have relied on extensively in the following pages.

⁸⁷ Rajendralal Mitra, “On the Origin of the Hindvi Language and Its Relation to the Urdu Dialect,” *JASB* 33, pt. 1 (1864): 24.

⁸⁸ Their scholarly clash over the *Rāso* was sufficiently memorable that it was mentioned in the short obituary of Growse published a quarter century later in the *Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 1893, p. 119.

F. S. Growse, then serving in his initial Indian post as an District Assistant in Mainpuri (western UP), was the first to get an article on the *Rāso* in print, in 1868.⁸⁹ In "The Poems of Chand Barday," Growse briefly described the first of two chapters in a *Rāso* manuscript from Benares and also translated a portion of it.⁹⁰ The following year, the Asiatic Society of Bengal's journal featured an article on the *Rāso* by John Beames, titled "Nineteenth Book of the Gestes of Prithirāj by Chand Bardāi," which was basically an annotated translation of the *Rāso*'s Padmavati episode.⁹¹ Beames, who was beginning a long posting in Orissa at the time, had previously been stationed in the Punjab and Bihar, and was apparently not acquainted with Growse.⁹² Their public conflict commenced with Growse's response to Beames' article, in which Growse questioned the accuracy of Beames' translation and offered an alternative translation of his own.⁹³ His politely phrased if critical comments provoked an immediate rebuttal from Beames, who was belligerent in defending his own work and gratuitously rude to Growse in the process.⁹⁴

The underlying cause of the tension between Beames and Growse – a similar ambition to edit the epic – is revealed in the course of Growse's reply to Beames' attack. Growse displays his mastery of the sophisticated put-down with his opening words:

Mr. Beames in replying to my criticisms on his translation, has evidently written under great excitement; but at this I am not surprised; it must be very annoying for a translator of Chand to be convicted of not knowing some of the commonest Hindi words.⁹⁵

According to Growse's version of events, he had obtained a complete manuscript of the *Rāso*'s long recension from the Agra College library in 1867, as well as authorization from the provincial government of the North Western Provinces to examine the text. Soon after he commenced work on it, however, Growse received a request to send the manuscript to Calcutta for photographing. Once it was in Calcutta, Beames kept the text so that he could edit it for the Asiatic Society of Bengal, forcing Growse to search for other copies

⁸⁹ Information on Growse's career was taken from the obituary mentioned above; and from F. S. Growse, *Bulandshahr, or Sketches of an Indian District; Social, Historical, and Architectural* (Benares: Medical Hall Press, 1884), p. ii.

⁹⁰ Vol. 37, pt. 1 (1868): 119–34. Growse discussed this manuscript further in a second article, "Further Notes on the Prithirāj-Rāyasa," *JASB* 38, pt. 1 (1869): 1–13.

⁹¹ *JASB* 38, pt. 1 (1869): 145–60.

⁹² Beames describes Growse as a stranger in his piece "Reply to Mr. Growse," *JASB* 38, pt. 1 (1869): 174. Details about Beames' official career can be found in his *Memoirs of a Bengal Civilian* (Delhi: Manohar, [1961] 1984), although it contains little about his scholarly activities.

⁹³ F. S. Growse, "Translations from Chand," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* [henceforth *JASB*] 38, pt. 1 (1869): 161–71.

⁹⁴ Beames, "Reply to Mr. Growse."

⁹⁵ Growse, "Rejoinder to Mr. Beames," *JASB* 39 pt. 1 (1870): 52.

without satisfactory results.⁹⁶ Unable to find another complete version of the *Rāso*, Growse eventually had to move on to other projects. Beames, on the other hand, continued to work on *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*, culminating in an edition of the epic's first chapter published in 1873 in the *Bibliotheca Indica* book series sponsored by the Asiatic Society of Bengal.⁹⁷

What attracted Beames to the *Rāso* was its status as the oldest surviving composition in the Hindi language, for Beames was at heart a philologist. He spent years engaged in research and writing of a three-volume work called *A Comparative Grammar of the Modern Aryan Languages of India*, which continued to be cited as authoritative for decades after its publication between 1872 and 1879.⁹⁸ Because Chand Bardai, the putative author of *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*, was "the earliest writer in any modern Indian language," Beames repeatedly refers to the epic's linguistic practices in order to illustrate Hindi's oldest forms.⁹⁹ Beames had virtually no interest in the contents of the *Rāso*, nor for that matter in the totality of Hindi literature, which he described as "on the whole about the least attractive body of literature in the world," consisting "almost entirely of long, tiresome religious poems . . . none of which are particularly worth reading, except for the light they throw on the gradual progress of the language."¹⁰⁰ Instead of Hindi, Beames' preference was for Urdu. He praised Urdu speech as "clear, simple, graceful, flexible, and all-expressive," and also favored its script, stating that "the introduction of the Persian character, in supersession of the clumsy Nagari, has rendered the mechanical process of writing much easier and more rapid."¹⁰¹ In the public discussion over language taking place at this time, Beames thus took a clear stance in favor of Urdu.¹⁰²

⁹⁶ Growse, "Poems of Chand Barday," p. 119; Growse, "Rejoinder to Mr. Beames," p. 56. Growse's prior interest in the *Rāso* is corroborated by A. F. Rudolf Hoernle, who writes that "the attention of the [Asiatic] Society was first called to this great Hindi epic by Mr. F. S. Growse in 1867, who suggested a search for manuscripts of it, with a view to an eventual publication" ("Part II. Archaeology, History, Literature, &c," in *Centenary Review of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, from 1784 to 1883* [Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1885], p. 167).

⁹⁷ Chand Bardai, *The Prithirāja Rāsau of Chand Bardai*, Pt. I Fasciculus I, ed. John Beames, *Bibliotheca Indica* n.s. 269 (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1873). He also published several more articles on the *Rāso* in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*.

⁹⁸ For example, Beames' grammar is cited by George Grierson in his entry on "Hindostani" for the 11th edition of *Encyclopedia Britannica* (New York: The Encyclopedia Britannica Co., 1910), vol. 13, p. 483.

⁹⁹ John Beames, *A Comparative Grammar of the Modern Aryan Languages of India*, vol. 1: *On Sounds* (London: Trübner & Co. 1872), p. 26.

¹⁰⁰ Beames, *Comparative Grammar*, p. 83. ¹⁰¹ Ibid., pp. 121, 84.

¹⁰² See also, Beames, "Outlines of a Plea for the Arabic Element in Official Hindustani," *JASB* 35 (1866): 1–13; and "Outlines of a Plea for the Arabic Element in Official Hindustani—No. 2," *JASB* 36 (1867): 145–54.

Growse's views on the language issue were diametrically opposed to those of Beames, as he made clear in the article "Some Objections to the Modern Style of Official Hindustani," published in 1866.¹⁰³ (This public rebuttal of his stance may explain why Beames was so vehement in his criticism of Growse's *Rāso* scholarship a couple of years later.) Growse vigorously rejected Beames' allegation that "Hindi is an arbitrary name for a group of vulgar dialects, which have little in common and could not be reduced to one standard."¹⁰⁴ The large shared vocabulary across north India was proof enough, for Growse, of the existence of Hindi, a language that he described as encompassing the poems of Tulsidas, Chand Bardai's *Rāso*, and Biharilal's *Satsaī*. In contrast to Hindi, Growse argued, the Urdu used in legal courts was an artificial and "alien form of speech" that had only been invented in the past 50 or 60 years.¹⁰⁵ As "the Nagari alphabet is the most scientific that human ingenuity has ever elaborated," Growse advocated its use in place of Perso-Arabic script for most purposes.¹⁰⁶

Growse's article is noteworthy for its implications. For one thing, it asserts an essential unity for the Hindi language, construed as a kind of catch-all category that encompassed what are today regarded as the separate literary languages of Awadhi (Tulsidas's *Rāmcaritmānas*), Brajbhasha (Biharilal's *Satsaī*), and the composite Rajasthani-Brajbhasha (called Pingal) of *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*. In order to differentiate Hindi from Urdu-Hindustani and secure it an officially recognized position, it was necessary to establish a genealogy for Hindi that was distinct from that of Urdu. Thus, the medieval languages of Awadhi and Brajbhasha were pressed into service as antecedents, despite their difference from the Khari Boli dialect that formed the basis of modern Hindi. Growse's allegation about Urdu's artificiality and recent origin served a similar goal: to establish Hindi as the only ancient, and hence authentic, language of the land. We can now understand why Growse wanted to edit *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*, which helped provide an illustrious past for the newly assertive claims and expanding political space of the Hindi language.

The late twelfth-century date ascribed to *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* thus made it valuable in the eyes of both John Beames and F. S. Growse, although for different reasons. The *Rāso* had a philological interest for Beames, who could use it to trace the development of modern Indo-Aryan languages – its significance to him was only as a linguistic relic from the distant past. Growse, in contrast, approached the *Rāso* and Chand Bardai, "the father of vernacular literature," as an ardent supporter of Hindi literature.¹⁰⁷ In the competition between them, Growse may have been the better translator, but Beames had the authority of the Orientalist establishment in Calcutta behind him and

¹⁰³ JASB 35, no. pt. 1 (1866): 172–81.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 173.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., pp. 174, 180.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 177.

¹⁰⁷ Growse, "Poems of Chand Barday," p. 131.

therefore prevailed. He became the acknowledged expert on *Prthvīrāj Rāso* in the 1870s, with the power to fix the form of the text by producing a printed version sanctioned by the Asiatic Society. Yet it is Growse whose reputation has lasted to the present time, based on his extensive and respected writings on Krishna and Rama, the two main objects of devotion in the Hindi-speaking area.¹⁰⁸ Regardless of their differing motives for studying the *Rāso*, both scholars helped confirm the *Rāso*'s status as a genuine record of Prithviraj's career, far superior in its academic merit to other imaginings of the Chauhan king.

Knowing the *Rāso* outside Rajasthan

The question of who had the better copy of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* was a source of acrimony in the exchanges between Beames and Growse, revealing that it was difficult to obtain good manuscripts of the entire epic. Growse, who spent his entire career in what is today western and central Uttar Pradesh, commented that “copies of the poem [of Chand Bardai] are exceedingly scarce.”¹⁰⁹ He had borrowed one from Agra College but had to surrender it to the Asiatic Society of Bengal, who then turned it over to Beames. Afterwards, despite assistance from prominent Indians, Growse was only able to locate three fragmentary texts that called themselves *Prthvīrāj Rāso*. None of them resembled the Agra College manuscript that Beames was utilizing, which was a copy of the Mewar long recension. This hampered Growse’s attempts to interpret the epic on an equal footing with Beames and exacerbated the hostility between them. The French scholar Garcin de Tassy similarly reported around 1870 that *Rāso* manuscripts were “very rare and very costly.”¹¹⁰

These comments on the scarcity of *Rāso* manuscripts are surprising at first glance, considering the impression left by James Tod that the epic was immensely popular in aristocratic circles, not to mention the numerous manuscripts that survive to this day. Tod’s remarks pertain exclusively to Rajasthan, however, and are corroborated by his near contemporary colleague William Price. Writing in 1827 from his vantage point at Fort William College in Calcutta, Price wrote about Chand Bardai’s poem that “this work, and others

¹⁰⁸ Growse pursued his interest in Hindi literature and Hindu culture in his book *Mathurā, A District Memoir* (Allahabad: North-Western Provinces Govt. Press, 1874), much of which concerns the religious sites associated with the worship of Krishna, followed by *The Rāmā-yana of Tulsi Dās*, an English translation of Tulsidas’ celebrated work in Avadhi (Allahabad: North-Western Provinces and Oudh Govt. Press, 1877–81).

¹⁰⁹ Growse, “Poems of Chand Barday,” p. 119.

¹¹⁰ Quote from Garcin de Tassy as cited in Ulrike Stark, *An Empire of Books: The Naval Kishore Press and the Diffusion of the Printed Word in Colonial India* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007), p. 405.

of a similar character, exist in the libraries of the Princes of Rajpootana, but have never found their way to the lower provinces of Gangetic India.”¹¹¹ Nineteenth-century European scholars may have acclaimed *Prthvīrāj Rāso* as the oldest text in the Hindi language, yet it was evidently not easily available throughout the large expanse of North India that we regard as the Hindi belt today. Within the multiplicity of narratives about Prithviraj that flourished in North India – in Sufi hagiographies, orally transmitted folk epics, or legends about caste origins, and the like – the *Rāso* occupied a paramount position only within Rajput circles, throughout much of the late nineteenth century.

This is not to say that the name of Chand Bardai and the general storyline of his *Rāso* were entirely unfamiliar to those outside of Rajasthan. Indeed, two works of history commissioned by the authorities at Fort William College in 1808, almost twenty years before Price penned the sentence quoted above, contained brief accounts of Prithviraj's life. *Ārā'išh-i Mahfil* is a text in the Urdu language written by Sher ‘Ali Ja’fari Afsos, who describes it as an adaptation of an earlier Persian work, *Khulāsat al-Tavārikh* (ca. 1695), and explicitly cites “the third book of the history of Akbar” – that is, Abu al-Fazl’s *Āīn-i Akbarī* – as a source of information on Prithviraj Chauhan.¹¹² Its biography of Prithviraj is the last chapter in a section on the pre-Islamic kings of Delhi beginning with Yudhishtira of *Mahābhārata* fame. Mrityunjay Vidyalankar’s *Rājāvalī*, on the other hand, is a Bengali text that names the *Rāso*’s Chand Bardai as its authority on Prithviraj Chauhan.¹¹³ However, Mrityunjay’s account of Prithviraj’s early years is a bizarre distortion of the *Rāso*’s contents that casts some doubts on the author’s alleged reliance on it.¹¹⁴ The liberties that Mrityunjay takes with the *Rāso* plot suggest that the epic’s narrative was not widely known in eastern India.

This admittedly somewhat circumstantial evidence, from comments made by European scholars and from texts created for Europeans, directs our attention to the localized nature of *Prthvīrāj Rāso*’s transmission in manuscript form. The supposition that Rajasthan was the principal, if not only, source of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* manuscripts is strengthened by the findings of Beames, who had the backing of the prestigious Asiatic Society of Bengal in searching for texts. Beames observed in 1873 that he could only locate five complete *Rāso*

¹¹¹ Krishnacharya, *Hindī ke Ādi Mudrit Granth*, pp. 188–9.

¹¹² Sher ‘Ali Ja’fari Afsos, *The Araish-i-Mahfil, or, the Ornament of the Assembly*, trans. Henry Court (Allahabad: Pioneer Press, 1871), p. 192.

¹¹³ Kumkum Chatterjee, *The Cultures of History in Early Modern India: Persianization and Mughal Culture in Bengal* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 147.

¹¹⁴ I am much indebted to the late Kumkum Chatterjee for providing me with an extensive summary in English of the relevant section, which appears in Mrityunjay Vidyalankar, *Rājāvalī* (Serampore, Mission Press, 1808), pp. 90–111. For a partial description of the text’s coverage of Prithviraj Chauhan, see P. Chatterjee, *Nation and Its Fragments*, pp. 80–1.

manuscripts, four of which had definitely been produced in Rajasthan.¹¹⁵ As best as we can ascertain, therefore, Rajasthan remained the center of the *Rāso* tradition well into the nineteenth century. Supporting the thesis that the recitation of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* was primarily confined to Rajasthan is the experience of Mohanlal Vishnulal Pandya, a Brahmin born in Meerut and educated in Benares whose acquaintance with the *Rāso* was quite limited originally. After moving to the princely state of Mewar where he was employed during the 1870s and 1880s, Pandya notes that: “Ever since I came to Rajputana, I have seen the work read or heard with love and esteem by almost all the Rajas and nobles in all parts of the province.”¹¹⁶ Previously, however, while living in British India, Pandya had not been very familiar with the *Rāso* nor had he thought highly of it.

Despite the absence of a flourishing *Rāso* manuscript tradition in the Gangetic region, Prithviraj Chauhan’s name was remembered there on account of the popularity of the Alha cycle of stories. The Alha epic’s popularity also led, over time, to a considerable conflation of it with the *Rāso*, in the consciousness of many people in the Hindi heartland. Probably because many of the same events and characters appear in both sets of stories, the boundaries between them got so blurred that the labels Mahoba Khand and Alha Khand came to be synonymous in the minds of some nineteenth-century scribes in British India. We see this in the case of one manuscript collected by Sir Henry Miers Elliot in 1854 that describes itself as an Alha Khand and also claims to have been composed by the poet Chand.¹¹⁷ Another manuscript that Growse acquired in the 1860s used both the Mahoba and Alha titles for the same episode, again with an ascription of authorship to the poet Chand.¹¹⁸ Any written work narrating the events of the Delhi–Mahoba conflict in the Gangetic region could apparently be assigned to Chand Bardai and through him to *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, thereby acquiring the prestige and trustworthiness associated with that well-established literary text.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ John Beames, “Studies in the Grammar of Chand Bardāī,” p. 167. Beames used a *Rāso* manuscript previously owned by Tod that had originally come from Kota (*Proceedings of the Asiatic Society for Bengal* for April 1872, pp. 57–8), and another manuscript called the Baidla after the chiefdom in Mewar from where it was obtained. He also consulted the Agra College *Rāso*, now at the National Museum in Delhi, which had been donated to the institution in 1861 by the Maharana of Mewar (Bora, *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, p. 73). Beames mentions two *Rāso* manuscripts in England: the one at the Royal Asiatic Society was acquired in Kota by Major James Caulfield, while the other was at the Bodleian Library. Only the provenance of the Bodleian manuscript is unknown, although it could certainly have come from Rajasthan.

¹¹⁶ Mohanlal Vishnulal Pandya, *The Defence of Prithirāj Rāsā of Chanda Bardāī No. 1* (Benares, Medical Hall Press, 1887), p. 43.

¹¹⁷ Ms. 156 in the Tod Collection at the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, London.

¹¹⁸ Growse, “Further Notes on the Prithirāj-Rāyasa,” p. 4.

¹¹⁹ Another *Rāso* manuscript that Growse consulted contained just *Mahobā Samay* and *Kanauj Samay* (Growse, “Poems of Chand Barday,” pp. 119–34; Growse, “Further Notes on the Prithirāj-Rāyasa,” pp. 1–3). Growse got this manuscript from the Maharaja of Benares through the good graces of the influential educator Babu (later Raja) Shivprasad. The rarity of *Prthvīrāj*

It is no accident, then, that the first lithographed edition of what was ostensibly the *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* contained only an account of the Delhi–Mahoba war along with the preceding Padmavati episode, which explained the origins of the war. A modest run of 500 copies was printed in 1871 by a small press in Agra; the much larger Naval Kishore Press of Lucknow purchased the copyright and published its edition of the same text in 1874.¹²⁰ This is yet another indication of the paucity of *Rāso* manuscripts outside the princely states of Rajasthan, because neither press could obtain the full *Rāso* narrative.

Conclusion

The competition by Growse and Beames over the right to edit *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* is a sign of its prominent position in the colonial corpus of knowledge by the 1860s and 1870s. An even better indication that Western scholars regarded the epic as a canonical work of Indian literature comes from its inclusion in the prestigious *Bibliotheca India* series, established by the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1847.¹²¹ The Asiatic Society's decision in the late 1860s to publish the *Rāso* worked to the benefit of John Beames, who was residing in Calcutta, the location of the Society's headquarters. Beames edited the first chapter of *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* for the *Bibliotheca Indica* series in 1873, but was unable to carry on any further. Dr. A. F. Rudolf Hoernle took over the task and published the text of ten more chapters between 1874 and 1886, as well as an English translation of one of these chapters.¹²² Through its publication in the *Bibliotheca Indica* series, *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* was acknowledged to be one of the most important pieces of Indian literature, of which scholars throughout the world should be made aware. James Tod's influence continued to manifest itself even 50 years after he left India, for the manuscript that was

Rāso texts in the mid Gangetic area is underscored by the fact that even a patron of the arts such as the Maharaja of Benares did not possess a copy of the entire narrative. Similarly, Shyamsundar Das found a manuscript titled *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* in the Asiatic Society of Bengal's library that contained only the Kanauj episode and a version of the Alha story; he edited and published the later under the title *Parmāl Rāso* (Benares: Nagaripracharini Sabha, 1919).

¹²⁰ The 1871 edition was published in Agra by Vidyaratnakar Press. For more details on the publication of this and the Naval Kishore Press edition, see Stark, *Empire of Books*, pp. 404–6.

¹²¹ Rajendralal Mitra, "Part I. History of the Society," in *Centenary Review of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, from 1784 to 1883* (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1885), pp. 59–61.

¹²² Hoernle's edited work covered chapters 26–35 of the long recension and appeared as *Fasciculus I* through *V* of Pt. II, *Prithirāja Rāsau of Chand Bardāī*, *Bibliotheca Indica* new series nos. 304, 408, 430, 489, 577 (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1874–86). Hoernle also published an English translation of *Rāso* chap. 26 (Revata) in 1881 (*Bibliotheca Indica* no. 452). During much of the time he was editing the *Rāso*, Hoernle was Philological Secretary to the Asiatic Society and edited the humanities section of the Journal in that capacity. He went on to serve as the society's President in 1897–8.

the basis of the *Bibliotheca Indica*'s edition of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* had been Tod's personal copy.¹²³

For much of the nineteenth century, as we have seen, the *Rāso* was acclaimed by Western scholarship for its alleged twelfth-century date. Concurring with the local understanding of it as an eyewitness account of Prithviraj Chauhan's life, James Tod treated the epic as a historical record of Rajput culture and society as it had existed before the changes wrought by Muslim rule in North India. While *Prthvīrāj Rāso*'s stirring tales of valiant heroes doomed to defeat no doubt appealed to the Romantic in him, Tod approached it not so much as a literary text but rather as a reference work, a source of information on the past. He used the *Rāso* as testimony to the antiquity of many Rajput lineages, to the innate bravery and chivalry of their warriors, and to the centrality of Mewar among the kingdoms of Rajasthan. It was also a guide for Tod's project of restoring Rajput society to its pristine, pre-Muslim, strength. Elsewhere in early colonial India, British officials were similarly interested in uncovering the historical precedents of governance in the regions they had recently conquered, as Rama Mantena notes in her study of Tod's contemporary Colonel Colin Mackenzie and his assistants.¹²⁴ Through the antiquarian practices of collecting and classifying texts and objects, early colonial scholars like Tod and Mackenzie transformed "historical artifacts into sources."¹²⁵

Tod's validation of the *Rāso* as an authentic historical source placed it in an altogether different category for Western scholarship than other imaginings of the Chauhan king, whose provenance was uncertain and dating unreliable. The relative absence of the supernatural in *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, as compared to the many fanciful boons and miracles that pervade the oral epics and Sufi legends, enhanced the impression that it was an accurate reflection of past reality. Colonial scholarship on folklore, religious legends, and caste origins has preserved a small selection of the memories of Prithviraj had been orally transmitted in Rajasthan and the Gangetic region, while Sufi hagiographies written in Persian provide another perspective on the Chauhan king. There must have been many more communities of memory for Prithviraj in precolonial India, which no longer exist as a result of the *Rāso*'s eventual hegemony in the popular culture of North India. Some of these too would have remembered Prithviraj in less laudatory terms than *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, although most probably as an active combatant.

With his repeated use of the phrase "last Hindu emperor of India" to describe Prithviraj, Tod also began the process of turning the Chauhan king into a hero not just for the Rajput elite of Rajasthan, as had been the case

¹²³ Beames, "Studies in the Grammar of Chand Bardāī," p. 167.

¹²⁴ Mantena, *Origins of Modern Historiography*, pp. 31–43.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 50.

during the precolonial era, but for all non-Muslim Indians. Tod rarely referred to Hindus as a unified category of people, preferring rather to differentiate between the numerous “nations” that he discerned within the Indian population, such as Rajput or Maratha. Shail Mayaram argues that, despite Tod’s recognition of the diversity of India’s social makeup, he viewed the opposition between Hindus and Muslim as deep and fundamental. Tod’s innovation, she asserts, was in “his construction of Rajput identity as a contrastive identity to that of the Muslim,” with Rajputs serving as exemplary Hindus.¹²⁶ His unusual use of the label Hindu in connection with Prithviraj Chauhan highlights the extent to which Tod regarded Muslims as foreign to the subcontinent and therefore not legitimately entitled to wield political power.

If Prithviraj’s relevance to a broad audience was enhanced by Tod’s casting of him as the “last Hindu emperor,” his epic’s significance was augmented when it was accorded the status of “oldest upon record” of any Hindi-language text by William Price and other colonial scholars. *Pr̥thvirāj Rāso* then became useful not only for recovering political history but also as a source of information on the evolution of North Indian vernaculars. Once it was construed as an ancient work composed in Hindi, the indigenous language of North India that was increasingly associated with a Hindu religious identity, the *Rāso* became an integral part of the linguistic past of most non-Muslims in North India. Alternate modes of envisioning Prithviraj Chauhan were still thriving in Rajasthan as well as elsewhere, but the Western academic establishment’s embrace of *Pr̥thvirāj Rāso* elevated its view of the past to a position of dominance that would eventually eclipse all other perspectives.¹²⁷ Popular remembrance of this twelfth-century Indian king came to be increasingly linked to the *Rāso* narrative during the twentieth century, as we will see in what follows, leading to an unusual reliance on a single text in the making of a medieval hero for modern times.

¹²⁶ Mayaram, *Magic of Prithviraj, Padmini and Pratap*, p. 7.

¹²⁷ However, the Alha cycle of stories did continue to be popular into the age of printing, as indicated by the nineteenth-century publications in the British Library’s Oriental and India Office Collections. This archive contains almost 120 different texts, quite a few in multiple editions, which narrate some of the Alha epic.

7 Contested meanings in a nationalist age, 1880s–1940s

I have read this paper with great interest and careful consideration. Its professed object is to undeceive the public of a false impression, that the Rāsā so long known to have been composed by Chand Bardāī, is not in reality made by him, but is a deliberate forgery of the 15th or 16th century. It is not to be wondered at that a paper making so high a profession and venturing so much as to turn all things topsy-turvy should cause a great stir in all historical circles. A reference to most of the old books of history and to the old bards of Rājpūtanā [sic] who are well versed in the Rāsā has led me to think that the arguments and inferences of the Kaviraj seem to be irrelevant [sic] and unsatisfactory.

Mohanlal Vishnulal Pandya, *Defence of Prithvīrāj Rāsā*¹

Introduction: debating the *Rāso*'s historicity

These words written by Mohanlal Vishnulal Pandya in 1887 constituted one round in another fierce dispute over *Prithvīrāj Rāso*, which was to last much longer and have graver consequences than the squabble between John Beames and F. S. Growse described in the last chapter. Throughout the 1860s and 1870s, there was a general consensus on the importance of the *Rāso* as an artifact of the late twelfth century. At issue in the verbal sparring between Beames and Growse was the question of who best understood *Prithvīrāj Rāso* and could thus speak most authoritatively about it. It was a struggle for power, a competition for scholarly control over the discourse relating to the *Rāso*. The motivations of the two men may have differed, with Beames being driven by philological ambitions while Growse's goal was more literary in nature. They were similar, however, in being interested in the *Rāso* because of its significance as the first composition in the Hindi language.

The controversy that began in the 1880s was far more serious in nature. The status of the *Rāso* as a historical document was at the crux of the disagreement, not its character as a literary text or its claims of expert knowledge. It started

¹ Pandya, *Defence of Prithvīrāj Rāsā*, p. 5.

with the publication in 1886 of an article in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* titled “The Antiquity, Authenticity and Genuineness of the Epic called THE PRITHĪ RĀJ RĀSĀ, and commonly ascribed to Chand Bardāī.”² Kaviraj Shyamaldas, the author of the article, challenged the common ascription of a twelfth-century date to *Prthvīrāj Rāso* and, by repudiating the reason the text was valued in nineteenth-century scholarship, thereby undermined its importance. Shyamaldas’ bold attack on conventional wisdom was so shocking that it provoked a rebuttal from Mohanlal Vishnulal Pandya the following year in a booklet called *The Defence of Prithīrāj Rāsā of Chanda Bardāī No. 1* that began with the quote featured at the beginning of this chapter. In it, Pandya comments that “it is not to be wondered at that” Shyamaldas’ paper “should cause a great stir in all historical circles,” since it ventured “so much as to turn all things topsy-turvy.” The two men, acquainted but from quite distinct backgrounds, were diametrically opposed in their evaluation of the reliability of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* as a source of historical information and, correspondingly, of its status as a canonical work of North Indian literature.

This dispute over the *Rāso*’s historicity has never been entirely resolved. Although few individuals, if any, would argue today that the epic in its present form dates back entirely to Prithviraj’s lifetime, a sizeable number still believe that the *Rāso* has a twelfth-century core. That is, some people contend that the epic had its beginnings in Prithviraj’s lifetime but was altered and added on to over the centuries – though marred by these later interpolations, *Prthvīrāj Rāso* nonetheless partially reflects the historical realities of Prithviraj’s age. In defending the *Rāso*’s historical value, this faction can be regarded as the intellectual heirs of Mohanlal Vishnulal Pandya. The renowned historian of Rajasthan, Dasharatha Sharma, was a moderate proponent of this school: he argued that “originally the *Rāso* was a much shorter work than it is at present,” provided reasons for “treating the story of Samyogita’s marriage as historical,” and stated that “some of its other episodes also may be true.”³

Others have followed Kaviraj Shyamaldas’ lead in assigning a late date to *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, thereby rejecting its claims to be a contemporary and therefore accurate record of Prithviraj’s life and times. Over the past century, most historians at elite academic institutions have ignored the *Rāso* narrative in constructing their accounts of the fateful events of the late twelfth century. Writing about Prithviraj’s reign for the multi-volume series titled *The History and Culture of the Indian People*, published soon after Indian independence, D. C. Ganguly dismissed *Prthvīrāj Rāso* as “a work of a very late period,” to cite but one example.⁴ The overall lack of faith in the *Rāso*’s reliability on the

² Kaviraj Shyamaldas, *JASB* 55, pt. 1 (1886): 5–65.

³ D. Sharma, *Early Chauhan Dynasties*, pp. 380, 382.

⁴ Ganguly, “Age of Prithvīrāja III,” p. 105.

part of historians explains why virtually no historical studies of the epic have been published in the past century, as compared to the on-going researches into the epic by at least a few literary scholars.

Yet the general outlines of the Prithviraj story as told in the *Rāso* remain well known to the Indian public even today. The presumed familiarity of his audience with the *Rāso* epic must be why a highly respected historian such as Satish Chandra, formerly of Jawaharlal Nehru University, felt compelled to refer to it several times in a short account of Prithviraj Chauhan's career as king. Although he reiterates historians' doubts about the *Rāso*'s veracity, he summarizes episodes from it nonetheless.⁵ Another indication of the continuing popularity of the *Rāso* narrative comes from Rima Hooja's recent survey of Rajasthan's history. Hooja takes considerable pains not to offend readers who may be partial to the *Rāso*, by including its version of events under the rubric of "tradition" and "popular belief;" she also relies heavily on Dasharatha Sharma's judgment as to what really happened.⁶ These modern scholars clearly expect their audiences to be aware of *Prthvīrāj Rāso*'s existence.

This chapter explores how the truth-claims of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* came to be contested from the 1880s through the 1940s, ultimately leading to the ambivalent situation of the present day, where the epic is referenced even by scholars who repudiate it. In trying to understand the status of Prithviraj Chauhan and the *Rāso* in nineteenth-century India, we have had little recourse but to rely on European perspectives up to this point. Even when we get a glimpse into popular memories of Prithviraj – as, for instance, through the window of the Alha oral epic – it comes to us via the European filter of the scholarly compiler and translator. Earlier in the nineteenth century, India had what C. A. Bayly has described as a "dual economy of knowledge." In Bayly's words, there was "an 'advanced' sector, which used western forms of representation and communication subsisting within an attenuated but still massive hinterland employing the older styles of information and debate."⁷ The newer and more authoritative system of knowledge was that created by British administrators and European scholars, with its own criteria for admissible evidence, modes of argumentation, and above all, an insistence on applying historical frameworks. During the second half of the nineteenth century, it became increasingly possible for Indians to take part in the public sphere of scholarly dissemination and debate that was dominated by Europeans. A larger number of Indians became active as intellectuals and creative writers within the adjacent sphere of the newly established vernacular newspapers and presses.⁸

⁵ Chandra, *Medieval India Part 1*, pp. 23–6.

⁶ Hooja, *History of Rajasthan*, pp. 265–71.

⁷ C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 372.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 340–51.

I start the chapter with a close examination of the debate between Mohanlal Vishnulal Pandya and Kaviraj Shyamaldas, which began in the pages of a prestigious English-language journal from colonial India, although both men were employed by the princely state of Udaipur at the time. This controversy over the historicity of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* soon expanded out of the realm of English academic learning, once Pandya published his rejoinder at a private press and both men released Hindi versions of their arguments too. This illustrates the extent to which the formation and dissemination of modern knowledge had moved beyond the circles of British scholar-officials to involve an ever-growing number of Indian intellectuals in an ever-increasing diversity of viewpoints and schools of thought by the late nineteenth century. A consequence of the multiplicity of vectors of learning was a weakening in the authority of academic knowledge, specifically the historiography “discovered” and disseminated by prestigious colonial institutions primarily in the English language. Thus, although the *Rāso* lost the unquestioned status it had previously possessed as a record from Prithviraj’s reign, segments of the educated public – and particularly those who wrote for the vernacular press – continued to regard it as a legitimate source of information on the past.

A consideration of the reasons behind Pandya’s defense of *Rāso*’s historicity leads me next in this chapter to the issue of nationalism. I briefly mention Harishchandra (1850–80), often given the honorific title Bharatendu or Moon of India because he reputedly inaugurated a new era for Hindi literature virtually single-handed. Benares, where Harishchandra was based and Pandya resided for a time, emerged as a major center for the promotion not only of Hindi literature but also of Hindu nationalism. For men like Harishchandra and Pandya, the testimony of “the old books of history” and “the old bards of Rājpūtanā who are well versed in the Rāsā” (mentioned in the quote at the outset of this chapter) was crucial in establishing Hindu heroic credentials. In other words, they regarded *Prthvīrāj Rāso* and other bardic texts more or less in the same manner as had James Tod, as heroic histories that testified to the martial bravery of Rajputs/Hindus, especially in fighting against Muslims. Ironically, now that several generations had passed since its publication and more was known about India and its history, the flaws in Tod’s *Rajasthan* were becoming more apparent to Western scholars.⁹ In contrast, Tod’s influence grew even greater among late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Indian writers operating in the new vernacular literary spaces that lay beyond the world of Western – that is, English-language – scholarship.

In the last two sections of the chapter, I turn to imaginings of Prithviraj taken from new textual genres of modern Hindi literature, often composed in prose,

⁹ Freitag, *Serving Empire, Serving Nation*, pp. 155–7.

as well as from new visual genres.¹⁰ Modern Hindi was late in its literary development, as compared to Urdu and especially Bengali, which pioneered the idealized conception of medieval Rajputs as brave nationalist heroes to be emulated.¹¹ Created from about 1900 through the 1940s, the select Hindi texts I examine offer versions of Prithviraj's story that differ in details. Yet, despite some concern over the *Rāso*'s authenticity, the overall trend was toward an idealization of Prithviraj, along with a simplification of the *Rāso* plot. A nationalist theme was prominent in most accounts in modern Hindi, with the genres of historical fiction and drama particularly prone to embellishment of the king's biography. This was carried over in the visual commemorations of Prithviraj from the 1930s and 1940s, whether in the form of lithographed picture or stone statue. It is worth noting that these visual representations of the Chauhan king were produced in Delhi, the place where he was remembered with greatest intensity. Deviations from *Prthvīrāj Rāso* were common in the new literary and visual genres of the twentieth century, typically in a reductionist direction; on the whole, however, they were inspired more by the epic narrative than by positivist historiography. In the epilogue to this book, I reflect on the divergent understandings of Prithviraj Chauhan's life today; for now, I simply wish to point out that the split opinion on the *Rāso*'s historical value dates as far back as the 1880s.

Shyamaldas, the critical bard

Shyamaldas (1836–93), the author of the initial attack on *Prthvīrāj Rāso*'s historicity, could not be farther from the high caste, English-educated resident of British India that one would have expected to lead the charge in refuting older understandings of the past. His article "The Antiquity, Authenticity and Genuineness of the Epic called PRITHĪ RĀJ RĀSĀ," was published in 1886 by the most prestigious learned body of colonial India, the Asiatic Society of Bengal.¹² Founded over a century earlier in 1784, Bengal's Asiatic Society had been an entirely European enterprise until 1829, when the first

¹⁰ For recent discussions of modern Hindi's new textual genres, see Francesca Orsini, *Print and Pleasure: Popular Literature and Entertaining Fictions in Colonial North India* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2009), pp. 160–272; Stark, *Empire of Books*, pp. 413–29.

¹¹ On the latter point, see Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 44–61. For a discussion of modern Hindi and Urdu print culture and its later date than in the case of Bengali, see Stark, *Empire of Books*, pp. 29–106.

¹² In *JASB* 55, pt. 1 (1886): 5–65. For a lengthier treatment of Shyamaldas and his critique, see Cynthia Talbot, "Contesting Knowledges in Colonial India: The Question of *Prthvīrāj Rāso*'s Historicity," in *Knowing India: Colonial & Modern Constructions of the Past*, edited Cynthia Talbot (Delhi: Yoda Press, 2011), pp. 171–212.

Indian member was inducted.¹³ The proportion of Indians grew gradually until it comprised twenty-five percent (83 out of 329) of the Society's members by 1885, the year before Shyamaldas published his critique.¹⁴ Despite the presence of a fair number of Indians in the late nineteenth century, the Society was still dominated by Europeans. The preponderance of Europeans is especially evident in the pages of its journal: between 1865 and 1890, for instance, only 15 percent (18 out of 117) of the men whose articles were published there possessed Indian names.¹⁵

Most Indian contributors to the journal were members of the colonial establishment, holding positions like deputy magistrate, deputy collector, and deputy inspector of schools, or they were teachers and schoolmasters. They had been educated in the English language and generally instructed in Western topics and methods; a few of them had earned college degrees. Indeed, these Indian scholars were precisely the sort of "educated natives" or "Babus" against whom the European opponents of the 1883 Ilbert Bill railed. This bill would have allowed Indian magistrates to try Europeans in rural localities where no European judge was readily available, but it met with intense opposition from the European business community inside India. The widespread agitation that they spearheaded led to the watering down of the Ilbert Bill's provisions, leaving bitter feelings among both Indians and Europeans. Despite their accomplishments, Western-educated Indians of the late nineteenth century continued to face considerable discrimination in their professional lives.

Yet Shyamaldas (1836–93), who questioned centuries of certainty about *Prthvīrāj Rāso*'s status as eyewitness testimony to the events it described, had not been trained in the Western manner and was an entirely self-taught historian.¹⁶ He was a member of the Charan bardic community of Rajasthan, and had been awarded the honorific title "Kaviraj" by the ruler of Mewar in recognition of his meritorious service as court poet. Shyamaldas' caste affiliation and his residence in a princely state, where traditional ways persisted with greater force than in British India, are both unusual for a contributor to the Asiatic Society of Bengal's journal, but most surprising is his inability to write in English. It is this fact that differentiates him most from other contributors to

¹³ U. Singh, *Discovery of Ancient India*, p. 14.

¹⁴ This statistic is based on my reckoning from "List of Members of the Asiatic Society of Bengal on the 31st December, 1885," in *Proceedings of the Asiatic Society* 1886: iii–xvii.

¹⁵ These numbers are based on my examination of the journal's table of contents. I did not include Pandit Harachandra Chakravarti (who transcribed an inscription), nor Babu Jogendra Nath Rae (who collected folk songs contributed by another); but I did count Shri Narayan Singh and Hiralal Kavyopadhyaya, who collaborated with George Grierson, among the eighteen Indians.

¹⁶ He writes that he had no idea how to go about writing a history when first asked to do so in the 1870s, and therefore had to consult several Persian chronicles in order to get started (*Vīrvinod: Mevār kā Itihās* [Delhi: Motilal BanarsiDass, 1986], pp. 182–3).

the *Journal* in the late nineteenth century, rather than the fact that he was Indian.¹⁷ Shyamaldas composed his article in Hindi and had it translated into English by a Munshi Ram Prasad; the Hindi version was published the following year.¹⁸

Shyamaldas laid out his position on *Prthvīrāj Rāso* very clearly in the opening paragraph of his article:

“This famous Hindī epic – generally believed by scholars to be the work of Chand Bardāī, the court bard of Prithī Rāj Chauhān, and describing the latter’s history from his birth to his death – is not *genuine*, but was, in my humble opinion, fabricated several centuries after Chand’s time, by a bard or bhāt of Rājpūtānā, to show the greatness of his own caste and of the Chauhāns, who had come to the province from other parts of the country, and were not held in great esteem by the Princes of Rājpūtānā.”

In addition to the terms “authenticity” and “genuineness” that are featured in the title, his article makes liberal use of words like “spurious,” “fabricated,” and “forged.” Shyamaldas also refers repeatedly to the *Rāso*’s “mistakes” and its “incorrect” dates.¹⁹

Through the use of such words, Shyamaldas highlights his engagement in the most fundamental task by the standards of modern historiography: the verification of source material. His language is highly judgmental and admits of no shades of gray – facts are either correct or inaccurate, a text is either genuine or false. This black-and-white approach to facts is facilitated by Shyamaldas’ emphasis on dates, for his repudiation of *Prthvīrāj Rāso*’s historicity rested primarily on its questionable chronology. The crux of Shyamaldas’ argument is that the dates mentioned in the *Rāso* were inaccurate and therefore cast serious doubt on the truth claims of the entire text. His emphasis on correct dates reflects the effort to establish a proper chronological framework that drove much of the Western historiography on India during the nineteenth century.

¹⁷ Shyamaldas published four other articles in *JASB*, all translated from Hindi: “Birthday of the Emperor Jalāluddīn Muhammad Akbar” (1886), “The Minā Tribe of Jāipur, in Meywar” (1886), “Antiquities at Nagari” (1887), and “The Mother of Jahāngīr” (1888).

¹⁸ Shyamaldas, “Antiquity, Authenticity and Genuineness,” 5; the Hindi version is titled “Pṛthvīrāj Rāsā kī Navīntā” (published in *Pṛthvīrāj Rāso kī Vivecanā*, eds. Mohanlal Vyas and Nathulal Vyas [Udaipur: Sahitya Sansthan, Rajasthan Vidyapith, 1959], pp. 1–61). It was supposedly first published in 1887 (Bhagvatilal Bhatt, “Prastāvanā [Preface],” in *Pṛthvīrāj Rāso kī Vivecanā*, eds. Vyas and Vyas, pp. 5–6), but I have been unable to find the original text or the exact details on its publication.

¹⁹ The censorious attitude conveyed in the English article is not quite as pronounced in the Hindi version, whose title can be rendered as “The Newness of *Prthvīrāj Rāso*.” Asserting something’s relatively recent date is less offensive than describing it as inauthentic. Similarly softer in tone is *asūddh*, meaning impure or imperfect; this Hindi word used by Shyamaldas was translated into English as “mistake,” “incorrect,” and “wrong.”

The three events that come under most scrutiny in Shyamaldas' examination of the *Rāso*'s chronology are Prithviraj's birth, his accession to the Delhi throne, and the final battle he fought against Muhammad of Ghur. "So that no one might argue that it might be a mistake of the scribe," Shyamaldas takes pains to cite at least two instances of the *Rāso*'s date for each event.²⁰ He then establishes the inaccuracy of these dates by comparison with the testimony of Persian texts, especially the mid thirteenth-century *Tabaqāt-i Nāṣirī*, whose detailed description of the hostilities between Prithviraj Chauhan and Muhammad of Ghur became the standard Indo-Persian account.²¹ Indo-Persian histories placed the final conflict between the two men in 1192–3 CE, some 91 years later than was specified in *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, and there is no hesitation on Shyamaldas' part as to which date was more credible. "The Muhammadans," he writes, "had a regular system of writing History, the Hindūs had no such system; if there was anything of the kind, it was simply the genealogies, and very little, if any, historical accounts written in the books of the bards, or exaggerated poems of the time."²²

Here Shyamaldas reiterates the widespread Orientalist charge that Hindu India lacked a proper historical consciousness and had therefore produced little that could be considered true history writing. In determining the date of Prithviraj's accession to the throne, Shyamaldas similarly rejected the *Rāso* in preference for another type of source material, the stone inscription. The privileging of inscriptions, along with Indo-Persian histories, in determining dates and other straightforward facts was a well-established practice among scholars of India, and became especially prevalent after the systematic collection and publication of inscriptions was officially undertaken by the Archeological Survey of India from the 1870s on.

The chronological flaws in the *Rāso* had serious repercussions for aristocratic genealogies throughout Rajasthan, according to Shyamaldas. The *Rāso* dates had become temporal anchors for bardic works composed hundreds of years later on behalf of the royal dynasties of Mewar, Marwar, and Amber, among others. The rulers of these Rajasthani kingdoms were alleged to be descendants of warriors who had fought in Prithviraj's wars, and so their forebears had to be assigned a time span that fit within *Prthvīrāj Rāso*'s chronological framework. Because the *Rāso* situated Prithviraj almost a century earlier than he had actually lived, there was a considerable gap in the king lists that later bards had to creatively adjust, leading to numerous "mistakes." Thus, if Shyamaldas' assessment of the *Rāso* as spurious was accepted, many of the dynastic histories of Rajasthan's ruling families would also have to be

²⁰ Shyamaldas, "Antiquity, Authenticity and Genuineness," p. 12.

²¹ The *Tabaqāt-i Nāṣirī* account is described in Chapter 2.

²² Shyamaldas, "Antiquity, Authenticity and Genuineness," p. 16.

rejected. Shyamaldas ends his article with a discussion of the *Rāso*'s true date of composition, which he placed between 1583 and 1613 CE.

The basic historical method employed by Shyamaldas was comparison of several different *types* of primary sources pertaining to the same event or era. The extensive use of primary sources is a notable aspect of his scholarship. In order to make his points, Shyamaldas cited entire verses from *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* and summarized their gist in English; passages from *Tabaqāt-i Nāsirī* are also quoted in translation. The most amply documented source material of all are the inscriptions Shyamaldas relies on as proof of the true dates for Prithviraj Chauhan and for Samar Singh, the Mewar king who was allegedly Prithviraj's staunch ally.²³ It is only because he was able to cross-check the *Rāso* with these other – supposedly more trustworthy – varieties of historical evidence that Shyamaldas could pronounce the *Rāso* to be erroneous. Although it appears routine to us today, such comparisons would have been much harder to carry out in the precolonial past, even had the inclination to do so existed. That is, European-style scholarship on India's past required a substantial collecting effort – a variety of different texts and documents had first to be gathered together. It also required the presence of investigators able to decipher and interpret both the language and the style of diverse historical materials.

These two conditions for modern historical research – a collection of primary sources and technical expertise in dealing with them – were abundantly fulfilled in Shyamaldas' case. An official History Department (*itihās karyālay*) had been created in the mid-1870s by the Maharana of Mewar, Sajjan Singh, who allocated one lakh rupees for the purpose.²⁴ A staff of scholars was assembled to assist the head of the department, Shyamaldas, in producing an official history of the princely state.²⁵ The team of assistants included specialists in Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian, Rajasthani, and English – the English expert was Babu (also called Munshi) Ram Prasad, who translated all five of Shyamaldas' articles into English for publication.²⁶ Shyamaldas was in

²³ Seven stone inscriptions are referred to in the body of the article, and an appendix that is almost forty pages long contains the complete Sanskrit text of six of these, along with modern Hindi and English translations of the two longest inscriptions.

²⁴ Mewar was likely the first among Rajasthan's princely states to establish such an office devoted to historical research, in Lloyd I. Rudolph's view ("Tod's Influence on Shymaldass's Historiography in Vir Vinod," unpublished paper presented at Annual Conference on South Asia, Madison, 1993).

²⁵ According to Raghubir Singh, Shyamaldas was appointed to write a history of Mewar in 1877 ("Śyāmaldās Dadhvāryā," in *Rājasthān ke Pramukh Itihāskār aur Unkā Krititva* [Bikaner: Hindi Vishvabharati Anusandhan Parishad, 1978], p. 26; G. N. Sharma gives the date as 1875 ("Kaviraja Shyamaldas," in *The Historians and Sources of History of Rajasthan*, eds. G. N. Sharma and V. S. Bhatnagar [Jaipur: Centre for Rajasthan Studies, University of Rajasthan, 1992], p. 59).

²⁶ G. N. Sharma "Kaviraja Shyamaldas," 59.

the enviable position, therefore, of having a stable of capable research assistants, like many eminent Western scholars in nineteenth-century India; and he could draw on the royal archive and library, in addition to his own library of secondary scholarship in English. Few other Indians in this time period would have had such parity in (both human and material) resources with the leading scholars of British India, nor did their job responsibilities typically involve the writing of histories. Shyamaldas' article on *Prthvirāj Rāso* was a work in progress whose final form appeared in the multi-volume history of Mewar commissioned by the Maharana, titled *Vīrvinod*, which appeared in print between 1886 and the mid-1890s.²⁷

While his patron may have provided him the means to research and write a comprehensive official history in a Western mode, it was first necessary for Shyamaldas to learn to think historically according to modern criteria. British direction and assistance was critical to Shyamaldas' historiographic efforts; he could not have developed his modern historical outlook without British impetus and guidance. The very idea of a new history of Mewar state had been suggested by British political agents, both in the time of Maharana Shambhu Singh (r. 1861–74) and of Maharana Sajjan Singh (r. 1874–84). Training in the most current technologies of historical research, specifically in the field of epigraphy, was provided by the British in the person of Pandit Govind Gangadhar Deshpande, who trained Shyamaldas and his men for over a year.²⁸ Shyamaldas also benefited from an extensive network of European acquaintances, some scholars whom he seems to have known only through correspondence, but others who visited Udaipur personally.²⁹

In this most reformist era in nineteenth-century Mewar history, Shyamaldas was acting in concert with the desire of his young Maharanas to embrace and emulate the ways of the British. The respect extended to Shyamaldas by the academic establishment, as exemplified in the publication of several articles in the premier periodical of the day, may derive at least partly from

²⁷ The discussion of *Prthvirāj Rāso*'s historicity appears in Shyamaldas, *Vīrvinod: Mevar kā Itihās* (Delhi: Motilal BanarsiDass, 1986), pp. 254–83. According to Raghubir Singh, the work of printing the text continued after Shyamaldas' death in mid-1894 ("Bhūmikā [Introduction]," in Shyamaldas, *Vīrvinod*, eds. R. Singh, Manoharsinh Ranavat, and Shivadattan Barhat [Jaipur: Mayank Prakashan, 1986], pp. 2–3). Instead of permitting it to be distributed, however, the new Maharana of Mewar, Fateh Singh, confiscated all copies of *Vīrvinod*.

²⁸ Shyamaldas, "Antiquity, Authenticity and Genuineness," p. 184.

²⁹ Among Shyamaldas' European acquaintances was Peter Peterson, who spent about 10 days in the Mewar region in October 1882 (Peterson, *Detailed Report of Operations in Search of Sanskrit MSS. in the Bombay Circle*, vol. 1 [Bombay: Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society & London: Trübner & Co. 1883], p. 54 and 54 fn.) Another mention of Shyamaldas comes from Cecil Bendall of the British Museum, who was on a mission to acquire Sanskrit manuscripts when he briefly visited Udaipur during the winter of 1884–5 (Bendall, *A Journey of Literary and Archaeological Research in Nepal and Northern India during the Winter 1884–85* [Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar, 1974], pp. 30–1).

the fact of his location outside British India: Shyamaldas was not directly subservient to any Englishman, but exerted much influence in the service of his princely patrons. A hereditary bard with no command of English, Shyamaldas perhaps exemplified the virtues of the “traditional” India that, to the late nineteenth-century colonial mind, still persisted in the princely states, in contrast to British India with its ever-growing number of “Babus.” Once we situate Kaviraj Shyamaldas within the context of the Mewar court of the late 1860s through early 1880s, it becomes less surprising that the person most responsible for displacing *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* from its position at the pinnacle of Hindi literature should have been a member of a traditional bardic community from a princely state.³⁰

Shyamaldas’ critique had an immediate, and long-lasting impact. Only because the epic was thought to be the earliest known work in the Hindi language had scholarly interest been focused on it from the late 1860s onward. This was what made the effort of compiling manuscripts and publishing an edition worthwhile for the Asiatic Society of Bengal, despite *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*’s considerable length. The Asiatic Society’s publication effort was suspended after 1886 – the year Shyamaldas’ article came out – even though only a fraction of the total 69 chapters had been printed.

The scholarly turn against the *Rāso* was accelerated by news from Georg Bühler, who in 1893 reported on the recent discovery of a Sanskrit text *Pr̥thvīrāja Vijaya*, “whose author was certainly a contemporary of Pr̥thvīrāja and one of his court poets.” The Sanskrit author’s “account of the Chauhāns contradicts Chand’s in every particular,” leading Bühler to conclude in a letter to the Asiatic Society that the *Rāso* was a forgery.³¹ English-language scholarship, whether conducted by Europeans or Indians, subsequently lost interest in the epic and few studies of it have been conducted in English since the 1880s.³² This is particularly true in the field of history, where *Pr̥thvīrāja Vijaya* replaced *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* as the only authentic Indic literary source on the Chauhan king’s life.³³

³⁰ Shyamaldas was not the first to raise the question – doubts about the epic’s historicity had occasionally been raised by others but merely in passing. The length and systematic quality of his repudiation of *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*’s supposed twelfth-century date of composition set Shyamaldas’ article apart from anything that had come before.

³¹ Georg Bühler, “Extract from Letter,” *Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* (1893): 94. Although Bühler had collected this text in Kashmir in 1875, he only surveyed its contents briefly; by the 1890s, one of his students had read through it in its entirety.

³² The only exceptions during the colonial era are R. R. Halder, “Some Reflections on the Pr̥thvīrāja Rāsā,” *Journal of the Asiatic Society, Bombay Branch* n.s. 3 (1927): 203–11; and Dasharatha Sharma, “The Age and Historicity of the Pr̥thvīrāja Rāso,” *Indian Historical Quarterly* 16 (1940): 738–49.

³³ For example, Sarda, *Pr̥thvirāja Vijaya* (Ajmer: Vedic Yantralaya, 1935).

In defense of tradition: Pandya's rebuttal

Kaviraj Shyamaldas' critique of *Prthvīrāj Rāso*'s historicity may have greatly diminished its worth in the eyes of colonial India's scholarly establishment, but not everyone shared his view. The staunchest advocate for *Prthvīrāj Rāso*'s continuing value was Mohanlal Vishnulal Pandya, who made persistent efforts to get the *Rāso* printed after the Asiatic Society abandoned its publication of the work midstream. As it happened, the two men were well acquainted, for at the time of their public disagreement over the *Rāso* Shyamaldas and Pandya were both members of Mewar's *mahādrāj sabhā* or State Council. Our main insight into Pandya's decades-long commitment to the *Rāso* comes from the tract he wrote in response to Shyamaldas' 1886 article. Titled *The Defence of Prithīrāj Rāsā of Chanda Bardāī No. I*, Pandya's fifty-page essay appeared as a booklet from Medical Hall Press of Benares in 1887.³⁴ Just as in the case of Shyamaldas' piece, Pandya issued a Hindi version along with the English essay; the difference is that Pandya composed his rebuttal initially in English and only after that in Hindi.³⁵

Although written in elegant English, Pandya's essay is much weaker than Shyamaldas' in its organization and logic. Pandya took contention with virtually every aspect of Shyamaldas' article, wasting much energy on minor points rather than the more problematic issues of chronology. Eventually, Pandya did have to address the discrepancies in dating that are so central to Shyamaldas' critique, particularly regarding the reign of Mewar's Samar Singh, whom the *Rāso* depicts as a close ally of Prithviraj Chauhan. Pandya challenged "the testimony of the inscriptions," whose dates for Samar Singh he believed were recorded inaccurately as a result of scribal error.³⁶ He similarly cast doubt on the evidentiary value of Indo-Persian texts, the other category of source material regarded as highly reliable in late nineteenth-century historical research.

In place of the twin pillars of epigraphy and Indo-Persian historiography, Pandya invoked the opinion of the learned. Especially authoritative were the writings of Colonel James Tod, "whose work was a labour of love and who maturely weighed all matters given therein."³⁷ The implication is that Shyamaldas was not nearly as judicious or he would not have made such an

³⁴ According to the noted Rajasthani historian Gaurishankar Hirachand Ojha, Pandya submitted his rebuttal first to JASB, which declined to publish it (Ojha, "Prthvīrāj Rāso kā Nirmāṇ-Kāl" in *Prthvīrāj Rāso kī Vivecanā*, eds. Vyas and Vyas, p. 215).

³⁵ The English version is called *The Defence of Prithīrāj Rāsā of Chanda Bardāī No. I*, and the Hindi version *Prthvīrāj Rāse kī Pratham Samṛakṣā* (Benares: Medical Hall Press, 1887). Pandya tells us he wrote the English text first, and then translated it (*Prthvīrāj Rāse kī Pratham Samṛakṣā*, p. 3).

³⁶ Pandya, *Defence of Prithīrāj Rāsā*, p. 20. ³⁷ Ibid., pp. 25, 17.

egregious error as to disagree with Tod, whose *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* offered “incontrovertible . . . proof” of the *Rāso*’s historicity.³⁸ Some sixty years after the publication in England of *Rajasthan* (1829–32), Tod had already attained the hallowed status that no other scholar, Indian or Western, has equaled to this day in Rajasthan. Aware that he might be thought heretical, Shyamaldas had in fact been very diffident in noting inaccuracies in Tod’s dating of events involving Prithviraj.³⁹ Nonetheless, Shyamaldas had dared to differ from Tod. Tod’s was the final word on things Rajput; literally in this case, for Pandya concluded his defense with a long, appreciative quote about the *Rāso* taken from Tod’s *Rajasthan*.

Pandya also had recourse to the testimony of Western scholars who had worked on *Prthvīrāj Rāso* more recently than Tod, such as John Beames, F. S. Growse, and especially Dr. A. F. Rudolf Hoernle, who had taken over from Beames the task of editing *Prthvīrāj Rāso* for the *Bibliotheca Indica* series.⁴⁰ In addition to these learned Westerners, Pandya cited the “concurrence of many influential Chiefs, Pandits, Bhāts, and Charans,” with his views, as well as “my friends, learned Pandits of Benares.”⁴¹ Another measure of veracity was the consensus of many or, in Pandya’s words, “universally accepted proof.”⁴² Overall, Pandya makes little attempt to argue from the original sources in Shyamaldas’ empiricist fashion. Instead, Pandya relies on conventional wisdom to make his case, just as pandits had for generations before him. Since he offered little in the way of supporting evidence, Pandya’s argument was no more than a conservative plea to uphold the *Rāso*’s long-held status as a text contemporary to Prithviraj’s lifetime.

At first glance Pandya might seem an unusual choice for the role of public defender of *Prthvīrāj Rāso*. Although he operated within the same political circles as Kaviraj Shyamaldas, Pandya came from a very different background. Unlike Shyamaldas, whose family had dwelt in Mewar for centuries, Pandya was a native of Mathura and later a resident of Benares. He moved to the Rajasthan region sometime in the 1870s, as an adult.⁴³ By 1880, he was working for the Mewar court as a manager looking after the affairs of the Nathdwara temple and as a member of the State Council. Another difference

³⁸ Ibid., p. 23.

³⁹ For example, Shyamaldas says about Tod that “the Colonel is not to blame, because the ‘*Prithī Rāj Rāsā*’ has caused mistakes of dates in the histories and annals of Rājpūtānā; and it was difficult, rather impossible for him, to write otherwise, when materials for History were available with great difficulty” (“Antiquity, Authenticity and Genuineness,” p. 16).

⁴⁰ Knowing that Hoernle was familiar with the *Rāso*, Pandya asked for assistance and received a four page response, which he included in his rebuttal (*Defence of Prithvīrāj Rāsā*, pp. 38–43).

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 20, 22. ⁴² Ibid., pp. 4–25.

⁴³ Motilal Menariya calls Pandya a Mathura resident (*Rājasthān kā Piṅgal Sāhitya*, p. 36). In his essay, Pandya mentions that he had dwelt in various parts of Rajputana for about fifteen years (*Defence of Prithvīrāj Rāsā*, p. 43).

from Shyamaldas was Pandya's identity as a Brahmin, belonging to a community that had originated in Gujarat.⁴⁴ Like many other educated Brahmins in late nineteenth-century North India, Pandya also knew English. That Shyamaldas and Pandya were addressing more than one audience is evident in their issuing of both English and Hindi versions of their essays on *Prithvirāj Rāso*, but whereas Shyamaldas needed someone else to translate his Hindi composition into English, Pandya wrote both himself.⁴⁵

Pandya's continuing efforts over the next several decades to get the *Rāso* published attest to the sincerity of his regard for it, but his attempt to uphold the text's historicity also served the interests of certain groups in Mewar. In the opinion of Motilal Menariya, a twentieth-century scholar based in Mewar, Pandya was incited to oppose Shyamaldas by some court bards from the Bhat community, a group to whom Chand Bardai had allegedly belonged and who were quite distinct from Shyamaldas' own Charan community.⁴⁶ This is a plausible scenario, considering Shyamaldas' accusation that *Prithvirāj Rāso* was "fabricated several centuries after Chand's time, by a bard or bhāt of Rājpūtānā, to show the greatness of his own caste and of the Chauhāns, who had come to the province from other parts of the country." Shyamaldas went on to state, "the poem appears to have been composed by some literate bard of the family of Kothāria or Bedlā Chauhāns, to prove that they were related to the kings of Rājpūtānā."⁴⁷

We can surmise that the alleged marriage of the Mewar king Samar Singh to Prithviraj Chauhan's sister Pritha – which is recorded in the *Rāso* and nowhere else – was a source of pride to the Kotharia and Bedla lineages, two of the most powerful subordinate families in the Mewar kingdom.⁴⁸ The imputation of forgery by a Bhat bard attached to the Kotharia or Bedla Chauhans cannot but have roused bad feeling toward Shyamaldas. Pandya, in turn, accused Shyamaldas of maliciousness in making his accusations, noting that Shyamaldas "is not to a certain extent on terms of friendship with the Bhāts in general and the Chohāns of Bedlā."⁴⁹

That Shyamaldas' critique had contemporary repercussions in Mewar beyond its impact on other bards becomes clear in Pandya's response. Much

⁴⁴ Pandya is a surname borne by some Gujarati Brahmins, and it is clear that Pandya had a connection with the region. He was, for example, a member of the Gujarat Vernacular Society.

⁴⁵ Pandya, *Prithvirāj Rāse kī Pratham Saṃrakṣā*, p. 3.

⁴⁶ Menariya, *Rājasthān kā Piṅgal Sāhitya*, p. 35.

⁴⁷ The quote in this and the previous sentence come from Shyamaldas, "Antiquity, Authenticity and Genuineness," p. 5.

⁴⁸ The Chauhans are the largest Rajput clan, with many separate branches and an amorphous identity. Census data from the early twentieth century show a preponderance of Chauhans in northeastern Rajasthan and the Delhi region.

⁴⁹ Pandya, *Defence of Prithvirāj Rāsā*, p. 5.

of Shyamaldas' article was dedicated to demonstrating that Samar Singh had actually lived approximately a hundred years after Prithviraj Chauhan, so that he could not have married Prithviraj's sister. This possibility threatened the livelihood of numerous landed families in Mewar whose entitlements to agricultural income from the crown were based on the past service of their ancestors, who had supposedly accompanied Prithviraj's sister, Pritha, when she came from Delhi as a bride. Pandya tells us these families, whom he specified by name, "take it ill if any one question the truth of their coming over in Pritha's following—a fact which they look upon as a point of honor."⁵⁰ They no doubt fully supported Pandya's attempts to establish, *contra* Shyamaldas, that "Samar Singh was a contemporary of his brother-in-law the Emperor Prithiraj Chohan of Delhie."⁵¹ Thus, the memories of the past contained in the *Rāso* had become a social reality in Mewar that could not easily be overturned, whatever the conclusions of modern historical scholarship. Pandya wrote from a conservative position, one that wished to maintain the conventional consensus on the *Rāso* and, by extension, the social, political, and economic privileges accruing to families who were linked in some way to the events or people it purported to describe.

While Pandya's adamant opposition was inspired in part by the various repercussions of Shyamaldas' stance within the princely state of Mewar, he was committed to a late twelfth-century date for the *Rāso* for an additional reason. This becomes clear in the preface to the Hindi version of his essay, *Prthvīrāj Rāse kī Pratham Saṃrakṣā*. The contents of the English and Hindi essays are identical except for their prefaces, which are notably different. In Hindi, Pandya declares that there is a special reason for defending this great poem created by Chand Bardai:

Virtually no indigenous (*svadeśī*) historical texts that narrate the heroism of the ancestors of our current kings exist; none among those works available under the name *khyāt* etc. is as excellent or detailed as this text; in other words, when this is our only book (tantamount to the entirety of our possessions), if we should sit by quietly while public discussion proves it to be false and inauthentic, having been defeated, we will be forced to rely on Muslim chronicles (*tavārīkh*) just as our Kaviraj-ji does, considering them as of the highest evidentiary value.⁵²

Pandya continues by saying how distasteful it would be to him to have the compositions of "our opponents" (*hamāre vimukhom*) regarded as truthful and deserving of acceptance, while such an invaluable repository of knowledge like the *Rāso* from "our house" (*hamāre ghar*) became the object of disrespect.⁵³

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 24–5, see also p. 20. ⁵¹ Ibid., p. 20.

⁵² Pandya, *Prthvīrāj Rāse kī Pratham Saṃrakṣā*, pp. 1–2. ⁵³ Ibid., p. 2.

In these statements, Pandya abandons any pretense of being objective and adopts a blatantly partisan position. Instead of dwelling on the merits of his argument for *Prthvīrāj Rāso*'s historicity, Pandya emphasizes the negative consequences of accepting Shyamaldas' position: the only reliable original sources remaining would be "Muslim" texts, not "indigenous" or "ours." Clearly Pandya needed to believe in *Prthvīrāj Rāso*'s authenticity as a twelfth-century text, no matter how marred by later interpolation, because there would otherwise be no valid attestation of Hindu martial heroism. The implication is that questioning *Prthvīrāj Rāso*'s status, as Kaviraj Shyamaldas did, was a disloyal act. Thus, Pandya states:

Whatever errors might be evident to us in our indigenous historical texts, those we should rectify after careful thought, on the basis of the books of other communities (*jāti*) and from new research. We should not because of those errors call our indigenous texts spurious, false, and inauthentic and thereby disrespect them.⁵⁴

In effect, Pandya admits in this Hindi preface that his defense of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* was motivated by a communal patriotism.

The poor quality of Pandya's "defence" of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* by the standards of modern historiography becomes more comprehensible once we realize that Pandya's motivations in repudiating Shyamaldas were not primarily intellectual. While protecting the privileges of friends in Mewar may have been an encouragement, Pandya's pro-Hindu sentiments were even more central, in my opinion. The Hindi preface to his rebuttal of Shyamaldas, presumably meant for an audience sympathetic to his own inclinations (who preferred to read and write a Sanskritized Hindi), was blatant in its assertion of an identity for "us" (also referred to as "Aryas") that was incompatible with that of "our opponents" and "other communities." Pandya's Hindu nationalism may have been rather early in date, but it was fully developed in its "othering" of Muslims and their historiography, in favor of histories that were "indigenous," no matter how flawed. By applying modern historical methods of analysis to this textual symbol of Hinduness, Shyamaldas, in contrast, had betrayed his lack of patriotism. What was modern about Pandya was not his historiographic practice, but rather his conception of a (Hindu) nation encompassing all non-Muslim inhabitants of the subcontinent.

Pandya was, in the end, very much a product of the Benares intellectual circles of the 1870s and 1880s, which were characterized by a growing sense of distinct Hindu identity. Among Pandya's Benares associates was the famous literary figure Harishchandra, known not only for his own writing in various genres that were often pioneering for Hindi literature but also for editing and financing a series of journals in which these innovative works appeared.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Pandya and Harishchandra collaborated on a short text called *Aṅgrez Stotra*, or Hymn in Praise of the English, first published in 1873.⁵⁵ Modeled on the hymns of praise addressed to popular deities, *Aṅgrez Stotra* was a satire expressly said to be intended for the spiritual liberation of those who engaged in false flattery of the British.⁵⁶ We know that Pandya continued his literary relationship with Harishchandra even after moving to Mewar, for he took over the editorship of the journal *Hariścandra candrikā* in 1880.⁵⁷ Sometime during the reign of the Mewar ruler Maharana Sajjan Singh (r. 1874–84), Harishchandra was invited to Udaipur and given the sum of Rs. 10,000;⁵⁸ it is likely that Pandya had some role in this honoring of a friend.

Although he had little direct connection with *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, Harishchandra exemplified the early nationalist intellectual who was first and foremost an author in the vernacular. Like Pandya, Harishchandra regarded James Tod as the ultimate authority on Rajputs in his long essay *Udayapurodaya*, or Rise of Udaipur, first published in 1877.⁵⁹ In this attitude, both men were but emulating the widespread admiration for Tod found among Bengali intellectuals of the day. It was men like Pandya and Harishchandra, with ambivalent feelings toward colonial rule and the current state of Indian society, who embraced Tod's work with such approbation that he was placed beyond reproach, not scholars trained more traditionally such as Shyamaldas. By this time, a Bengali translation of Tod's *Rajasthan* had already been published, and an Urdu translation was published soon afterward in 1877.⁶⁰ Even though Tod's work was not translated into Hindi until considerably later, Tod obviously had a role in shaping conceptions of Rajput history among speakers of Hindi.⁶¹

⁵⁵ *Aṅgrez Stotra* was printed by Channu Lall at the Benares Printing Press in 1873. The title page of this first edition claims that it was compiled by Mohanlal Vishnulal Pandya on the direction of Babu Harishchandra. The text was re-published in 1882 and again in 1886, both times under Harishchandra's name rather than Pandya's.

⁵⁶ However, the literary scholar Sudhir Chandra identifies it as an unacknowledged, close translation of a piece written by Bankimchandra, the most celebrated Bengali author of the nineteenth century; only a short Sanskrit prologue was added to the original contents (*The Oppressive Present: Literature and Social Consciousness in Colonial India* [Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992], pp. 84–7).

⁵⁷ According to Dalmia, the journal "had almost dwindled into non-existence" before Harishchandra took it over again shortly before his death in January 1885 (*Nationalization of Hindu Traditions*, pp. 135, 245).

⁵⁸ Ram Vallabh Soman, *Later Mewar* (Jaipur: Current Law House, 1985), p. 293.

⁵⁹ It appeared in serial installments in 1877, then as an independent tract in 1878 (Vasudha Dalmia, "Vernacular Histories in Late Nineteenth-Century Banaras: Folklore, Puranas, and the New Antiquarianism," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 38, no. 1 [2001]: 71 n30). It has been reprinted in Bharatendu Harishchandra, *Bhāratendu Granthāvalī*, vol. 3, ed. Brajratnadas (Benares: Nagarpracharini Sabha, 1953), pp. 213–60.

⁶⁰ Freitag, *Serving Empire, Serving Nation*, pp. 174–9.

⁶¹ Francesca Orsini states that Tod's *Rajasthan* "was translated into Hindi probably as early as the 1880s" (*Hindi Public Sphere*, p. 178); this is not implausible given that the first Urdu translation

Pandya's understanding of history likely drew its inspiration from Harishchandra, whose several historical essays reveal a vision of the past quite distinct from that of colonial scholars writing in English. Vasudha Dalmia uses the term "vernacular history" to describe Harishchandra's approach, because he and others of his Benares circle drew freely on popular Sanskrit religious traditions such as the Puranas as well as local legends and genealogies in reconstructing the past, along with the inscriptions and Indo-Persian histories favored by the English-language scholarly establishment.⁶² While the Benares intellectuals might utilize the knowledge of Orientalists, they did not follow it slavishly.

Pandya may also have been influenced by the distinctly Hindi/Hindu tinge in Harishchandra's historical writing, which was not limited to the incorporation of material from older Sanskrit texts. Harishchandra shared with Pandya a feeling that Muslim histories did not tell the whole story of the peoples of the subcontinent.⁶³ Their rejection of Muslim chronicles must be seen in the context of the growing movement in support of the Hindi language. The Hindi movement began quite modestly in the 1860s as a demand that provincial governments allow Hindi in Nagari script to be used in the legal courts alongside a version of Hindustani (Urdu) that drew heavily on Persian, its predecessor as the language of the courts and of administration. As the years went on, the pro-Hindi position gradually broadened so as to encompass not only issues of language preference but also community identity. In the words of Christopher R. King, "the Hindi movement of nineteenth century North India expressed a Hindu nationalism whose essence lay in the denial of existing assimilation to cultural traditions associated with Muslim rule and the affirmation of potential differentiation from these traditions."⁶⁴ The agitation for Hindi was particularly intense in Benares, Allahabad, and other cities of the Northwest Provinces and Oudh, where the number and status of Muslims was relatively high. Michael Dodson has recently suggested that

was published in 1877 (Stark, *Empire of Books*, pp. 333–5). However, the earliest Hindi translation Jason Freitag was able to track down comes from 1906 (*Serving Empire, Serving Nation*, p. 177); in a few pages, I discuss a second Hindi translation by Baldevprasad Mishra, whose first volume was published in 1907; this is the earliest rendition of Tod's work into Hindi that I have personally seen.

⁶² Dalmia, "Vernacular Histories," pp. 60, 68.

⁶³ For example, Harishchandra stated that "it is not justifiable to give up whatever insights can be obtained . . . from Hindu texts beginning with *Khumman Rāso*. The historical accounts that are highly regarded in India as accurate these days are largely inconsistent with or do not cover the same ground as what is written in Hindu texts" (Harishchandra, *Granthāvalī*, 3:240–1). (*Khumman Rāso* is a dynastic history of the Mewar rulers, probably from the eighteenth century, which Tod believed was much older and relied on heavily.) Dalmia concurs that "Muslim chronicles are . . . firmly discounted as biased" in Harishchandra's writing ("Vernacular Histories," p. 68).

⁶⁴ King, *One Language, Two Scripts*, p. 15.

the pandits and English leadership at Benares Sanskrit College, which had been advocating a Sanskritized Hindi for decades, may have contributed to the strength of the Hindi movement in Benares.⁶⁵

Pandya was by no means the only Indian author to retain an attachment to *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, nor was Shyamaldas immediately or even entirely successful in discrediting *Prthvīrāj Rāso* in the eyes of all Western scholars. In his *Modern Vernacular Literature of Hindustan*, published in 1889, the linguist George Grierson continued to place Chand Bardai in the late twelfth century. Grierson states that Chand's "poetical works were collected by Amar Singh of Mewar in the early part of the seventeenth century. They were not improbably recast and modernised in parts at the same time, which has given rise to a theory that the whole is a modern forgery," at which point he cites Shyamaldas.⁶⁶ Pandya had been the first to raise, in passing, the possibility of several recensions of and numerous interpolations to the *Rāso*. He was on friendly terms with Grierson, who thanked Pandya for assisting him in checking Tod's literary references. Grierson, like Pandya, continued to privilege Tod as a source of information on all matters Rajasthani, specifying in the introduction to his book that the "only English work which I have taken as an authority has been Tod's *Rājāsthān* [sic], which contains much information not readily available elsewhere concerning the bards of Rāj'putānā."⁶⁷

In 1906, twenty years after Shyamaldas' article refuting the *Rāso*'s historicity, Hoernle referred to the epic as "the oldest work written in Hindi, or indeed in any of the modern North Indian vernaculars." He noted that the genuineness of the text was challenged by Kaviraj Shyamaldas "and has since remained greatly suspect, on the ground mainly of the incorrectness of its dates."⁶⁸ But Hoernle believed that the dating problem had been resolved by Shyamsundar Das, a central figure in Nagaripracharini Sabha, an organization founded in 1893 that was dedicated to promoting the Hindi language in Nagari script. Elaborating on a suggestion first made by Pandya, Shyamsundar Das argued that Chand Bardai had used a previously unknown Anand era, which began 90–91 years later than the Vikram era. Echoing the interpretation of Pandya (with whom he had long been acquainted), Hoernle wrote that "it is not denied that the text has suffered by occasional interpolations of incidents as well as by modernisation of the language."⁶⁹ Persuaded by Hoernle's

⁶⁵ Michael S. Dodson, *Orientalism, Empire, and National Culture: India, 1770–1880* (Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 142.

⁶⁶ George A. Grierson, *Modern Vernacular Literature of Hindustan* (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1889), p. 3.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. xiii.

⁶⁸ A. F. Rudolf Hoernle, "Notices of Books: Annual Report on the Search for Hindi Manuscripts, 4 vols.," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1906): 500.

⁶⁹ Hoernle, "Notices of Books," p. 501.

stance, as well as by a claim made in 1911 that the “real” or original epic had been discovered,⁷⁰ the historian Vincent Smith was persuaded to give some credence to the *Rāso*.⁷¹ The view propagated by Pandya and Shyamsundar Das that the epic is at core a twelfth-century text has persisted among a number of Indian scholars writing in Hindi or focusing on Rajasthan’s history.⁷²

This modified defense of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* – that it had originated in the twelfth century but been subjected to considerable alteration subsequently – came under attack again in the 1920s.⁷³ The most influential critic was Gaurishankar Hirachand Ojha, the leading historian of Rajasthan in the first half of the twentieth century and intellectual heir of Kaviraj Shyamaldas, who had employed him as a young man in the Mewar state’s History Office.⁷⁴ In his own writings on the history of Rajasthan, Ojha drew heavily on *Vīrvinod*, the multi-volume work on Mewar compiled by Shyamaldas, which had been banned and withdrawn from circulation.⁷⁵ Ojha’s views on *Prthvīrāj Rāso* were similarly shaped by those of Shyamaldas: he was vehement in his insistence that the epic was a later, fictional, work that probably dated from the mid sixteenth century. The alleged Anand era was soundly rejected by Ojha, who argued not only that this era was referred to nowhere else but also that the mere adding of 90 or 91 years did not correct the erroneous dates found in the *Rāso*.⁷⁶ Ojha’s argument, a continuation of Shyamaldas’ critique with added evidence, has prevailed at the upper reaches of the academic world. For example, in his influential history of Hindi literature, first published in 1929 and revised in 1940, Ramchandra Shukla was emphatic that the *Rāso*

⁷⁰ Asiatic Society of Bengal, “Annual Report (Feb. 1911),” *Journal & Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* n.s. 7 (1915): xxx–xxxi.

⁷¹ Compare the attitudes toward *Prthvīrāj Rāso* expressed in Vincent A. Smith, *The Early History of India*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908), 357 n2 with *The Early History of India*, 3rd edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1914), p. 387 n2.

⁷² For example, Rajmal Bora believes the *Rāso* was composed in Prithviraj’s lifetime, but not written down until the late sixteenth century (*Prthvīrāj Rāso*, pp. 122–4 & 136–7). A more recent iteration of his views can be found in Bora *Rāso*, vol. 1, pp. 19–21. Dasharatha Sharma, a well-known historian of Rajasthan, believed that the original *Prthvīrāj Rāso* might have been composed during the king’s lifetime, and certainly no later than the mid thirteenth century (“Age and Historicity of Prthvīrāja Rāso,” pp. 738–49); see also his *Early Chauhan Dynasties*, pp. 86–8, 97–8, 110–14).

⁷³ For example, Halder, “Some Reflections on the Prthvīrāja Rāsā,” pp. 203–11.

⁷⁴ M. S. Jain, “Gaurishanker Hirachand Ojha,” in *Historians and Historiography in Modern India*, ed. S. P. Sen (Calcutta: Institute of Historical Studies, 1973), p. 291.

⁷⁵ G. N. Sharma, “Kaviraja Shyamaldas,” pp. 286–7; Talbot, “Contesting Knowledges,” pp. 200–1.

⁷⁶ Gaurishankar Hirachand Ojha, “Rāso kī Nirmāṇ-Kāl [Anand Vikram Samvat kī Kalpanā]” and “Prthvīrāj Rāso kā Nirmāṇ-Kāl” in *Prthvīrāj Rāso kī Vivecanā*, eds. Vyas and Vyas, pp. 145–213 and 214–48. The first of these essays was originally published in *Nāgarīpracāriṇī Patrikā* in 1920; the publication history of the second essay is not provided by the editors.

was a spurious (*jālī*) text.⁷⁷ In the past half century, scholars writing in English or based at prestigious institutions have largely rejected the *Prthvīrāj Rāso*'s historicity and retained only a slight interest in it from a literary perspective.

Meanwhile, Mohanlal Vishnulal Pandya, who had expressed such great admiration of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* in his rebuttal to Shyamaldas, retained his commitment to the text until the end of his life. He did what he could for the *Rāso* by making it available in a printed edition, initially through Medical Hall Press, Benares. Although Pandya started publishing the *Rāso* in 1887, the project progressed very slowly until 1904, when the Nagaripracharini Sabha of Benares took it on. With the help of additional editors such as Shyamsundar Das and Radhakrishna Das, the entire text was published by 1912.⁷⁸ Pandya died before publication was complete, unfortunately, and so never wrote the introduction that had been planned for the edition. This means that the precise details of which manuscripts were used in preparing it have been lost, although it is clear that Pandya relied heavily on his personal collection of manuscripts obtained in Udaipur. The Nagaripracharini Sabha edition prepared by Pandya and others was widely circulated in the early twentieth century and again in its recent 1993 reprinting. Although it took decades of effort, Pandya did manage to disseminate *Prthvīrāj Rāso* to new circles and new audiences, even if the world of English-language scholarship was largely skeptical about its worth.

Shyamaldas and Pandya make a fascinating contrast. One was a hereditary bard, the other a Brahmin; one was born in a princely state, the other in British India; one was unlettered in English, while the other was proficient in the language of the colonial masters. Yet it is the first one who published an influential article in the top academic journal of Western scholarship in India; and it is he who overturned centuries of certainty about the age and accuracy of a bardic ballad that had been much patronized in his own princely state. Meanwhile, it was the other one, the English-speaker, who spent decades of his life trying to get the bardic ballad printed so that it could reach a wider audience and who finally achieved this goal at a publisher dedicated to promoting the Nagari script and Hindi language. These two men overturn the easy assumptions we might make about their intellectual positions based on affiliations of caste, class, language training, and birth place. They also reveal the diverse forms of modernity and their uneven progressions through society, for who would we describe as more modern: Shyamaldas in his adoption of

⁷⁷ Ramchandra Shukla, *Hindi Sāhitya kā Itihās*, 9th edn. (Benares: Nagaripracharini Sabha, 1942 [1929]), p. 46.

⁷⁸ These are the dates given in the preface to the Nagaripracharini Sabha's second edition of the *Rāso* (Pandya *Rāso*, p. 3). Elsewhere the time span is said to extend from 1906 to 1913 (S. Singh, *Chandbardai*, pp. 26–7).

Western historiographic practices or Pandya in his advocacy on behalf of a freshly imagined community of Hindus and Hindi-speakers?

The examples of Shyamaldas and Pandya bring to light the complexities of knowledge formation by the late nineteenth century. Several generations after the foundational studies of colonial scholars such as William Jones and James Tod, the new knowledges and their epistemologies had been widely disseminated among intellectuals of both Indian and Western origin and significantly adapted or reinterpreted in turn. The trajectories of intellectual transmission could be quite convoluted, with Tod as perhaps the best illustration of this phenomenon. While ostensibly making available to the public the contents of ancient bardic histories, Tod introduced many new concepts and assumptions into his representation of Rajasthan's past. For decades Tod's work was lauded for its wealth of details on Rajput society and its rich insights into Rajput culture, and eventually it achieved an authoritative status.

Already in the late nineteenth century, however, it was becoming apparent that Tod was not entirely right on all matters Rajasthani, creating doubts that culminated in the 1920 edition of *Rajasthan*, in which William Crooke frequently repudiated or amended Tod's statements in a slew of footnotes.⁷⁹ By that time, however, Tod had long since been enthusiastically embraced by Indians who wrote in the new, modern genres of vernacular literature and articulated new, modern notions of romantic nationalism, as will be described in the next section of this chapter. And so it was the English-educated Pandya who, despite ambivalent feelings about colonial rule, relied on the colonial knowledge formulated by Tod, with its strong pro-Rajput sentiments; while the hereditary bard Shyamaldas, adhering to new standards of scholarship in the discipline of history, rejected Tod along with the bardic knowledge that Tod purported to be relaying. The intricate flows of knowledge reception, transformation, and recirculation that had transpired over the nineteenth century defy attempts to apply dualistic classifications of the indigenous versus the foreign, the traditional versus the modern, or the local versus the global.

I have presented my discussion of Shyamaldas and Pandya so far in terms of historiography and historicity, but what if we shift gears and adopt a memory-studies perspective instead? This also helps break down the dichotomy between the two men's views that we can too readily posit. The empiricist stance adopted by Shyamaldas affects an air of objectivity towards the past, which is implicitly treated as something apart and outside of the present that can only be retrieved through direct contact with its relics. The insistence on both objectivity and documentary evidence was central to the increasingly professionalized discipline of history as it developed over the course of the

⁷⁹ See the interesting discussion on this point in Freitag, *Serving Empire, Serving Nation*, pp. 162–9.

nineteenth century and remains among the characteristic features that differentiate “history” from “memory,” in the minds of many. Yet, from a vantage point 130 years in Shyamaldas’ future, we can readily see how much his critique of *Prthvīrāj Rāso*’s historicity was a product of its own intellectual times and employed a narrow definition of acceptable evidence. This recognition of the constructed nature of historiography, widespread among scholars today, has led a growing number of memory theorists to suggest that “history itself might be regarded as one mode of memory among others,” or that “history writing is simply a very specific medium of cultural memory with its own rules and traditions.”⁸⁰ In other words, the activity Shyamaldas was engaged in was but one form of remembering the past, albeit highly specialized in its techniques when compared to Pandya’s methods.

An emphasis on social frameworks as shapers of memory – one of the two strengths of a memories-studies approach mentioned in this book’s introduction – is another way we can avoid an overly dichotomous analysis of Shyamaldas and Pandya. If we accept that their opinions on the *Rāso* epic were linked to living communities of memory, whose values and views they both reflected and attempted to influence, we can differentiate at least three separate social groups. One was the academic establishment of colonial India, whose notions of modern historical methodology Shyamaldas was emulating with considerable skill and success when he critiqued the *Rāso*. Members of the Mewar court in Udaipur, who sought to preserve entrenched privileges, constituted another community: in this case, one whose interests lay in retaining the older memories deposited in *Prthvīrāj Rāso* rather than in rejecting them. Pandya spoke for them just as much as he spoke for the newer memory community of Indian nationalists such as Harishchandra and himself in the Hindi-speaking area, and numerous others in Bengal, who sought inspiration in the past for the future that they hoped to create. Pandya’s ability to speak to and for these last two, quite distinct, groups of people illustrates how it is possible for individuals to participate in multiple memory communities.

Retellings of Prithviraj’s story in colonial modernity

Pandya and other early Hindu nationalists who wrote about the Indian past were not academically trained or professionally employed as scholars, and they often came from the ranks of the new vernacular print culture. Nonetheless, they had a large part in shaping how Prithviraj Chauhan and other martial

⁸⁰ Patrick H. Hutton, “The Memory Phenomenon as a Never-Ending Story,” *History and Theory* 47 (2008): 587; Marek Tamm, “Beyond History and Memory: New Perspectives in Memory Studies,” *History Compass* 11, no. 6 (2013): 463.

figures from the medieval era were remembered in modern India; arguably more so than did Kaviraj Shyamaldas. In this section, I turn my gaze away from scholarship in English and in Western academic circles – the colonial knowledge that has been the primary focus of the last chapter and a half – to look instead at how Prithviraj Chauhan and his promoter James Tod were treated in the emerging field of modern Hindi publishing. In this world of vernacular literature and a rising Hindi/Hindu consciousness, James Tod's idealistic image of Prithviraj Chauhan and other Rajput heroes flourished unabated and the *Rāso* story remained alive, though with considerable modifications. If we want to trace back the genealogy of the Prithviraj who is invoked by Hindu nationalists in the present day, we must go to the vernacular retellings of his story from the early twentieth century. These are the immediate forebears of the symbolic figure of Prithviraj, and not *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, which is but a rather distant and distorted predecessor.

Little was written in English about Prithviraj and the *Rāso* after Shyamaldas' critique in the late 1880s discredited the epic's alleged twelfth-century date, but the situation was quite different in the modern Indian languages. At least twenty separate narratives about the Chauhan king were composed in Hindi between approximately 1900 and 1940;⁸¹ other works on Prithviraj were produced in Bengali, Marathi, Gujarati, and Telugu, additionally. There was a spectrum of genres: from modern prose renditions of the *Rāso* to historical dramas and historical fiction in novel form. These works differ in how they characterize Prithviraj and why they narrate his story – I do not want to imply that early twentieth-century vernacular literature imagined the Chauhan king in a uniform manner. There was considerable variation between texts in the number of supporting characters that were featured and in the treatment of Prithviraj's death; as always, there were a multiplicity of ways in which Prithviraj was remembered. Yet a recurrent tendency to conceptualize Prithviraj Chauhan in nationalist terms – both as a model of self-sacrifice for all Indians and also more narrowly as a defender of Hindu interests – can be widely observed.

Retellings of Prithviraj's life-story in the vernacular languages were part of a larger fascination with the martial events and personalities of the distant past

⁸¹ Works relating to Prithviraj that were written between 1900 and 1940 and are not otherwise mentioned in the following pages include: Kavi Chandra, *Bhajan Prthvīrāj* (Muzaffarnagar: self-published, 1914); Babu Satishchandra, *Samyogitā*, trans. Parsnath Tripathi (Calcutta: Haridas and Company, 1921); Mathurprasad Dikshit, *Prthvīrāj Rāso* (Lahore, 1923); Shivadyal Jayaswal, *Samyoginī-svayamvar* (Kanpur: self-published, 1924); Chandrashekhar Pathak, *Prthvīrāj*, 4th edn. (Calcutta, 1927); Narayanprasad Mishra, *Samyoginī Svayambar* (Benares: Babu Baijnath Prasad Bookseller, 1929); Harisharan Shrivastava, *Prthviraj kimva Cauhāncaritra* (Meerut, 1930); Chatsurseen Shastri, *Khavās kā Byāh*, 2nd edn. (Lucknow: Ganga Pustakmala Karyalay, 1938); Mayadatta Naithani, *Samyogitā* (Bombay: Hindi-grantha-ratnakar Karyalay, 1939).

that becomes apparent in North India beginning in the 1890s. Increased censorship of literature and theater by colonial authorities is no doubt one reason for the greater popularity of historical themes, since criticism of the colonial present could be masked if the setting was transferred to the precolonial past. A patriotic fervor that sought to counteract the colonial narrative of India's (lack of) development was another factor in the rise of historically oriented literature. It was supplemented by an accelerating rate of change in society that may have induced nostalgia for the past. Sudhir Chandra believes, along similar lines, that "the emotional need for cultural belonging deepened" as conflict with the colonial rulers intensified.⁸²

One indication of the growing relevance of India's martial past to the Indian public is the renewed interest in the classical *Mahābhārata* epic, a frequent source for modern Bengali and Hindi drama, as evidenced by a play penned by Mohanlal Vishnulal Pandya in 1874.⁸³ The *Mahābhārata* was regarded by many Indian intellectuals writing in the vernaculars, such as Harishchandra and Bankimchandra, as a "repository of national history," in Pamela Lothspeich's apt phrasing.⁸⁴ Similarly, new productions featuring armed resistance in the precolonial era replaced the plays about religion and romance that had dominated the *nauṭankī* theater of North India in earlier years. In her study of *nauṭankī*, Kathryn Hansen notes the parallels between the new martial trend in drama, exemplified by episodes taken from the Alha oral epic set in the twelfth century, and an emerging strand of more militant Indian nationalism.⁸⁵

The construction of a militant Hindu history featuring valiant Rajput warriors was foremost the work of Bengali nationalist writers, as numerous scholars have observed. The romantic vision of Rajput history propagated by James Tod was adopted by Indian intellectuals earlier, and more enthusiastically, in Bengal than elsewhere in India.⁸⁶ In a perceptive comment on the reception of Tod's work in Bengal, Ramya Sreenivasan points out that it was

⁸² Chandra, *Oppressive Present*, p. 6.

⁸³ Sisir Kumar Das claims that Pandya wrote a Hindi play "on the mythological hero Prahlad with political [i.e., anti-colonial] overtones" while in Benares (*A History of Indian Literature*, vol. 8: 1800–1910 [Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1991], p. 282). I have not been able to find a copy of it.

⁸⁴ Because it was a treasure-house of morally uplifting, politically relevant, and supposedly true stories, Lothspeich asserts that "more Hindi works are based on the *Mahābhārata* than any other source text, including the *Rāmāyana* and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, in the late colonial period" (Pamela Lothspeich, *Epic Nation: Reimagining the Mahabharata in the Age of the Empire* [Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009], pp. 36, 2).

⁸⁵ Kathryn Hansen, *Grounds for Play: The Nauṭankī Theatre of North India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 117–33.

⁸⁶ Meenakshi Mukherjee estimates that more than a hundred Bengali works published between 1858 and 1920 were based on episodes from *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* ("Tod's Rajasthan and the Bengali Imagination," in *Elusive Terrain: Culture and Literary Memory* [Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008], pp. 154–5).

“comparable to the epics in its didactic value, and was read within similar generic horizons: the epics and the *Annals* were equally exemplary narratives about characters believed to have been historical figures.”⁸⁷ By the early twentieth century, most scholars working in English regarded bardic accounts such as *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* or the tales narrated by Tod to be valuable only as literary specimens and not as historical sources. But such a strict differentiation between literature and history was not made by many intellectuals writing in the vernacular languages.

Even though Bengali intellectuals accepted Tod’s valorization of the Rajputs wholesale, they also transformed his categories of analysis in a fundamental manner. In place of the multiplicity and diversity of “nations” that populated the subcontinent in Tod’s mind, most Bengali writers concerned themselves with only two: Hindus and Muslims. To be sure, Tod had often cast Muslims as foreign invaders who oppressed Rajputs and other indigenous Indians, but he was even more scathing in his remarks on the Marathas. Very seldom did Tod speak of Hindus as a whole, for he thought India’s non-Muslim population was varied in their origins and essential attributes. When Bengali intellectuals collapsed all the many non-Muslim groups into the single category of Hindu, it constituted a major departure from Tod’s worldview. Like Tod, Hindu Bengali writers lionized the Rajputs, but they made the unprecedented move of appropriating these Rajputs as part of their own immediate past. This radically expanded the boundaries of the community that was being imagined – an Indian nation that encompassed Hindus from all corners of the subcontinent.⁸⁸ Tod’s massive text was particularly appreciated because it provided ample ammunition, in its many accounts of martial bravery, to refute the British charge that (especially Bengali) Hindus were effeminate and cowardly.

The general lag in the development of modern Hindi literature is reflected in the dates of the first Khari Boli texts on Prithviraj Chauhan, which are more than thirty years later than their equivalents in Bengali. The earliest works I have found are prose accounts published in 1899 and 1901.⁸⁹ Another prose retelling titled simply *Pr̥thvīrāj Cauhān* that is a mere ten pages in length was

⁸⁷ Sreenivasan, *Many Lives of a Rajput Queen*, p. 179.

⁸⁸ Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay & the Formation of Nationalist Discourse in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 145.

⁸⁹ As Hindi publications of this era were often reprinted without acknowledgement of earlier editions, the dates cited for the works discussed in this section must be understood as tentative. Ramnarayan (Dugar), a resident of Udaipur, wrote the 1899 retelling of the *Rāso* story, *Pr̥thvīrāj Caritra* (produced at Akhtar Printing Press). The 1901 rendition of the *Rāso* was written by Jayantiprasad Upadhyay, *Pr̥thvīrāj Cauhān* (Moradabad: Madanmohan Jyotishi & Vishvambar Dayalu Itihasprakash, 1901). R. S. McGregor cites an earlier work, a play titled *Samyogitā Svayamvar* from 1897, which I have not been able to locate (*Hindi Literature of the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* [Wiesbaden: Otto Harrasowitz, 1974], p. 96).

published in 1902.⁹⁰ Nonetheless, it is worth notice because the author, Baldevprasad Mishra (1869–1905), was a member of a circle of writers from Moradabad who were slightly younger than Bharatendu Harishchandra and explicitly acknowledged him as an influence and inspiration.⁹¹ A Brahmin who knew Sanskrit, English, and Bengali, in addition to Hindi, Mishra was respected by the Hindi-writing intellectuals of his day such as Shyamsundar Das and Mahavirprasad Dwivedi.⁹² Mishra thus followed Harishchandra's example as a pioneer in Hindi literature, taking up historical themes among others. His retelling of the *Rāśo* (which he claims was based on the early thirteenth-century *Tāj al-Ma'āsir*, Firishta's seventeenth-century Persian chronicle from the Deccan, *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāśo* and other historical works) mentions many chapters in the *Rāśo*'s long recension and goes into some detail on Prithviraj's shooting of the Sultan, but does little with the Kanauj episode and its depiction of fighting between Hindu warriors.⁹³

Mishra also emulated Harishchandra in his admiration for James Tod. Around the time that his *Pr̥thvīrāj Cauhān* was published, Mishra was working on a translation of Tod's *Rajasthan*. Mishra's willingness to undertake the demanding and time-consuming work of preparing a Hindi version of *Rajasthan* illustrates yet again Tod's considerable impact on the first few generations of authors in the modern Indian languages. The first volume of Mishra's *Rājasthān Itihās* came out in 1907, just one year after the earliest Hindi translation of Tod.⁹⁴ Mishra's volume was 941 pages long and took him six years to complete; he was not able to carry out the entire project before his death and the second volume was finished by his brother.⁹⁵ Mishra's account of Prithviraj's life was probably prepared as background for the Tod project, explaining its brevity.

If Mishra's self-described "translation" of *Rajasthan* is any indication, early renditions of Tod's work into modern Indian languages took considerable liberties.⁹⁶ Where he thought it was warranted, Mishra introduced information from other sources into Tod's narrative; he was not shy about expressing his

⁹⁰ Baldevprasad Mishra, *Pr̥thvīrāj Cauhān* (Calcutta, 1902); another edition was published in Aligarh by Jagat Vinod Yantralay in 1904.

⁹¹ Dalmia, *Nationalization of Hindu Traditions*, pp. 141–2.

⁹² Harmohanlal Sud, *Bhāratendu Maṇḍal ke Samānāntar aur Āpūrak Murādābād Maṇḍal* (Delhi: Vani Prakashan, 1986), pp. 84–5.

⁹³ This claim is made on the title page of Mishra's booklet. Harmohanlal Sud, author of a book on the group of Moradabad writers who admired and emulated Harishchandra, has confused Baldevprasad Mishra's text with Jayantiprasad Upadhyay's account of Prithviraj from 1901; Sud's summary of Mishra's version is therefore entirely wrong (*Bhāratendu Maṇḍal*, p. 221 ff.).

⁹⁴ Freitag, *Serving Empire, Serving Nation*, p. 177.

⁹⁵ Sud, *Bhāratendu Maṇḍal*, pp. 287, 290.

⁹⁶ I have consulted the edition published in 1925 (Baldevprasad Mishra, *Rājasthān Itihās*, vol. 1, rev. Jwalaprasad Mishra [Bombay: Khemraj Shrikrishnadas at Shrivenkateshwara Stim Yantralaya]).

own opinion on matters either.⁹⁷ Mishra injects numerous additional details from *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*, including some passages taken directly from the epic, as well as a discussion of differing views on how Prithviraj died. While he occasionally diverges from Tod's assessment of matters, at other times Mishra's “translation” restates Tod's views in an even more emphatic manner – this is especially apparent in the anti-Muslim passages. Part of Tod's appeal for authors in the modern Indian languages was surely the license he provided for them to be highly critical of the Muslim role in India's past. Just as “translations” of Tod's *Rajasthan* offered ample opportunities for authors such as Baldevprasad Mishra to express their Hindu nationalist sentiments, so too did prose retellings of *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* into modern Hindi.

Inspiration or instruction for the present day could equally well be disseminated in the form of historical plays and novels, with even less expectation that the author adhere to an existing text than in the case of “translations” or other prose works such as Mishra's essay. In the modern genres of drama and fiction, the historical imagination could be given free rein, to fill in what was not known and to construct a past that would fit the desired future. Historical fiction in Hindi relating to Prithviraj was not composed for decades after similar works in Bengali, but does appear at about the same time as the first modern Hindi prose synopses of *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*. The earliest Prithviraj-related Hindi novel I have identified is *Vīrpatnī vā Rānī Samyogitā*, published in 1903 and self-described as historical fiction (*aitihāsik upanyās*). Meenakshi Mukherjee identifies its author, Gangaprasad Gupta, as one of “the first generation of popular novelists in Hindi.”⁹⁸ Like Baldevprasad Mishra, who wrote a short summary of the *Rāso* in 1902, Gangaprasad Gupta also produced a Hindi version of Tod's *Rajasthan*, which came out in serialized form in 1911, revealing yet again the link between Tod and the literary valorization of Prithviraj and other Rajputs in colonial-era North India.⁹⁹

Gangaprasad Gupta's novel *Vīrpatnī vā Rānī Samyogitā* loosely follows the *Rāso* story, although the Chauhan king looms larger in this novel because the roles of most other characters are reduced considerably. Despite the mention of Prithviraj's queen Samyogita in the novel's title, she is a secondary figure whose main act of heroism is her decision to become a *sati* at the end.

⁹⁷ This is quite evident in Mishra's section on the Mewar king Samar Singh, where Tod's original contains some coverage of Prithviraj Chauhan's last conflict with Shihab al-Din of Ghur (B. Mishra, *Rājasthān Itihās*, pp. 114–33; Tod, *Rajasthan*, pp. 297–303).

⁹⁸ Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality*, p. 60. She cites a date of 1903 for Gangaprasad Gupta's *Vīrpatnī vā Rānī Samyogitā*; I read the second edition published in 1912 by Banarsiprasad Varma in Benares.

⁹⁹ Gangaprasad Gupta's translation of Tod's *Rajasthan*, published in Benares, was titled “Tād kṛt Rājasthān kā Itihās” (Shivkumar, *Banglā Sāhitya Meṁ Rājasthān*, vol. 1 [Howrah: Sahitya-Niketan, 1989], p. 84).

A notable deviation from the cast of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* lies in the addition of a pair of extraneous characters: the young Rajput Pratap Singh and Samyogita's female companion Anandi, who is in love with Pratap Singh. Unlike the other characters who act more or less as they do in the *Rāso* epic, these two young people embody new values. Pratap Singh abandons his sworn loyalty to Jaychand, king of Kanauj, in order to join the Chauhan king's fight against the foreign Muslim. Anandi does not go to battle for the nation herself, but she contributes to the war-effort by saving Pratap Singh's life so that he is able to resume the fight. Both assume the guise of ascetics (evoking the memory of the ascetics in Bankimchandra's *Anandmath*) and die without having consummated their love. This couple, who have the largest roles in the novel, clearly represent the modern Indian nationalist man and woman. *Vīrpati vā Rānī Samyogitā* thus grafts a nationalist message, in the form of these new characters, on to the root stock of an essentially early modern narrative.¹⁰⁰

Another striking departure from the *Rāso* occurs at the end of *Vīrpati vā Rānī Samyogitā*. In the *Rāso*'s famous *śabd-bhedi-bāñ* episode, the blind Prithviraj aims an arrow at Shihab al-Din based on sound alone, and dies soon after successfully assassinating the sultan. Gangaprasad Gupta chose a more plausible ending in lieu of the *Rāso*'s heroic resolution to Prithviraj's life. In his version of the Prithviraj story, the king is captured on the battlefield and dies almost immediately afterwards. This fate is more in line with what the Indo-Persian chronicles report and is obviously more realistic than the amazing feat of archery attributed to Prithviraj in the *Rāso*. The purging of supernatural and unrealistic elements found in older narratives is the most notably "modern" trend in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Indian literature.¹⁰¹

Gangaprasad Gupta's novel *Vīrpati vā Rānī Samyogitā*, first published in 1903, is not alone in ascribing a more plausible manner of dying to the Chauhan king. In the play *Prthvīrāj* by Manomohan Goswami, originally published in Bengali in 1905 and subsequently translated into Hindi, Prithviraj and Chand kill each other shortly after being taken captive.¹⁰² The omission of

¹⁰⁰ Prachi Deshpande notes the presence of this type of romantically involved young couple, who represented the ordinary person, in Marathi plays from the early twentieth century as well. She observes that the trope of the young man, in particular, "drove home the point that Maratha power rose from a broad-based patriotism among the common people and not simply the military genius of a single figure such as Shivaji" (*Creative Pasts: Historical Memory and Identity in Western India, 1700–1960* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2007], p. 159).

¹⁰¹ This point has been made previously by several scholars, including Lothspeich, *Epic Nation*, pp. 8–9; and Orsini, *Print and Pleasure*, pp. 210–11, 216–19.

¹⁰² The Hindi version of Goswami's *Prthvīrāj* play was done by Rupnarayan Pandey, a well-known translator of Bengali popular literature (Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920–1940* [Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002], pp. 72 n99, 413–14). I have only seen the second edition of this Hindi translation (Prayag: Gandhi Hindi-pustak Bhandar, 1929), and do not know the date of the first edition.

the *Rāso*'s fanciful episode in Ghazni, where Prithviraj avenges himself on Shihab al-Din Ghuri, suggests that the authors of both works were doubtful about its accuracy. Other retellings of Prithviraj's story from the first two decades of the twentieth century also exhibit an awareness that the *Rāso*'s veracity was questionable. In some cases, only one possibility is mentioned: death immediately after the Tarain Battle; in other cases, the *Rāso*'s *sabd-bhedī-bāñ* episode is also cited as a second possibility.¹⁰³ This kind of equivocation can be witnessed in Jayantiprasad Upadhyay's *Prthvīrāj Cauhān* (1901). Upadhyay states that the Chauhan king died on the battlefield and rejects the *Rāso* as unreliable because of the many late interpolations in it. But he then goes on to tell the *Rāso* version of Prithviraj's death and praises the poet Chand lavishly, leaving some confusion in the reader's mind as to his true stance on the issue.¹⁰⁴ Vaidyanath Tripathi in *Rājpūt Vīrtā* (1913) similarly presents both endings to Prithviraj's life.¹⁰⁵

From the 1920s onward, however, concerns about the *Rāso*'s accuracy seem to have abated for writers in modern Hindi. A few authors continue to acknowledge differences in opinion between Chand and "English history writers" regarding Prithviraj's final fate, while clearly preferring Chand's alternative – such is the case with Narottam Vyas in his "history" titled *Prthvīrāj*.¹⁰⁶ But by this time, most accounts such as Vishvanath Tripathi's *Prthvīrāj Cauhān* (1927) reverted to the more satisfying episode in which the king avenges his honor, without expressing any qualms about the *Rāso*'s historicity.¹⁰⁷ Jagdishprasad Tivari's short poem *Prthvī-rāj kā Śabdbedhī-Bāñ* (1920) presents both Jaychand and Shihab al-Din Muhammad of Ghur as cruel personalities and likewise incorporates the *Rāso* tale of Prithviraj's revenge on the sultan.¹⁰⁸ In the same era when the scholars Ramchandra Shukla and Gaurishankar Hirachand Ojha were vehemently rejecting the *Rāso*'s testimony in their Hindi publications, we find less academically based

¹⁰³ Rammnarayan Dugar, who wrote the earliest prose retelling of the *Rāso* in modern Hindi I know of, included a long introduction that deals with the historicity issue. He concludes that the epic was written long after the king's life, probably in the early seventeenth-century reign of the Mewar ruler Amar Singh I (*Prthvīrāj Caritra*, pp. 84–9). While he denies the authenticity of the *sabd-bhedī-bāñ* episode in his introduction (p. 80), Duggar does narrate this episode later on in his synopsis of the *Rāso* epic.

¹⁰⁴ Upadhyay, *Prthvīrāj Cauhān*, pp. 280–96.

¹⁰⁵ Vaidyanath Tripathi, *Rājpūt Vīrtā (Prthvīrāj-Patan)* (Bombay: Khemraj Shrikrishnadas, 1913).

¹⁰⁶ Narottam Vyas, *Prthvīrāj: Gauravmay Hindū-sāmrājya kā Antim Itihās*, 2nd edn. (Calcutta: Popular Trading Co., 1930). All of Vyas' other published works are dated in the 1920s, so the first edition of *Prthvīrāj* was likely published in that decade.

¹⁰⁷ Vishvanath Tripathi, *Prthvīrāj Cauhān* (Benares: Chaudhuri and Sons, 1927), pp. 137–40. There is relatively little commentary by the author in this prose biography, aside from the common complaint about the disunity of Indian kings and a more unusual explicit disapproval of Prithviraj's multiple marriages.

¹⁰⁸ Jagdishprasad Tivari, *Prthvī-rāj kā Śabdbedhī-Bāñ* (Kanpur: The Author, 1920).

writers embracing aspects of the past imagined in *Prthvīrāj Rāso*. The greater nationalist fervor of the 1920s and 1930s likely encouraged an interest in heroic histories, which commercial writers may have competed to fulfill.

While the treatment of Prithviraj's death varied over time, other aspects of the story remained similar in the many Hindi works on Prithviraj from the first half of the twentieth century. They typically contained a nationalist message that stressed the need for unity among Hindus while also vilifying Shihab al-Din and other Muslims. Another common feature in this literature – whether prose retelling of the *Rāso*, historical novel, or historical drama – is the narrowing of the literary focus to fewer and fewer people. Whereas *Prthvīrāj Rāso* is populated with a big cast of hundreds, twentieth-century retellings feature a much smaller number. Prithviraj's multiple wives are rarely mentioned, a strategy that made his marriage with Samyogita seem closer to the modern norm of monogamy. Nor do Prithviraj's various *sāmans* receive much attention; except for Samar Singh of Mewar, warriors affiliated with Prithviraj are often entirely overlooked. An extreme example of this phenomenon is Ramkumar Varma's one-act play *Prthvīrāj kī Āñkhein* from the mid-1930s, which features only three individuals: Prithviraj, his bard Chand, and the sultan Muhammad Ghuri.¹⁰⁹ These elisions of other (non-Muslim) enemies, other warrior heroes, and other wives from the Prithviraj narrative demonstrate the centrality of forgetting in the conveying of cultural memories. Adapting older memories to make them meaningful to new circumstances often involves as much suppression of inconvenient or incongruent realities as it does the imagining of more appropriate or admirable ones. In that sense, what is forgotten as memories get transmitted onward is just as important to study as what is retained or recast.

A corollary to the narrowing literary focus is a growing idealization of the Chauhan king, notable in many although not all modern Hindi literary works. As Prithviraj was cast more and more as an individual hero, rather than a king leading a multitude of heroes, there was a tendency to represent him in increasingly positive terms. The gray ambiguities of the *Rāso* character are frequently whitewashed, giving rise to a hero who is a one-dimensional paragon of royal virtue. Once Prithviraj Chauhan was understood as a national icon, a representative of the Hindu nation, his blemishes apparently had to be eradicated and his culpability for defeat erased.

A further notable characteristic of modern Hindi works such as Gangaprasad Gupta's *Vīrpatnī* and Goswami's *Prthvīrāj* is the dearth of violent action.

¹⁰⁹ Ramkumar Varma, *Prthvīrāj kī Āñkhein* (Lucknow: Ganga-Granthagar, 1936). Varma was a Hindi lecturer and later professor at Allahabad University; he was also a poet associated with the Chhayavad movement (Orsini, *Hindi Public Sphere*, pp. 35 and 109; Karine Schomer, *Mahadevi Varma and the Chayavad Age of Modern Hindi Poetry* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983], pp. 140–4).

Despite the militant tone that pervades much of this literature, there are very few descriptions of combat, in striking contrast to *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, the classical epics, and many oral epics as well. India's epic tradition relishes battle narratives, which are numerous, lengthy, and often numbingly repetitive. Military details, frequently quite formulaic, abound in epic literature: battle formations, one-on-one combat between named warriors, descriptions of war-horses and elephants, the clouds of dust caused by the movement of armies, and the streams of blood drenching the battlefield strewn with hacked off heads and body parts. None of this figures in the modern Hindi works surveyed, even those that ostensibly summarize the *Rāso*. This internal evidence alone indicates that the authors and audiences for modern retellings of Prithviraj's story were no longer members of a warrior class. Instead, as Francesca Orsini explains, Brahmins dominated the ranks of those who advocated and utilized modern Hindi in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, along with individuals from scribal and mercantile communities such as Kayasthas, Agrawals, and Khatris.¹¹⁰ These teachers, journalists, and the like may have sought inspiration from the defiance of Rajput heroes such as Prithviraj, but they had little knowledge or interest in military action. In their hands, the Chauhan king was transformed from a war-lord into a patriot.

Visual commemorations of Delhi's emperor

In the first half of the twentieth century, Prithviraj Chauhan was also commemorated visually, both in sculpture and in the popular chromolithograph format. The earliest statue of the king is located in Delhi, in another reminder that Prithviraj's ostensible association with Delhi has been central to his significance as a cultural hero, in both Mughal and modern times.¹¹¹ In a small garden to the left of New Delhi's Lakshmi-Narayan temple (more widely known as Birla Mandir) stands a smaller than life-size stone sculpture of the king Prithviraj Chauhan (Figure 7.1), presumably erected between 1933 and 1939, while the temple was being built.¹¹² As the only other rulers represented at this site are the famous Ashoka Maurya and legendary King Vikramaditya, the implication is that Prithviraj was comparable to these celebrated emperors of antiquity.¹¹³ Prithviraj Chauhan is dressed in a stitched robe and leggings

¹¹⁰ Orsini, *Hindi Public Sphere*, pp. 3–4 and 14.

¹¹¹ I am grateful to Michael Bednar for alerting me to the existence of this statue.

¹¹² Construction of the temple began in 1933; it was completed in 1938 and inaugurated in 1939.

None of the various statues located outside the temple in its garden courtyards are dated.

¹¹³ However, behind the temple is a larger courtyard containing statues of a slew of kings, ranging from mythical ones such as Yudhishtira of *Mahābhārata* fame, to national heroes such as Shivaji Bhonsle, and the more locally famous Ranjit Singh of the Punjab and Surajmal of Bharatpur.



Figure 7.1. Statue of Prithviraj Chauhan, Lakshmi-Narayan temple grounds, Delhi; photograph by Eric Schenk

appropriate for horse-riding and stands upright with a long, heavy sword in his right hand. This formal, indeed rigid, representation of the king can easily be differentiated from post-independence heroic statues, typically bronze equestrian images.

Although the Birla Mandir image is quite dissimilar in form to the more recent statue at Ajmer with which we began this book, its inscription casts Prithviraj in much the same light as at Ajmer: as a patriot who was noteworthy for his armed resistance to Muslim power. The Birla Mandir inscription does not only praise the king in the manner of the Ajmer inscription, for it also points out his defects as a leader. So, for instance, Prithviraj is faulted for “his misdirected kindness and poor judgment in letting Muhammad Ghuri of Ghazni go free, after having defeated and captured him many times, which had disastrous consequences for the Hindus only.”¹¹⁴ This line reveals familiarity with the *Rāśo* narrative, in which Shihab al-Din is said to have been taken captive by Prithviraj either seven or twenty-one times, depending on the version. The Hindu nationalistic message regarding “disastrous consequences for the Hindus only” is reinforced by the last line in the inscribed text, which conveys what Prithviraj was supposedly thinking at the time of his last battle. The passage can be broadly rendered as “no longer is my mind inclined toward pleasure or sorrow; no more have I an interest in Delhi’s empire; to joyfully annihilate the barbarians – that is my sole remaining desire.”¹¹⁵ This is an excellent example of the deployment of Muslims in nationalist rhetoric as a stand-in for the colonial masters – for an Indian audience embroiled in the struggle for independence against the British, Prithviraj’s statue served as a reminder of two sets of foreign oppressors and so was doubly useful.

While the Birla Mandir statue would have been seen by hordes of people who visited this popular temple, inaugurated at a public ceremony by Mahatma Gandhi himself in 1939, other visual depictions of Prithviraj were appreciated in more private settings. Images of gods, goddesses, and saints dominated the new art form of chromolithographs, but precolonial heroes such as Shivaji and Rana Pratap were also occasionally featured along with the more frequent portrayals of Bhagat Singh, Subhas Chandra Bose, Mahatma Gandhi and other contemporary heroes.¹¹⁶ Chromolithographs of Prithviraj Chauhan existed too, although not as commonly. As appreciation of a visual object did not entail literacy, the audience for a Prithviraj chromolithograph may have overlapped only partially with the consumers of novels and plays about him. In this

¹¹⁴ *Gaznī ke Muhammad Gaurī ko anek vār parāst kar, bandī banā kar chor diyā thā, unkī us anūcī udārtā tathā avivek kā hindū mātra ke liye jo ati anīṣ pariṇām huā.*

¹¹⁵ *Ab hamāre man mein sukh aur duḥkh kī āsakti nahīn hai aur nāmīh dillī ke samrājya kī mamta hai ānandpūrvak mlecchonī kā vināś karūn yahī mere man mein ek icchā śes hai.*

¹¹⁶ See Christopher Pinney, ‘Photos of the God’: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), pp. 105–44.

connection, we should note Christopher Pinney's observation that "images are not simply, always, a reflection of something happening elsewhere . . . they exist in a temporality that is not necessarily co-terminous with more conventional political temporalities."¹¹⁷

That visual images sometimes represented the past in alternative ways at variance with mainstream historiography is well exemplified by the chromolithograph titled *Mahārāj Pṛthvīrāj Jīvan Caritra* or King Prithviraj's Biography shown in Figure 7.2. It was published by Hem Chander Bhargava press of Delhi; the Delhi connection is no coincidence: as in the case of the Birla Mandir statue, the remembrance of Prithviraj was strongest in the capital city. In a departure from Hem Chander Bhargava's standard practice, this chromolithograph was printed in the city of Nagpur in the region of the Central Provinces.¹¹⁸ This allows us to date it sometime before 1950, when the Central Provinces were renamed Madhya Pradesh – all things considered, the most likely date for the picture is sometime in the 1940s.¹¹⁹ The largest image in this visual rendition of Prithviraj's biography shows the Delhi king Prithviraj at court, surrounded by a mass of men who look quite alike, with their Rajput moustaches and Islamicate clothing.¹²⁰ (The details are not quite right, however: the robes are too long, the headgear is more typical of Marathas, and the lance was used more widely in the Deccan than in North India.) This central scene is static but suggests something of the king's greatness and his rightful authority as sovereign of Delhi. We can interpret this panel, because of its size and centrality, as expressing Prithviraj's most essential attribute.

In contrast to the stillness of the central picture, the scenes in the lower frames depict Prithviraj in action as a martial hero. On the bottom left, he is chasing a fleeing foe, presumably Muhammad Ghuri, whom Prithviraj defeated seven times, according to the caption underneath. While Prithviraj brandishes a lance against the backdrop of the Himalayan foothills, three of his warriors slash at the enemy with swords. Here and in the adjacent scene, the Muslim identity of the opponents is signified through the use of green clothing.

¹¹⁷ Pinney, *Photos of the Gods*, p. 205.

¹¹⁸ The printer was Shiv Raj F.A.L. Works; the picture is numbered 123. One difficulty in assigning a date is the fact that Hem Chander Bhargava used different numbering sequences for their differently-sized chromolithographs (Pinney, *Photos of the Gods*, p. 216 n5).

¹¹⁹ In its use of oval-shaped insets to present several different scenes, it closely resembles a chromolithograph produced by Hem Chander Bhargava around 1920 that depicts events from the life of the Sikh guru Arjun Dev (Pinney, *Photos of the Gods*, p. 78; Fig. 53). Since it was not printed in Bombay, where the firm had their first few hundred pictures printed, this picture is clearly not among the earliest ones it produced. Additionally, the location of the firm is given as Dariba (a corner in Chandni Chowk) in the chromolithographs of the 1920s and 1930s, whereas this one specifies Chandni Chowk, Delhi; the copyright mark is also not the same.

¹²⁰ I thank the audiences of presentations I made at the University of Texas at Austin and the University of Pennsylvania for their comments on this picture, which have contributed to the following analysis.



Figure 7.2. A visual biography of Prithviraj, Hem Chander Bhargava press, Delhi

The famous scene of Shihab al-Din being shot by the blind Prithviraj is shown in the inset panel on the bottom right. Here Chand Bardai is standing to the left of Prithviraj, who is wearing a hunting costume rather than regular robes, and above them both is the sultan, with an arrow lodged in his neck and about to fall down. Between them, the two episodes in the lower section of the picture encapsulate the conflict between Shihab al-Din and the Chauhan king.

The images in the upper section are perhaps the most intriguing. Instead of images of people, what we find are monuments. On the far left appears the Iron Pillar, but – since the captions have mistakenly been transposed – its label (*lohe kī kīlī* or iron spike) appears underneath the image on the far right. What is shown on the right are the Hindu or Jain temple columns notoriously reused in the building of Delhi's first mosque. The caption that should have accompanied it reads “the temple that Maharaja Prithviraj had made.” In the center frame is the Qutb Minar itself, but the caption describes it in different terms. It tells us that Prithviraj's daughter used to have *darśan* of the Yamuna R. before taking her meals, and that this column (*lāṭh*) was made for her use.¹²¹

Three instantly recognizable icons of Delhi – the Iron Pillar, the Quwwat ul-Islam mosque, and the Qutb Minar – are thus placed together in what is no less than a reinscription of the Qutb complex. The minaret and the mosque – which normally stand for the Delhi Sultanate's conquest of North India – are here read as palimpsests, underneath which lies the pre-conquest past. The sculpted columns reused in the mosque had once adorned a temple commissioned by Prithviraj on that very spot, while the minaret too was a form of *spolia*, converted from its origins as a viewing platform for a Hindu princess.¹²² Meanwhile, the unquestionably ancient Iron Pillar attests to the legitimate transmission of sovereignty over Delhi to Prithviraj, to the viewing public that was familiar with the story of Anangpal Tomar. All three of these monuments were associated with Prithviraj Chauhan in Delhi tradition, at least as far back as the mid nineteenth century; what the poster reflects are therefore beliefs that were current locally in Delhi, the home of the Hem Chander Bhargava press.¹²³

¹²¹ The caption reads: *mahārāj Prathvīrāj kī betī śrī Yamunājī ke darśan karke bhojan kartī thī unke niyat yeh lāṭh banāā gaī thī.*

¹²² The Qutb Minar was similarly interpreted in 1947, in a newspaper published by the Hindu Mahasabha (Mrinalini Rajagopalan, “A Medieval Monument and its Modern Myths of Iconoclasm: The Enduring Controversies over the Qutb Complex in Delhi, India,” in *Reuse Value: Spolia and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine*, eds. Richard Brilliant and Dale Kinney [Farnham, Surrey, UK, England; Burlington, VT : Ashgate, 2011], p. 209).

¹²³ These traditions were recorded in two versions of a guidebook to Delhi written in 1847 and 1854 by (Sir) Sayyid Ahmad Khan (David Lelyveld, “The Qutb Minar in Sayyid Ahmad Khan's *Āsār us-sanādīd*,” in *Knowledge Production, Pedagogy, and Institutions in Colonial India*, eds. I. Sengupta and D. Ali [New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011], pp. 155 and 160).

How should we interpret the totality of this print, which calls itself a “life history” (*jīvan caritra*)? The main focus is on Prithviraj’s legitimate kingship, as signified by the central panel. He rightfully held sway over the capital Delhi (represented by the three monuments on the upper level), which was subsequently appropriated by Muslim rulers, just as the Iron Pillar was now overshadowed by an Islamic arch. The only biographical detail featured is the king’s armed conflict with Muhammad Ghuri, to whom he lost his capital and kingdom. This picture, in my reading of it, is not trying to evoke the tragedy that befell Prithviraj (or by extension, the Hindu nation) so much as assert Prithviraj’s right (that is, the Hindu majority’s right) to rule the nation from Delhi because of prior occupancy. Other readings of the picture are possible, to be sure, since it combines narrative and symbol in a non-linear manner that can be interpreted variously. I perceive it as an alternative imagining of history, in which the monumental indices of power in the oldest part of Delhi are recast as originally non-Muslim.

This visual life history of Prithviraj brings together several images that had a prior independent existence – the depictions of the Qutb Minar, Iron Pillar, and Qutb mosque, for instance, would have circulated widely as photographs or drawings in travelogues, textbooks or even advertisements. Several paintings of the sultan being shot by Prithviraj’s arrow that approximate the scene in this print were also made in early nineteenth-century Rajasthan, in small courts around Mewar.¹²⁴ They are combined with other, more generic, illustrations – the court tableau and the image of an elite horse-rider in combat – to create a montage that is both original and improbable. The picture fits well with Christopher Pinney’s interpretation of images “as unpredictable ‘compressed performances’ caught up in recursive trajectories of repetition and pastiche, whose dense complexity makes them resistant to any particular moment.”¹²⁵ Prithviraj’s pictorial biography is indeed a pastiche of diverse elements, little fragments of memory from here and there pulled together and filled in perhaps with some pure fabrication. Because it recycles older images (of the sultan’s slaying, of the Iron Pillar, etc.), there is a pronounced recursive quality to this poster, although it combines older forms in novel ways and so produces a different, new meaning out of them.

While the reuse of older symbols in varying configurations, leading to a density and complexity in significance, is more immediately evident in visual objects such as chromolithographs, a similar case could be made for literary imaginings. Novels and plays that recreate Prithviraj’s life also contain a series of elements, some of which must be present in order for the narrative to be

¹²⁴ For example, Fig. 4 (from Devgarh, Rajasthan) in Beach and Nahar Singh, *Rajasthani Painters*.

¹²⁵ Pinney, *Photos of the Gods*, p. 205.

categorized as pertaining to this particular king. These requisites include a wife called Samyogita, as well as an enemy called Shihab al-Din who defeated the Chauhan king in battle. Yet within that shared language that identifies Prithviraj narratives, each literary work has a somewhat different emphasis, distinct assemblage of features, and separate meaning. The Prithviraj figure can thus be endlessly appropriated and deployed, for varying purposes that may be new but which are always imbricated with older ways of thinking.

Conclusion: a divergence of histories

How do we explain the dissonance between Kaviraj Shyamaldas' repudiation of *Prthvīrāj Rāso*'s historicity in 1886 and the evocation of the epic in a print of the Chauhan king from the 1940s? How is it that the *Rāso* story survived the academic world's debunking of its historical value, to be reformulated time and again in late colonial literature and art? Shyamaldas' opinion was quite influential and has affected the course of most academic scholarship on Prithviraj Chauhan since the late nineteenth century. Once the *Rāso*'s status as a text contemporary to Prithviraj Chauhan's lifetime was undermined, English-language scholarship, whether conducted by Westerners or Indians, largely lost interest in it and few studies of the epic have been conducted in English since that time.¹²⁶ But a good number of colonial-era public intellectuals and writers, and even some scholars, continued to draw on *Prthvīrāj Rāso* for information and inspiration. The high regard for the *Rāso* was especially strong among those engaged in literary studies. The epic had a place in the Hindi curriculum at Benares Hindu University in the 1920s, for instance, and also in the certification for proficiency in Hindi language administered by the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan.¹²⁷ The *Rāso* lived on in vernacular educational programs and vernacular literary scholarship, in other words, although it faced near extinction in the world of English-language scholarship, especially in the field of history.

The situation with *Prthvīrāj Rāso* bears some resemblance to the fate of the *bakhar* genre in Marathi. As Prachi Deshpande explains, *bakhars* are prose narratives about some aspect of the past, usually concerning a leading local family, and mostly date from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. While they were considered historical in their day, under the colonial educational regime *bakhars* were regarded as literary texts instead and taught only in

¹²⁶ I know of only two journal articles in English on *Prthvīrāj Rāso* published since 1950: Pritchett, "Prthviraj Raso;" and McLeod and Bhatnagar, "Deaths of Prithviraj." The only book-length work in English is Soman's *Prithviraj Chauhan and His Times*, although the king is discussed extensively in D. Sharma's *Early Chauhan Dynasties*.

¹²⁷ Orsini, *Hindi Public Sphere*, pp. 108, 120 n223.

programs on Marathi literature.¹²⁸ The more constricted definition of what constituted historical writing in colonial India led to the rejection of the truth-claims of indigenous narratives about the past such as *Prthvīrāj Rāso* and the *bakhars*. Few older writings thought to be historical in precolonial India maintained that status in colonial knowledge, which placed a premium on a rigorous and empiricist standard of historiography.

Other developments in Marathi historiography are similar to those which we have seen in the case of modern Hindi works on Prithviraj. The mostly Brahmin intellectuals writing in modern Hindi gradually came to regard the *Rāso* version of the Rajput past as part of a shared history that also encompassed themselves. Retellings of the Prithviraj story were now seen as relevant to a wide audience, who together constituted a collective group. Likewise, according to Deshpande, “as western India encountered colonial modernity, historical narratives would be mapped onto larger social categories, increasingly bounded and enumerated, and historiography would emerge as the terrain for the imagination of new, modern communities.”¹²⁹ This stands in contrast to the older tradition of *bakhar* writing (and the genealogies or dynastic histories of Rajasthan), which pertained to the past of a single person or family, in most instances. In Bengali, too, from the late nineteenth century onward writers began to envision history more expansively as a narrative about the people as a whole – what Partha Chatterjee has described as “the passage from the ‘history of kings’ to the ‘history of this country.’”¹³⁰

Another large-scale trend common to Hindi, Marathi, and Bengali literature of the colonial era is the theme of opposition between Hindus and Muslims, a state of affairs that was depicted as primordial and persistent. In the Marathi case, the desire to enhance regional pride led to an emphasis on the Maratha period and the glorification of local resistance to the Deccan Sultanates and Mughal empire – this was particularly conspicuous in modern historical plays and novels, many of which dealt with Shivaji’s career.¹³¹ The struggles against Mughal power on the part of both the Marathas and Rajputs were mainstays of the modern historical imagination of fiction writers in Bengali, as well as in Hindi. More specifically, we witness greater hostility towards Muslims in modern Hindi plays and novels on Prithviraj’s life, in the repeated characterization of Shihab al-Din Ghuri as evil and deceitful, than is true of the *Rāso*. As Shail Mayaram reminds us, alongside the more inclusive form of Indian nationalism propagated by Gandhi and Nehru in the first half of the twentieth century, there were

¹²⁸ Deshpande, *Creative Pasts*, pp. 19–39 and 89–93.

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 70.

¹³⁰ P. Chatterjee, *Nation and Its Fragments*, p. 95.

¹³¹ Deshpande, *Creative Pasts*, pp. 157–63.

“a series of overlapping publics more influenced by a subterranean popular nationalism oriented to Muslim otherness.”¹³²

In a broad parallel to the divided opinion on the historicity of *Prithvirāj Rāso*, modern historiography in the Maharashtra region also split into two distinct streams. Deshpande uses the terms “scholarly” or “professional” to describe the histories produced by credentialed academics at colonial institutions, as opposed to the “popular” or “amateur” history – written primarily in Marathi – by people who were never officially employed as historians. Most research and writing about Maratha history during the colonial period was carried out beyond the formal academic sphere, often in a spirit of opposition to the colonial state. V. K. Rajwade is an example of one such scholar who remained independent in his pursuit of Maratha history, yet managed to publish many articles and twenty-two volumes of historical documents.¹³³ No one comparable existed in the field of *Rāso* studies or even the historiography of North India, nor was there such an emphasis on empirical research outside official or professional circles. However, a common nationalist orientation pervaded the “popular” writings on Prithviraj just as it did on Shivaji and the Marathas.

Instead of “popular,” the word “vernacular” has become fashionable in academic parlance of late, to describe the space wherein alternative histories and nationalisms originate and thrive.¹³⁴ In his introduction to *History in the Vernacular*, for instance, Partha Chatterjee differentiates the vernacular from the colonial modern, “where the new disciplinary practices of modern historiography emerge in South Asia.”¹³⁵ He points out that early modern practices may have survived into colonial modernity, where they had “a peripheral or subterranean life in the domain of the vernacular,” but these older practices could also coalesce with the newer conventions of modern historiography to produce hybrid forms of historiography.¹³⁶ Among the essays in *History in the Vernacular* is one by Kumkum Chatterjee concerning a dispute in Bengal over the admissibility of vernacular genealogies as historical data.¹³⁷ This

¹³² Mayaram, *Magic of Prithviraj, Padmini and Pratap*, p. 3.

¹³³ Deshpande, *Creative Pasts*, pp. 104–5, 118–21, 207.

¹³⁴ The art-historian Kajri Jain applies the term vernacular to images and objects as well, because, in her words: “Of all the fraught categories – ‘traditional,’ ‘native,’ ‘indigenous,’ ‘local’ – that might be deployed for the specificity of the forms of postcolonial experience I seek to describe, I want to suggest that ‘vernacular’ comes closest to resisting the pitfalls of primordialism and romanticism” (*Gods in the Bazaar: The Economies of Indian Calendar Art* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007], p. 14).

¹³⁵ Partha Chatterjee, “Introduction: History in the Vernacular,” in *History in the Vernacular*, eds. Raziauddin Aquil and Partha Chatterjee (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2008), p. 9.

¹³⁶ P. Chatterjee, “Introduction,” pp. 9–14.

¹³⁷ “The King of Controversy: History and Nation-Making in Late Colonial India,” in *History in the Vernacular*, pp. 107–41; also published in *American Historical Review* 110.5 (2005): 1454–75.

controversy of the 1920s and 1930s pitted professional academics who pursued a “scientific” history against writers and other amateurs who sought to uncover more local and indigenous truths.

It is tempting to classify the differences in attitudes towards *Prthvīrāj Rāso* as the divergence of the vernacular from the cosmopolitan, the realm of knowledge where English reigns supreme. During the colonial period, alternative reconstructions of Prithviraj’s career that followed the general outlines of the *Rāso* plot were composed primarily in the vernacular languages, whereas English was the authoritative language in which Shyamaldas chose to repudiate the epic’s historical value. In the past century, the *Rāso* has been studied and appreciated primarily in Hindi literary circles, rather than in educational environments where English dominates. And vernacular can refer not only to the language used for writing but also to different historical practices and methods of assessing truth-claims – Vasudha Dalmia applies the term to Bharatendu Harishchandra’s historiographic efforts, which incorporated material such as Puranic legends and bardic genealogies that would have been regarded with great suspicion by Western scholars of the late nineteenth century (although James Tod had utilized them decades earlier).¹³⁸

But the divisions are never so neat and clean, even when we restrict our analysis to the variables of language use or place of national origin. Some Western scholars writing in English, such as the philologist A. Rudolf Hoernle and linguist George A. Grierson, persisted in their belief that *Prthvīrāj Rāso* had a historical core, while Indian scholars writing in Hindi, such as the literature specialist Ramchandra Shukla or the historian Gauri-shankar Hirachand Ojha, could be adamant that it was a later fabrication. Although the more commercially oriented writers who produced historical plays and fiction did favor the lively *Rāso* narrative, so too did independent scholars such as Shyamsundar Das and others dedicated to spreading Hindi language and literature. Indeed, the refusal to give any credence to the *Rāso* epic as an account of “what really happened” is primarily a phenomenon found among professional historians, and particularly those at the more powerful institutional sites.

Rather than a simple dichotomy of the professional or cosmopolitan as opposed to the popular or vernacular, it would be more useful to think of a slew of competing remembrances of the past within which professional historiography occupies only a small segment. This is not to suggest that scholars all agreed, for we have seen that there were differences in attitude towards *Prthvīrāj Rāso*’s historicity, particularly between historians and literary scholars. But there is a certain similarity in method, in source materials, and

¹³⁸ Dalmia, “Vernacular Histories.”

in forms of argumentation that characterize scholarly approaches to the past and typically set them apart. Only from the late nineteenth century on, with the spread of modern education and culture, do we get written evidence of “memories” (or reconstructions, or imaginings) of Prithviraj from a wider variety of people – such a slew of remembrances and memory communities must have flourished for centuries beforehand, even if it is not visible to us any longer. While professional scholarship’s sphere of influence seems substantially reduced in the late colonial era as a result of the large number of alternative narratives about Prithviraj that were recorded in written form, competing visions of the past must always have existed in other sectors of society. Amidst this transition to a more vibrant culture of publication, the imprint of former conceptions continued to shape newer understandings of the Chauhan king, however. As a consequence of the *Rāso*’s pre-eminence in literate circles prior to the 1880s, the Prithviraj of modern Hindi historical plays and novels was most often derived from *Prithvīrāj Rāso* rather than folk traditions such as the Alha oral epic. In the process of appropriating the *Rāso* epic, much got adapted and much got discarded in modern renditions of Prithviraj’s story in a notable trend that has lasted to this day.

8 Epilogue: the postcolonial Prithviraj

Home Minister Shri Lal Krishna Advani said that international community has realized that pressure should be exerted on Pakistan to put a stop on the export of terrorism to India . . . Shri Advani was speaking here today after inaugurating the Qila Rai Pithora Conservation Complex and unveiling the statue of Samrat Prithviraj Chauhan. Emphasizing the need for preserving our cultural and historical heritage, Shri Advani observed that we would truly honour the memory of Samrat Prithviraj Chauhan if not only the brave soldiers but all citizens of India would embrace the qualities of bravery and sacrifice of Prithviraj Chauhan.

press release, June 7th, 2002¹

Commemorating Prithviraj in Delhi, 2002

These remarks officially attributed to L. K. Advani, serving as Home Minister at a time when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) controlled the central government, demonstrate the continuing deployment of Prithviraj Chauhan for Hindu nationalist purposes. By “preserving” the memory of Prithviraj and other aspects of India’s “cultural and historical heritage,” the BJP has attempted to mobilize patriotic sentiment, most especially against threats to the nation from the Muslim other. Upper-caste martial heroes such as the Chauhan king are particularly useful in cultivating a collective pride in the Hindu community that is militant in tone.

Advani was the most prominent of a slew of BJP politicians who attended the inauguration of the capital city’s latest tribute to Prithviraj, a large park graced by a bronze statue of the king (Figure 8.1).² Unveiled on June 7th, 2002, this statue depicts the king seated on horseback with a drawn bow in

¹ “Statue of Samrat Prithviraj Chauhan Unveiled,” Press Releases June 7th, 2002, Ministry of Urban Development, Government of India. <http://pib.nic.in/archieve/lrelyr2002/rjun2002/07062002/070620027.html>; accessed April 24, 2010.

² I am indebted to Suzanne Schulz for the photographs and information she provided after visiting the site on my behalf on May 21, 2010.



Figure 8.1. Statue of Prithviraj Chauhan, Qila Rai Pithora park, Delhi; photograph by Suzanne Schulz

hand,³ just like the one at the Ajmer memorial park (Figure 1.1.), similarly constructed when the BJP was in power locally. At 18 feet in height, however, the Delhi statue is much larger and its placement on the roof of a building makes it loom over its surroundings. Around the building are extensive park-like grounds designated as “Qila Rai Pithora,” encircled by (now renovated) walls dating back to the pre-Muslim era that adjoin the Qutb Minar complex. As the official website for the Delhi territory informs us, Rai Pithora was another (Persian) name for Prithviraj Chauhan, “the popular hero of the stories of Hindu resistance against Muslim invaders.”⁴

The driving force behind the creation of this complex was Jagmohan (Malhotra), a BJP Minister of Parliament from New Delhi who was Minister of Urban Development for the central government when the project was first conceived in 1999.⁵ Jagmohan had become Union Minister of Tourism and

³ Ram Sutar, the sculptor of the Delhi statue, is a well-known artist and recipient of the Padma Shri. He specializes in large statues for public spaces, especially of nationalist figures such as Mahatma Gandhi – see “List of Major Sculptures by Padmashree Mr. Ram V. Sutar,” Indian Art Circle, www.indianartcircle.com/ravmsutar/rvs_list.shtml, accessed June 2, 2013.

⁴ “Seven Cities of Delhi: Qila Rai Pithora,” Govt. of National Capital Territory of Delhi, <http://delhigovt.nic.in/dept/prj/visitor/city.asp?opt=3>, accessed June 2, 2013.

⁵ See his “Statement Re: Development of Prithviraj Chauhan’s Quila Rai Pithora in South Delhi” in the *Lok Sabha, Synopsis of Debates for Dec. 22, 2000*. Accessed on April 24, 2010 at <http://>

Culture by the time the complex was officially opened to the public in 2002. The Qila Rai Pithora complex represents but one among a number of efforts by Jagmohan to “rescue” India’s built heritage and simultaneously contribute to its green spaces. Jagmohan’s initiatives are showcased in an exhibit on the “March of Indian Civilization” housed in the building underneath the Prithviraj statue. Fourteen sites, which were “renovated,” “rejuvenated,” or “restored” under Jagmohan’s direction – among them Chittorgarh, Hampi, Mahabaliapuram, Ajanta, Kurukshestra, and Dholvira – are featured in this circular gallery composed of tall display boards. Jagmohan’s vision combined heritage tourism with an environmental thrust: that is, the area around the monuments at these sites was typically cleared of shops and other obstructions, cleaned up, and landscaped with gardens and other greenery.⁶ The Qila Rai Pithora complex, for example, is touted for “weaving history and heritage in our urban fabric, and providing freshness and tranquility in the otherwise congested and fast expanding cities.”⁷

Even more than the Chauhan king himself, this new park in Delhi commemorates the place from where he allegedly exercised power. Remnants of walls extending considerably beyond the current Qutb Minar complex are widely thought to be the fortifications of a pre-Sultanate palace built by Prithviraj, while an inner citadel called Lal Kot is ascribed to the ruler Anangpal Tomar. The division of pre-Sultanate remains in the vicinity of the Qutb Minar into two phases goes back to the mid nineteenth-century writings of Alexander Cunningham, but has not been conclusively demonstrated.⁸ Even if one accepts the possibility of more than one period of building at the site prior to the 1190s, there is no solid reason to associate the more recent construction with Prithviraj Chauhan. As I have explained in Chapter 3, the name Qila Rai Pithora surfaces no earlier than 400 years after Prithviraj’s defeat, and identifying the site as his fort contradicts the testimony of

parliamentofindia.nic.in/lsdeb/ls13/ses5/22122k.htm. The project was initially announced on Nov. 28, 1999 (Nirmala George, “Rajput Fort Ruins to be Second Lodhi Gardens,” *Indian Express*, www.indianexpress.com/Storyold/134576/, accessed June 2, 2013).

⁶ For more details, see Jagmohan, “Translating Blueprint on the Ground,” in *Soul and Structure of Governance in India* (Mumbai: Allied Publishers, 2005), pp. 444–90.

⁷ These words appear on the display board on Qila Rai Pithora in the March of Indian Civilizations exhibit, inside the building.

⁸ There has been relatively little excavation of the pre-Sultanate layers at the Qutb Minar complex, partly because the presence of Sultanate-era buildings makes access difficult. Two phases of the Rajput (i.e., pre-Sultanate) period were differentiated in the most recent archaeological work conducted in the 1990s (*Indian Archaeology 1991–92 – A Review*, ed. B. P. Singh [New Delhi: Director General, Archaeological Survey of India, Government of India, 1996], p. 12; *Indian Archaeology 1992–93 – A Review*, ed. Ajai Shankar [New Delhi: Director General, Archaeological Survey of India, Government of India, 1997], pp. 7–8). However, this distinction seems to be based on the existence of two different types of pottery and thus does not serve as proof that the site was successively occupied by the Tomar and Chauhan dynasties.

Pr̥thvīrāja Vijaya, inscriptions, and Indo-Persian histories, which all state that he was based in Ajmer. But no matter: the weight of popular consensus has determined that these walls are what remains of Prithviraj's capital and so they must be recouped for the nation. The park is now under the jurisdiction of the Archaeological Survey of India, which has long promoted the idea that the Qutb Minar complex once hosted a fort that housed Prithviraj Chauhan.⁹

A notable feature of this new tribute to Prithviraj is the lack of contextualization – that is, an explanation of what the Chauhan king did and why he should be remembered. Inscriptions on the plinth of the statue provide only limited information: all we are told about the horse-riding warrior is his title (*samrāṭ* or emperor), name, and dates (1165–92 CE), in both Devnagari and Roman script. Elsewhere on the grounds is a large stone plaque with details on the government officials who presided over the inauguration ceremony, beginning with Advani. The only attempt to explain the historical significance of the site comes on a display board inside the building under the statue, which explains briefly that Qila Rai Pithora was built by Prithviraj around 1180 CE and was one of Delhi's seven cities.

How are we to interpret the reticence of the founders of the Qila Rai Pithora park to praise the accomplishments of the hero being commemorated? Pragmatic political considerations likely had a part in the decision, for the BJP has often tried to downplay the anti-Muslim stance that their political rivals regard as a corollary of its pro-Hindu ideology and policies. The paucity of biographical details about Prithviraj may reflect a belief that, because the public was already well aware of his identity, potentially controversial reminders were pointless. We might interpret this as a case of official “forgetting” or silencing of aspects of the past that may be uncomfortable in the present, if brought out too explicitly. Whatever the specific reasons, the steady reduction in complexity that is a hallmark of modern imaginings of the king is exemplified at the Qila Rai Pithora site.

It is striking that this new memorial to Prithviraj publicly heralds only one of the Chauhan king's multiple meanings: his association with the city of Delhi. Local memories linking Prithviraj to Delhi are strong, as we saw in Figure 7.2, the twentieth-century lithograph that identified monuments of the Qutb Minar complex as having been originally built by him. Prithviraj's position as ruler of Delhi was foremost in the minds of some Indian Army sepoys stationed there in May 1857 as well, when they shouted out his name (*pr̥thvīrāj kī jāy*, or victory to Prithviraj) while rushing to join the uprising.¹⁰ Eschewing other aspects of his significance, the Qila Rai Pithora memorial – comprising the

⁹ See, for example, Y. D. Sharma, *Delhi and Its Neighbourhood*, p. 14.

¹⁰ Harriet Tytler, *An Englishwoman in India: The Memoirs of Harriet Tytler, 1828–1858*, ed. Anthony Sattin (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 186–7. I thank Sumit Guha for providing this information to me.

grounds where Prithviraj supposedly lived – emphasizes the prior occupation of Delhi by Hindu rulers such as he, thereby attesting that the nation's capital was originally (and inherently) a Hindu space. Through the reclamation of a portion of Prithviraj's fort walls, the city of Delhi is re-inscribed literally and not just figuratively, and so too is the nation.

Legacies of colonial retellings

Interest in Prithviraj since the mid-twentieth century has not been limited to the kind of officially sanctioned and politicized use of the king that we witness at the recent parks in Ajmer and Delhi. Supplementing the numerous retellings of his life that have been written in various languages and genres since Independence are the narratives created in newer forms of media. *Samrāṭ Pr̥thvīrāj Cauhān*, a Hindi movie from 1959, may be the oldest of the films and television shows about the king.¹¹ It adheres more closely to *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*'s overall plot than more recent versions such as the television series *Dharti ka Veer Yodha Prithviraj Chauhan*, which ran for 382 half-hour episodes on Star TV Plus from May 2006 to March 2009.¹² This TV series in Hindi begins and ends along the lines of the *Rāso*, but diverges wildly in between; much of the narrative consists of ups and downs in the relationship between the yet unmarried Prithviraj and Samyogita, filled in with tales of entrapment and deceit that are reminiscent of the *dāstān* adventures of earlier times. *Veer Yodha Prithviraj Chauhan* falls somewhere in the middle in its fidelity to the overall *Rāso* plot, despite the inclusion of a dance-duet by Prithviraj and Samyogita in the midst of a Kashmiri meadow and other novel elements.¹³ It is an animated film released directly as a DVD in 2008, available in English, Hindi, Tamil, and Telugu languages. Most faithful to the *Rāso* narrative, primarily because the brevity of its format does not permit the incorporation of new material, is the comic book version from 1971, which appeared in both English and Hindi.¹⁴ *Prithviraj Chauhan* was no. 25 in the Amar Chitra Katha series, the earliest of the historical figures to be treated after Shivaji (no. 23) and Rana Pratap (no. 24).¹⁵

¹¹ *Samrāṭ Pr̥thvīrāj Cauhān*, VCD, directed by Harsukh Jagneshwar Bhatt (1959; Delhi: Nupur Marketing, 2005). I thank Barry Flood for presenting me with a copy of this movie.

¹² "Dharti ka Veer Yodha Prithviraj Chauhan," *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Dharti_Ka_Veer_Yodha_Prithviraj_Chauhan&oldid=556426295, accessed June 8, 2013. This series was produced by various members of the Sagar family, but the identity of the directors and actors changed over time. Episodes can be viewed at www.youtube.com/show/dhartikaveeryodhaprithvirajchauhan.

¹³ *Veer Yodha Prithviraj Chauhan*, DVD, written and directed by Rakesh Prasad (Mumbai, Shethia Audio Video Pvt., Ltd., 2008).

¹⁴ *Prithviraj Chauhan*, Amar Chitra Katha No. 25 (Bombay: IBH Publishers, 1971).

¹⁵ Karline McLain, *India's Immortal Comic Books: Gods, Kings, and Other Heroes* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), p. 141.

Although these recent renditions of Prithviraj's story appear in the new media of film, TV, and the comic book, they resemble the early twentieth-century Hindi novels and plays that inspired them and deviate from the *Rāso* in similar ways. Indeed, the lack of dramatic change in how Prithviraj has been represented in literary and visual texts is rather surprising, and underscores the persisting impact of the nationalist imaginary of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century India, especially in relation to historical figures of the pre-colonial past. Compared to *Prithvirāj Rāso*, the Chauhan king lacks any obvious faults in modern iterations of his biography, in ways that both simplify and flatten his personality. Similarly, Prithviraj narratives of the postcolonial, as well as colonial, era tend towards straightforward didactic messages that dwell on self-sacrifice in the cause of national unity. There are obvious divergences among the new media tales of the Chauhan king, to be sure, just as there were in the printed stories of the early twentieth-century, so one can never speak of unanimity or total consensus. But characterizations of Prithviraj and the plot lines of his life-story were more varied in the eighteenth century – with the written *Rāso* epic, the oral Alha epic, the Sufi hagiographies and other folk stories all flourishing at the same time – than is apparent today.

A notable trend found in both postcolonial and colonial-era retellings is the revamping of Prithviraj's character in a more positive direction, in order to represent him in closer to ideal terms. Since the killing of his minister Kaymas, without warning and in the dark (as translated in this book's second chapter), is perhaps Prithviraj's most reprehensible act in *Prithvirāj Rāso*, it has often been omitted in the past century, as it is in the Amar Chitra Katha comic and the animated film *Veer Yodha Prithviraj Chauhan*. In doing so, a poignant symmetry is eliminated between Prithviraj's shooting of Kaymas in the darkness of night and his shooting of Muhammad Ghuri in the darkness caused by blindness, as well as the intimation that Prithviraj's loss of sight is retribution for his cruel treatment of a loyal subordinate. Perhaps because it is among the oldest of the new media stories, *Samrāt Prithvirāj Cauhān* (1959) is unusual in retaining the Kaymas episode, but makes certain alterations that call attention to the problematic nature of the original episode. Here Prithviraj shoots his minister in response to screams from a woman that Kaymas is manhandling. As the king is defending the honor of a woman, this redaction of the Kaymas episode does not tarnish our image of him. The whitewashing, or effacement, of troubling dimensions of Prithviraj's personality that were presented in *Prithvirāj Rāso* has been a widespread phenomenon in modern times.

A nationalist message of Hindu unity continues to pervade recent retellings, just as it has since the late nineteenth century. In *Veer Yodha Prithviraj Chauhan*, for instance, Prithviraj's defeat at the battle of Tarain is invoked as an example of what happens when (Hindu) Indians fail to act in the broader interests of the nation. Jaychand of Kanauj is rebuked more than once – by his

daughter, by his guru – for forsaking his duty to the nation in making an alliance with Muhammad Ghuri, and is even called a traitor or betrayer (*gaddār*) by Ghuri himself. (This also helps exonerate Prithviraj of any blame, of course.) The creators of this animated film made sure that viewers would not miss its plea for patriotism by appending a last song titled “Ye Hai Hindustān Hamāra” (“This is Our Hindustan”), heard while the closing credits scroll by. The exhortations for national unity have changed little, although the legacy of Partition is the perceived danger today, rather than the colonial power’s ability to divide and conquer its subjects.

Related to the tactic of blaming treachery by other Indians for the Ghurid conquest is a widespread vilification of Muslims in modern stories on Prithviraj, unlike the more measured characterization found in the *Rāso* epic. Hence, the first episode of the TV series, *Dharti ka Veer Yodha Prithviraj Chauhan*, stresses the ruthless and warlike nature of Muslims by showing bands of Ghurid troops riding through the Indian countryside, cutting down helpless peasants without provocation and burning their villages – violence for violence’s sake, it would seem.¹⁶ Members of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), the Hindu nationalist cultural organization, apparently regarded the 1959 *Samrāṭ Prithvīrāj Cauhān* movie as quite an indictment of Islam, so much so that they showed it to audiences in the Ajmer region during a 1980s campaign to “reconvert” local Muslims to Hinduism.¹⁷

Use of the *śabd-bhedī-bāñ* episode from the *Rāso*, in which Prithviraj shoots the Sultan with an arrow despite being blinded, could be construed as another dimension of the modern maligning of Muslims in Prithviraj narratives, because it casts Shihab al-Din in a bad light. This episode is the finale to all four retellings of the Prithviraj story in new media that I have reviewed here – the 1959 movie (*Samrāṭ Prithvīrāj Cauhān*), the 1971 comic book (*Prithviraj Chauhan*), the animated film from 2008 (*Veer Yodha Prithviraj Chauhan*), and the TV series from 2006–9 (*Dharti ka Veer Yodha Prithviraj Chauhan*). In repeating this unlikely ending to Prithviraj’s life, the newer narratives follow the example of most vernacular retellings since the 1920s. The commercial motive probably looms large as well, for the *śabd-bhedī-bāñ* ending is undeniably more dramatic and emotionally satisfying – an important consideration for the producers of the new media tales.

However, a certain discomfort with, or at least acknowledgement of, the implausibility of their narratives has become widespread in Prithviraj stories from the past half century, which often provide some sort of disclaimer.

¹⁶ “Episode 1: Kamalavati Conceives and Somesvara is Excited,” *Dharti ka Veer Yodha*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=X1Ux-M9mifQ, accessed June 10, 2013.

¹⁷ Mayaram, *Magic of Prithviraj, Padmini and Pratap*, p. 23. I am grateful to her for alerting me to the existence of this 1959 movie.

Editors for the Amar Chitra Katha comic book, for instance, abjure any responsibility for historical accuracy by stating that Prithviraj “has become the hero of many legends.”¹⁸ The makers of the animated film, aimed at a young audience, explain that “the changes made in the story is [sic] not meant to hurt the Sentiments of any religion or Society, but to show in a simple & entertaining manner the life & times [of] Veer Yodha Prithviraj Chauhan.” The TV series is the most brazen of them all, for it claims that “some characters may be fictional based on Folklore and popular Legend that have been used to dramatize the narrative,” rather than admitting that entire sequences of episodes have been completely fabricated by its writers. Instead, it cites Chand Bardai’s *Prthvīrāj Rāso* among its sources of information (along with Tod’s *Rajasthan*), in a tactical maneuver also seen in colonial-era books on the Chauhan king: to say that a work is based on the *Rāso* is essentially an assertion of legitimacy rather than a verifiable attribution.

Thus, while *Prthvīrāj Rāso* can be regarded as a distant ancestor of today’s Prithviraj narratives, the more immediate forebears are the corpus of stories about the Chauhan king from the colonial era. A transformation in the narrative that appears in all four of the new media versions proves my point, for it can also be found in Gangaprasad Gupta’s historical novel from 1903, *Vīrpatnī vā Rānī Samyogitā*,¹⁹ and in Manomohan Goswami’s *Prthvīrāj* play first published in Bengali in 1905.²⁰ It relates to Prithviraj’s abduction of Samyogita, which in these works always takes place in the royal assembly hall at Kanauj during the princess’ *svayamvara* or bridegroom-choice ceremony. After Samyogita ignores the assembled princely suitors and places her garland over a statue of Prithviraj in the doorway, he bursts into the hall on horseback and whisks her away. This moves the plot along in a snappy fashion, at the expense of the charming episode found even in the shortest recension of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* (and translated here in Chapter 4), in which the princess, who is banished to a tall house on the banks of the Ganges, gets her first glimpse of Prithviraj as he feeds pearls to the fish in the water below.

Even more noteworthy is the reduced coverage of the subsequent battle between the Kanauj forces and Prithviraj with his *sāmant* warriors. The animated film is at one extreme in completely eliminating the armed conflict, since Jaychand is not able to persuade any of the assembled princes to pursue the fleeing Prithviraj and Samyogita. In the early twentieth-century Goswami play, the fighting that followed Samyogita’s abduction is only referred to in passing some two years after the fact. However the exact

¹⁸ This statement appears on the inside cover of the comic book.

¹⁹ G. Gupta, *Vīrpatnī vā Rānī*, pp. 19–22; for the date, see Mukherjee *Realism and Reality*, p. 60.

²⁰ Goswami, *Prthvīrāj*, pp. 55–62.

details are handled, the end result is the same: the significance of the battle is downgraded considerably. I have previously argued that the combined abduction-battle scene is the central heroic episode of the entire *Rāso* epic, in its depiction of core Rajput values and especially in its naming of the many individual warrior lords who died in the fighting. The down-sizing of this episode is another sign of the non-martial identity of the story's twentieth-century consumers, who neither enjoy extended accounts of combat nor have warrior ancestors to discover in the tales of martial glory. It probably also reflects a general discomfort today about glorifying armed combat between different Hindu factions: violence is apparently only to be lauded when deployed against (alien) enemies of the nation. The curtailment of the Kanauj and other battle scenes in modern books and films means that Prithviraj's elite warriors, the *sāmant* lords, have essentially vanished from the narrative, with the occasional exception of Mewar's Rana.²¹ The *Rāso*'s imagining of a class of warriors united in action had been a unique feature that accounted for much of its appeal in the precolonial period; no longer relevant in the colonial and postcolonial eras, the *sāmant* lords have become a vestige of an earlier time.

Looking back: a summation

One of the main findings of this case-study of Prithviraj Chauhan is the potency of place in ensuring the remembrance of a person. Prithviraj's association with Delhi was firmly established by the sixteenth century, not only as Delhi's sovereign in *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, but also in Indo-Persian historiography, where he figures as the brother of the Delhi ruler. Tales about capitals as far apart as Vijayanagara (Karnataka), Warangal (Andhra), and Delhi identify these localities as sites of unusual power that could nourish the ambitions of empire-builders. The imperial aura of former political centers such as Kalyana, the capital of the Deccan's Chalukya empire in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, was so pervasive, a recent study has shown, that components of its architectural fabric were recycled or replicated in the sixteenth century at Hampi and Bijapur, the capitals of the Vijayanagara kingdom and the Adil Shahi sultanate, respectively.²² Had Prithviraj not been linked to Delhi, he might very well have vanished from popular memory, especially since the significance of the Chauhan city of Ajmer was increasingly derived from its status as the site of Mu'in al-Din Chishti's tomb-shrine. Prithviraj's role as Delhi king was remembered most vividly and intensely in Delhi itself, where local inscriptions of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries recollect a

²¹ For example, the Rana appears in *Samrāṭ Prthvīrāj Cauhān* (1959), and Gangaprasad Gupta's novel of historical fiction, *Vīrpatnī vā Rānī* (1903).

²² Eaton and Wagoner. *Power, Memory, Architecture*.

transition from Tomar to Chauhan to Turkic rule and nineteenth-century inhabitants identified the Qutb Minar and associated monuments as remnants of Prithviraj's reign. Even in other areas, however, oral traditions such as the Alha and Guga epics identified Prithviraj as the powerful and expansionist ruler of an empire based in Delhi.

Despite the richness of Prithviraj Chauhan as a site of memory, there is little that we can say definitively about his career. From the distance of 800 years, we can only dimly ascertain the most basic facts about this historic figure: his position as ruler of the Chahamana kingdom based in Ajmer, his wars with neighboring North Indian kingdoms, his commissioning of a Sanskrit courtly poem, and his defeat in battle to Muhammad of Ghur. Standard accounts in history textbooks touch briefly on his defeat, within the larger narrative of the Ghurid conquest of North India, based on the details provided in Indo-Persian histories. Few early reminiscences from Indic contexts survive, although Prithviraj's memory does seem to have been transmitted for genealogical purposes among lineages that identified themselves as Chauhan successors to the imperial Chahamanas. A collateral branch held sway for a century at the Rajasthani fort of Ranthambhor, whose last Chauhan king Hammir also became a commemorated hero. In Nayachandra Suri's *Hammīra Mahākāvya* and Chandrashekhar's *Surjanacarita*, both courtly Sanskrit poems that highlight the great deeds of past Chauhan warriors, Prithviraj thus became a celebrated ancestor whose luster added to the fame of the large and widespread Chauhan clan of Rajputs. Jain scholars of Gujarat also remembered Prithviraj as one among a slew of medieval kings from other regions who compared unfavorably with Gujarat's own kings; in the Jain stories, Prithviraj is hence cast as an incompetent, failed king.

Only when we come to *Prthvīrāj Rāso* – which cannot be firmly attested until the late sixteenth century – do we witness a Prithviraj who is admirable in character and who redeems the disgrace of his defeat through an amazing act of vengeance. Prithviraj could not be revered for his military accomplishments in the manner of Krishnadevaraya of Vijayanagara, the pre-eminent ruler of early sixteenth-century South India, or the Maratha Shivaji, who carved out a kingdom in the face of repeated assaults from Adil Shahi and Mughal armies, or even Rana Pratap of Mewar, who managed to stave off submission to Mughal might for decades. Prithviraj is presented as a different kind of hero in *Prthvīrāj Rāso*: one whose story is tragic because it ends in the loss of his kingdom, yet who can still be venerated because he retained his honor as a warrior by killing Muhammad Ghuri. The persistence of the *śabd-bhedi-bāṇ* episode to the present day makes more sense once we realize that it is essential to the casting of Prithviraj as a martial hero. Awareness that he had been defeated by Shihab al-Din and his Ghurid army must have been too widespread to create an altogether new conclusion, underscoring the point that

“while the past is malleable, it is not infinitely so.”²³ There are limitations to how much a construction of the past can be radically altered, at any given moment, and still gain collective credence. In this way, past memories can continue to shape the contours of future remembrances. But a triumphant resolution of some sort was essential to the *Rāso*’s emplotment of Prithviraj’s life story, even if he could not be made into a victor; and the new ending that was created proved highly successful in propagating the Chauhan king’s fame.

This is not to say that *Prīthvīrāj Rāso* was ever the only tradition about the king, although it did achieve a dominant status by the late nineteenth century. Even today, videos sold on the streets around the tomb-shrine of Mu’in al-Din Chishti in Ajmer feature the story, taken from Sufi hagiographical literature, of the indigenous king who tried to prevent the saint from transforming the city into an Islamic space. Occasional resurfacings of the Alha epic’s vision of Prithviraj as an imperial oppressor from Delhi can also be witnessed. As a site of memory, Prithviraj is akin to a palimpsest in that older strata of meaning are still sometimes legible even through the newly accrued layers of significance. While Prithviraj was remembered by later generations who were diverse in their physical and social locations due to his status as a king from a powerful dynasty, the most prevalent and persistent memories of him were articulated in a high caste, high class environment. The *Rāso* epic became the most widely transmitted written tradition about Prithviraj in precolonial India because of its broad appeal to the Rajput elites of the Mughal era.

Our first firm evidence for the existence of *Prīthvīrāj Rāso* comes from the 1590s, although it is always possible that it was present somewhat earlier in oral form only. Once the *Rāso* does become visible in the historical record, it is associated with Rajput lineages affiliated with the Mughals such as the Hadas of Bundi, Rathors of Bikaner, and Kachhwahas of Amber. The late sixteenth-century Mughal context in which *Prīthvīrāj Rāso* is first attested is surely no accident, since it meant participation in a pluralistic courtly society composed of persons with a variety of geographical origins, religious affiliations, and ethnicities. While Rajput chronicles such as Nainsi’s *Khyāt* depict the Rajputs as a highly competitive set of related lineages engaged in constant infighting, the presence of markedly different groups at the Mughal court would have made the warrior lineages of Rajasthan more conscious of their internal similarities. From the Mughal perspective, the Rajputs constituted a distinct community, whom Abu al-Fazl defines as descendants of the ancient kshatriyas who adopted the sword as their calling. Although Abu al-Fazl acknowledges that

²³ Geoffrey Cubitt goes on to write, “symbolic significance is adjusted (and heroes and celebrated events go in and out of fashion) in ways that are always influenced by earlier constructions, and by the restraining effect of possible challenges to any radically new interpretations” (*History and Memory*, p. 214).

Rajputs were “divided into thousands of septs,” he goes on to “record the names of a few of the most renowned, that are now in His Majesty’s service.”²⁴ In a courtly milieu where genealogy and historiography were of keen interest, *Prīhvīrāj Rāso* offered a view of the past that confirmed Mughal perceptions of the Rajput as a discrete social category.

I have argued that the epic’s appeal arose from its presentation of Prithviraj’s *sāmant* lords as the forefathers of the Rajput warrior community of Mughal India, its articulation of a martial ethos tied to an elite kshatriya identity, and its geo-political vision of a regional world centered in Delhi and delineated by the Gangetic region to the east, Gujarat to the south, and Afghanistan to the northwest. Through *Prīhvīrāj Rāso*, Prithviraj was transformed from an illustrious ancestor of a single Rajput clan to an exemplary model for an entire regional community of Rajputs. We can point to the early modern understanding of the Chauhan king as a representative of a large and influential class of warriors as another element in his success as a cultural symbol, in addition to his linkage to the pre-eminent political center of North India, and the emplotment of his life story as a martial hero who died gloriously.

In linking Prithviraj to Delhi, *Prīhvīrāj Rāso* manifested the need for a “concrete relationship to time and place” that holds true for all “memory figures,” in Jan Assmann’s estimation. In other words, the memories of individuals or events that are successful in getting passed on collectively require a connection with a specific location (and, less crucially, a time), for “memory needs places and tends toward spatialization.”²⁵ The second of the three requisite features Assmann identifies is a “concrete relationship to a group,” which the *Rāso* fulfilled by populating its epic narrative with a multitude of alleged ancestors who were exemplary warriors according to the heroic ethos of Mughal-era Rajputs. The last requirement for memory figures noted by Assmann is “an independent capacity for reconstruction,” by which he means that the past has to be continually recreated “according to the changes taking place in the frame of reference of each successive present.”²⁶ Only if it remains relevant in some fashion to the current time will a particular memory be cherished and transmitted into the future. *Prīhvīrāj Rāso* added meaning to Prithviraj’s life by remembering him as triumphant in the end, rather than as a pathetic and incompetent failure in the manner of the Jain tales. Through this creative adjustment, the epic thereby became a longer-lasting and widespread memory of the Chauhan king.

²⁴ Abu al-Fazl, *Ā’īn-i Akbarī*, 3:131.

²⁵ J. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, pp. 24–5.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 24. Assmann presents these three features as aspects of collective memory first formulated by Maurice Halbwachs.

Reconstruction is a never-ending process for memory, however, which is why a longitudinal – or long-term – perspective on the history of memories is so valuable, as I argued in the introduction to this book. Only by tracing the pathways taken by a symbolic figure or event over the centuries, as I have done here, can we clearly discern the layers of memories that build up one after the other. Thus, the *Rāso* too was reworked at the late seventeenth-century court of the Sisodiya kings of Mewar, as part of a larger effort to enhance their already considerable cultural prestige. While the shared history for Rajputs envisioned by *Prīthvīrāj Rāso* made it an attractive narrative to the warrior elites, the Mewar rulers wanted a version that publicized Sisodiya superiority and promoted an ethic of obedience to the overlord. In the course of expanding the epic so that it included more instances of glorious combat by a variety of Rajput lineages, however, Mewar's poets magnified the military threat posed by Shihab al-Din Muhammad of Ghur and his troops. Conflict between Rajputs and outsiders from Afghanistan thus came to constitute a more significant element of the Mewar recension of *Prīthvīrāj Rāso* than was true in older versions of the epic.

The Mewar redaction of the epic is what Colonel James Tod encountered during his early nineteenth-century sojourn in Udaipur, which he went on to transmit in an altered form (in another stage of reconstruction) to the world outside Rajasthan. As a result of its acceptance by Tod and other colonial scholars as a genuine product of the twelfth century, *Prīthvīrāj Rāso* began a new life as an authentic historical “source.” Tod’s Romanticist leanings, which made him receptive to the testimony of bardic literature, contributed to the *Rāso*’s transformation into a “primary source” of historical information, but the epic’s relatively secular character was probably also a factor. Transmission of the *Rāso* into a new age was facilitated by Tod’s idealization of medieval Rajput society, whose warlike tendencies he interpreted as aspirations for political independence and whose warriors he construed as freedom-fighters, especially in their struggles against “the Islamite invaders.”²⁷ If Tod’s enthusiastic validation of *Prīthvīrāj Rāso* as a heroic history constitutes the first phase of Prithviraj’s transition into the modern era, the second phase commences with the king’s transformation into a nationalist symbol in the late nineteenth century.

Reinscribed as a selfless patriot who resisted the oppression of foreign rulers, Prithviraj gradually came to overshadow the other characters in the *Rāso* epic. As the *Rāso* narrative got stripped down and reconfigured for different uses in modern times, it underwent a dramatic metamorphosis. Whereas Prithviraj’s story had earlier been a vehicle to express the ideals

²⁷ Tod, *Rajasthan*, p. 291.

and aspirations of a regional community of warriors, by the late nineteenth century it had to serve as an inspiration for the entire nation. For that purpose, it was the Chauhan king alone who mattered, and not his Rajput lords. In the same way, Prithviraj's conflict with Muhammad Ghuri increasingly effaced the many depictions of intra-Rajput antagonism included in the epic. As a didactic narrative intended to mobilize the nation, whether against the colonial occupiers or against the "foreign" Muslims, a black and white opposition was most useful, unmuddled by intermediate gradations or superfluous rivalries. As an individual who represented the entire population, it was necessary for Prithviraj, the nationalist symbol, to be both flawless and uncomplicated. Thus, only the rudiments of the long-recension version of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* have survived into the present time, and its complex meanings have been muted and mutated.

Still, looking back from our vantage point 800 years after Prithviraj's death, the pivotal role of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* in perpetuating the king's memory is easy to detect. We have seen in our survey of Prithviraj's "afterlives" in collective memory that *Prthvīrāj Rāso* is not a single text composed at a fixed point in time, but rather an evolving textual tradition with notable variants. Nonetheless, the epic's presentation of Prithviraj's character and life-story are fairly consistent from one iteration to another. In retrospect, it is striking both that *Rāso*'s vision has been so persistent and also that it was so late to develop. Why it took so long for Prithviraj Chauhan to be cast as an admirable hero is somewhat of a mystery, but it points to the significance of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the evolution of modern historiography. That is, much of how we have more recently thought about the past has been shaped by the historical conceptions and historical texts of elite Mughal society, whether we are talking about the periodization of Indian history into Hindu and Muslim eras, the increased interest in noble genealogies, or the projection of a unified community of Rajputs into the twelfth-century past. Thus, while none of the present-day representations of Prithviraj are replicas of *Prthvīrāj Rāso*'s hero, many of them are clearly descendants. Whether the long shadow cast by early modern constructions of the past such as the *Rāso* is a peculiarity of South Asia or is more widespread globally is a question worth pursuing, but will require more studies of memories as they transition from the pre-modern to modern.

A second striking finding of this study is the longevity of the colonial-era nationalist reincarnation of Prithviraj. Again, I reiterate that there is no uniformity in the conceptions of Prithviraj either now nor a hundred years ago. Yet, many of the notable aspects of Prithviraj narratives in today's popular culture, which differentiate them from the *Rāso*, can be observed as far back as the beginning of the twentieth century. These include the deflection of responsibility for his defeat at Tarain from Prithviraj onto others (treachery, disunity, etc.), the "forgetting" of the king's murder of his minister, the overlooking of

his large band of subordinates, the effacement from memory of his many wives, and other features that I have described as reducing or flattening the epic narrative. In contrast, I cannot identify any significant innovations or reformulations in Prithviraj as a symbolic figure during the past century. Perhaps Prithviraj, whose significance as a former ruler is in the realm of the political, has been so thoroughly appropriated by the nationalist imaginary that he can no longer be construed as anything but a patriot. To be sure, certain romantic incidents drawn from *Prithvirāj Rāso* are still circulating today, notably the blinded hero's slaying of the sultan and also, to a lesser extent, his abduction of the Kanauj princess. But these episodes are presented much as they were a hundred years ago, in ways that have reconfigured their meaning from the days of the epic. That is, most modern tellings gloss over the loss of Prithviraj's best fighters as a result of his hubris in challenging the Kanauj army, and turn the fight against Shihab al-Din into Prithviraj's only memorable conflict.

The continuing popularity of these unlikely episodes that originated in *Prithvirāj Rāso* and the residual belief in the *Rāso*'s truth-claims have been the most unexpected aspects of this study for me. As a scholar, I had presumed that professional skepticism about the epic would have percolated through society over the course of the past hundred years. Yet, if anything, a Prithviraj Chauhan or, more accurately, a series of Prithviraj Chauhans who are nationalist descendants of the *Rāso* hero seem to be increasingly overwriting the more prosaic Prithviraj of history textbooks, especially in the new media. This situation calls to mind Arvind Rajagopal's discussion of a "split public" in the Ram Janmabhumi campaign of the late 1980s and early 1990s. In their reporting, English language newspapers proceeded with the assumption that secular rationality undergirds the modern worldview and that their own coverage of events was objective and neutral. Due to this "refusal of the sociological fact of religious belief," the English language press could not make the Ayodhya temple movement "intelligible to its own readers."²⁸ Conversely, their greater proximity to the cultural symbols being deployed by the movement meant that Hindi newspapers were more comfortable discussing the issue and expressed a greater range of attitudes toward it. Scholarly historiography on India, like its English-language newspapers, may also be suffering from a cultural isolation that makes it deaf to the symbolic resonances of sites of memory such as Prithviraj Chauhan. This makes it all the more imperative, then, for scholars to spend time exploring the alternative remembrances and heroic histories that thrive in the collective memories of different communities, both now and in the past.

²⁸ Arvind Rajagopal, "A 'Split Public' in the Making and Unmaking of the Ram Janmabhumi Campaign," in *The Indian Public Sphere: Readings in Media History*, ed. Arvind Rajagopal (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 221, 217.

Appendix: *Prthvīrāj Rāso*'s textual history

This appendix contains detailed information on *Prthvīrāj Rāso*'s history as a text, for readers who wish to delve more deeply into the question of dating or the epic's manuscript tradition and printed editions. I have tried to avoid repeating points that have already been made in the main part of the book, but some overlap in contents is inevitable.

The issue of dating

Because the *Rāso* presents itself as a contemporary account of Prithviraj's life, the question of the text's date is closely linked to the issue of its historicity. Even now there is no consensus on the *Rāso*'s "authenticity," a dispute that has been described as the longest and most fierce debate in Hindi literature.¹ Kaviraj Shyamaldas of Udaipur began the controversy in the 1880s, as described in Chapter 6, and placed the epic within the time span 1583 to 1613 CE.² Motilal Menariya, a scholar who spent decades of the twentieth century overseeing the Maharana's library in Udaipur, was similarly vehement that the *Rāso* was created in the first half of the seventeenth century.³ On the other hand, Kaviraj Mohansimha, the editor of a *Prthvīrāj Rāso* published in Udaipur in the 1950s (which scholars in Rajasthan with whom I spoke generally regarded as the best version of the epic), accepted the *Rāso*'s account of its own creation at face value and eliminated from his edition the verses he thought had been composed by Chand's son Jalha.⁴ The belief in an actual poet named Chand Bardai who composed a poem on Prithviraj Chauhan remains quite strong, as the publication in 2000 of a monograph on Chand by the prestigious Sahitya Akademi of New Delhi testifies.⁵

¹ Shanta Singh, *Chandbardai*, pp. 14–15.

² Shyamaldas, "Antiquity, Authenticity and Genuineness," p. 24.

³ Menariya, *Rājasthān kā Pingal Sāhitya*, pp. 40–7.

⁴ Kaviraj Mohansimha, "Sampādakiyā," in Chand Bardai, *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, vol. 1, ed. K. Mohansimha (Udaipur: Sahitya Sansthan, 1954), pp. 1–2.

⁵ Shanta Singh, *Chandbardai*.

Since the publication in the 1930s of *Purātana Prabandha Saṅgraha* [PPS], a compilation of Jain tales including one on Prithviraj, some scholars have pointed to evidence within that text of an early date for *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*. The editor of PPS, Muni Jinavijaya, noted that this prose Sanskrit narrative also contains four verses in the vernacular, of which two are found in the tale about Prithviraj and the other two in the story about Prithviraj's enemy, Jaychand of Kanauj.⁶ The two verses in the PPS's Prithviraj tale are supposedly said to be by the poet Chand; the first one also appears in all four recensions of *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*, while something similar to the second of these verses appears in all but the shortest recension of the *Rāso*.⁷ As *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* is composed in vernacular verse, in contrast to the Jain *prabandha*'s Sanskrit prose, the original source of these two shared verses is more likely to be the *Rāso*.

Following this logic, one could date *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* to a period prior to the composition of PPS. Muni Jinavijaya thought that some stories in PPS were first composed as early as 1233 CE, considerably before the date of 1471 given in the colophon of the manuscript containing the Prithviraj tale.⁸ (However, this 1471 date may not apply to the Prithviraj narrative, which was written by a different scribe than the colophon.)⁹ Two other relevant verses from PPS are featured in the Jaychand *prabandha* and are attributed to Chand's son Jalha. The second of these does not appear in any version of *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*, while the first is found only in the *Rāso*'s longest recension.¹⁰ Nonetheless, they can be used to support the theory that the *Rāso* was completed by Jalha after Chand's death. Thus, Muni Jinavijaya concluded that these four verses were incontrovertible proof of the existence of a Chand Bardai who composed *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* in the late twelfth century. Other scholars have agreed with Jinavijaya's general argument, without necessarily assuming such an early date for either PPS or the *Rāso*. Dasharatha Sharma, for instance, claims that the Chand verses "prove conclusively that the original *Rāso* did exist before 1471 AD."¹¹

If *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* was indeed composed first, one might expect the PPS to have based its Prithviraj story on the *Rāso*, but there are significant differences in the two tales, which I have described in Chapter 2. The lack of fit between the two accounts extends to the verses that allegedly came from *Pr̥thvīrāj*

⁶ Jinavijaya, *Purātana Prabandha*, pp. 8–10. The verses are reproduced on pp. 86 and 88–9.

⁷ M. Gupta, *Rāso Sāhitya Vimars* (Allahabad: Sahitya Bhavan, 1962), p. 127. Narottamdas Swami, however, states that the second verse appears only in the *Rāso*'s long recension (*Rāso-sāhitya*, p. 48).

⁸ Jinavijaya, *Purātana Prabandha*, pp. 6–7. ⁹ Ibid., pp. 2–4.

¹⁰ Note that Jinavijaya wrongly identified one of the verses in the Jaychand tale as attributed to Chand. He was most probably following the reading of the verse from the Nagaripracharini Sabha edition of *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*'s long recension (Pandya *Rāso*), whose editors emended the text to read Chand rather than Jalha (M. Gupta, *Rāso Sāhitya Vimars*, pp. 110–11).

¹¹ D. Sharma, "Age and Historicity of the *Pr̥thvīrāja Rāso*," p. 748.

Rāso, which are imbedded within *PPS*'s Prithviraj tale. As Mataprasad Gupta has noted, the first verse is supposedly uttered by Chand to Prithviraj, in reference to the king's secret attack on minister Kaimbasa/Kaymas.¹² This verse attributed to Chand in *PPS* mentions two arrows, as in the *Rāso* episode where the king manages to hit the minister on the second attempt. In the *PPS* story, in contrast, too much of an uproar is caused by the first arrow's narrowly missing its target for the king to try again; Kaimbasa therefore survives. Hence, the reference to two arrows being shot at the minister does not make sense in the context of the *PPS* narrative. The second Chand verse in the *PPS*'s Prithviraj story, which is similarly about Kaimbasa/Kaymas, makes reference to an incident that is not told in the *PPS* and thus also seems to be out of place. These discrepancies suggested to Mataprasad Gupta that *PPS*'s Prithviraj story derived from a tradition other than *Prthvīrāj Rāso*. In Gupta's view, the verses were taken from yet another work, composed by Chand prior to the mid-thirteenth century and containing some of the content of the later *Rāso*.

Other scholars do not regard the verses ascribed to Chand in *PPS* as proof of the prior existence of a *Prthvīrāj Rāso* epic. It is possible instead that these verses were drawn from a pool of verses about kings that circulated widely among bards, some of which also found their way into the *Rāso*. This was the stance taken by the Mewar scholar and librarian Motilal Menariya.¹³ Narratamdas Swami, whose work on *Prthvīrāj Rāso* has been influential among Rajasthani scholars writing in Hindi, agrees that the Chand verses were stray, miscellaneous poems that did not form part of a larger work; he notes that Jain narratives contain numerous such floating verses.¹⁴ While he considered Chand to have been a historic figure who was Prithviraj's court poet, Swami did not believe that Chand ever created an epic poem called *Prthvīrāj Rāso*.

Scholars also disagree about the language of the verses associated with Chand in *PPS* and its implication for the *Rāso*. Muni Jinavijaya classified these verses as Apabhramsha in language, which would indicate an early date for them and by extension for the *Rāso* epic also. However, Hazariprasad Dwivedi pointed out that the verses might have been amended to reflect correct Apabhramsha practice by the Jain scholars who preserved the contents of *PPS*.¹⁵ The literary scholar Namwar Singh, on the other hand, argues that their language is not a very polished or perfect form of Apabhramsha.¹⁶ In any case, if the *PPS* verses were taken from a mass of stray verses and not from a set composition, the relative age of its language would have no bearing on the date of *Prthvīrāj Rāso*.

¹² M. Gupta, *Rāso Sāhitya Vimarś*, pp. 125–8. This *PPS* verse is equivalent to verse 3.27 in Gupta *Rāso*.

¹³ Menariya, *Rājasthān kā Piṅgal Sāhitya*, p. 50. ¹⁴ Swami, *Rāso-sāhitya*, p. 48.

¹⁵ Dwivedi, *Hindi Sāhitya*, pp. 80–1. ¹⁶ N. Singh, *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, p. 50.

Given the range of scholarly views on the issue, the most one can safely infer from the Prithviraj-related verses in *PPS* is that the belief in the existence of a poet Chand at Prithviraj Chauhan's court is quite old. This has led to a consensus among literary scholars writing in Hindi that Chand Bardai was a historic person who lived in the late twelfth century.¹⁷ But opinion is mixed regarding Chand's authorship of *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*. For example, both Mataprasad Gupta and Narottamdas Swami believe that the *Rāso* was composed considerably after the time of Chand, whom they regard as contemporary to Prithviraj Chauhan.¹⁸ Namwar Singh is more ambivalent about the historicity of Chand but agrees with Gupta and Swami that Chand did not create *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*.¹⁹ Muni Jinavijaya's position, which accepted *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* as a twelfth-century work by Chand Bardai, has not been entirely abandoned even now, however. A variant of it is espoused by Rajmal Bora, as one example: Bora believes the *Rāso* existed only in oral form from Prithviraj Chauhan's reign down to the late sixteenth century.²⁰

I prefer to follow the lead of Narottamdas Swami, Namwar Singh, and others who date *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* to the sixteenth century, a period when Hindi writing of all types was experiencing a great efflorescence.²¹ While elite literature in South Asia was certainly recited, it also relied on written texts to serve as primers for oral performance – this means that a written trail of the *Rāso*'s existence would be likely. However, Bora's thesis that the *Rāso* was transmitted for a length of time before it was ever committed to writing, as was the case with folk epics transmitted by low-caste performers, cannot be definitively refuted. As far as the written epic is concerned, however, certain chronological and genealogical inaccuracies in it point to a time of composition much later than Prithviraj's period. Some of these have already been mentioned in Chapters 5 and 7: the discrepancies with inscriptional genealogies, divergences in chronology from Indo-Persian histories, and the later dating of the Mewar king Samar Singh. In addition, there is the issue of vocabulary: the inclusion of words borrowed from Persian marks *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* as a later work. All the objections raised in this paragraph militate against *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*'s claim to be a product of the late twelfth or early thirteenth century.

Conversely, there are several arguments in favor of an age of composition in the sixteenth century, including the date of the oldest extant *Rāso* manuscript,

¹⁷ Discussion of the various positions on the *Rāso* and Chand Bardai can be found in: Swami, *Rāso-sāhiya*, pp. 97–8; and Vijay Kulashreshtha, *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso kā Adhyāyan* (Delhi: Sahitya Prakashan, 1992), p. 233.

¹⁸ M. Gupta, "Bhūmikā [Introduction]," in Chand Bardai, *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāsau*, ed. Mataprasad Gupta (Ciragamva, Jhansi: Sahitya Sadana, 1963), pp. 168 and 171; Swami, *Rāso-sāhiya*, pp. 34 and 9.

¹⁹ N. Singh, *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*, p. 248. ²⁰ Bora, *Pr̥thvīrājrāso*, pp. 122–4 and 136–7.

²¹ Swami, *Rāso-sāhiya*, pp. 50–2; N. Singh, *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*, p. 246.

which is dated in (*samvat*) year 1667 of the Vikram era or 1610 CE.²² Since the colophon states that it was copied from another manuscript, the *terminus ante quem* can be pushed back at least another decade or so.²³ Other evidence in support of a late sixteenth-century date for the *Rāso* comes from two summaries of Prithviraj Chauhan's career that are included in texts written between 1585 and 1600, *Surjanacarita* and *Ā'īn-i Akbarī* (both discussed in Chapter 3). Around the same time, Chand is cited as the "the creator of vernacular poetry" in a poem titled *Māncarit*, where he is praised among a list of great poets, the remainder of whom all wrote in Sanskrit.²⁴ This acknowledgement of Chand as a composer of poems in the vernacular (*bhāṣa*) dates to around 1600 and is found in a work that deals with the life of Raja Man Singh, the highest-ranking Rajput lord at Akbar's court. Once again, we find a connection with the Mughal nobility of Akbar's reign. Chand is listed among the praiseworthy poets such as Valmiki, Shriharsha, Kalidasa, and Jayadeva in another poem from ca. 1619, *Ras-Ratan* by Puhkar Kavi. The *Rāso* itself is not named in other texts until ca. 1650.²⁵

Another consideration in dating the *Rāso* is the age of its language. The text exists in many versions but none of them contains language that is earlier than ca. 1450 to 1650 at best, in the opinion of Swami.²⁶ Some manuscripts, particularly the longer ones, display "a frequent archaism of language," but this can most probably be attributed not to age but to the deliberate practice of court bards of the Bhat community (to which Chand Bardai is supposed to have belonged).²⁷ R. S. McGregor characterizes the language of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* in its shortest and oldest variant as "an early form of Brajbhāṣā showing Rajasthani features,"²⁸ and scholars from Rajasthan often call this Rajasthani-inflected Brajbhasha by the name Pingal.

²² The exact CE date is Friday June 15, 1610 (Bora, *Prthvīrājrāso*, p. 104). Some scholars assert that a manuscript in the possession of Nagarpracharini Sabha in Benares is earlier, based on their reading of its date as Vikram *samvat* year 1640 or 1647 (ca. 1583 or 1590 CE), but the date has also been read as 1747, 1767, etc. (Bora, *Prthvīrājrāso*, pp. 80–1; N. Singh, *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, pp. 21 and 243).

²³ Bora, *Prthvīrājrāso*, p. 104.

²⁴ Translation by Allison Busch, *Poetry of Kings*, p. 172. I am grateful to Allison for alerting me to this reference and providing a translation of it.

²⁵ The 1650 text, in which Chand's name also appears, is Dalpati Mishra's *Jasvant Udyot* (Swami, *Rāso-sāhitya*, p. 39).

²⁶ Here Swami refers to the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries of the Vikram era (*Rāso-sāhitya*, p. 98). The Vikram era begins in 57/58 BCE, while the year in the Vikram era is referred to as *samvat*.

²⁷ Quotation from McGregor, *Hindi Literature from Its Beginning*, p. 19; Narottamdas Swami states that the *Rāso*'s language is that used by Brahma Bhatts in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of the Vikram era, as well as by the Charan poet Suryamall Mishran ca. 1850 CE (*Rāso-sāhitya*, p. 50).

²⁸ McGregor, *Hindi Literature from Its Beginnings*, p. 17.

A final reason for placing the composition of the *Rāso* in the sixteenth century comes from analysis of earlier narratives about Prithviraj Chauhan (covered in Chapter 2), which are all relatively short. These older tales may contain a few elements of the *Rāso* story, but they diverge from the epic in a very fundamental way – they do not portray Prithviraj as a heroic figure, as someone who should be admired or emulated. For that reason, I consider the *Rāso* to come out of a separate tradition, a “memory community” that imagined Prithviraj Chauhan in a radically different way.

Recensions, editions, and manuscripts

Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso is not a single text but rather a set of texts that have yet to be critically edited. The shortest (*laghutam*) recension contains approximately 400 stanzas, while the short (*laghu*) recension is roughly three times longer. Likewise, the medium (*madhyam*) recension is thrice the length of the short recension, and the long (*bṛhad*) recension is another threefold longer.²⁹ Broadly speaking, the longer recensions encompass the shorter ones. That is, all the episodes found in the shorter recensions appear in the longer ones. Additionally, it is also true that the great majority of the verses in the shortest recension are found in some form in the other recensions. Yet there is often considerable variation in the verses – couplets may be broken up and joined together in different combinations and the number of lines in a given verse may vary widely, for instance, in addition to differences in vocabulary or linguistic change over time.

There are a range of opinions on the mutual relationship of the four *Rāso* recensions. The noted Hindi literary scholar and author, Hazariprasad Dwivedi, believed the shorter recensions were abridged versions of the long recension.³⁰ Motilal Menariya suggested that the various recensions might date from roughly the same period and could represent differing responses to audience demand; that is, the text could have been expanded or pruned depending on the purpose and patron for which it was produced.³¹ Most commonly, however, scholars have assumed that the shorter *Rāso* recensions are older, following the standard model for textual criticism.³² One fact that

²⁹ Swami, *Rāso-sāhitya*, p. 78; N. Singh, *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*, p. 243. The shortest recension contains approximately 1300 two-line verses while the long recension contains about 30,000. The verses vary greatly in length, from *dohā* couplets to verses with twenty or more lines, so it is difficult to get a consistent count.

³⁰ Hazariprasad Dwivedi and Namwar Singh, *Saṅkṣipt Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*, 2nd edn. (Allahabad: Sahitya Bhavan, 1957), p. 13. This book contains a shortened version of the epic that the two editors created from the text of the long recension published by Nagaripracharani Sabha (i.e., the Pandya *Rāso*).

³¹ Menariya, *Rājasthān kā Piṅgal Sāhitya*, pp. 51–2.

³² For example, Swami, *Rāso-sāhitya*, p. 78.

does not support the standard view is the relatively short span of time separating the appearance of the shortest recension in 1610 CE and the longest recension in 1703 or earlier. On the other hand, Mataprasad Gupta has argued forcefully that the shorter recensions were not merely abbreviated versions of the longer ones. He based his stance on an analysis of numerical figures, pertaining to the size of armies and the like, in the short, medium, and long recensions. In almost all cases, the numbers were considerably exaggerated in the longer as compared to the shorter recensions, proving that the latter were not derived directly from the former and also suggesting that the longer recensions were later in date.³³

The most convincing argument favoring the view that the shortest recension is the oldest comes from Namwar Singh, who carried out a careful linguistic comparison of the Kanauj Samay sections of the shortest (*laghutam*) and long (*brhad*) recensions. The language of the *laghutam* recension exhibits considerably more archaic features such as doubling of consonants, the writing of “ai” as two separate letters, and use of the retroflex nasal, among others. The language of the *brhad* recension, aside from being more modern in form, also reveals the influence of Rajasthani pronunciation and includes more Perso-Arabic vocabulary. Namwar Singh concludes that the shortest recension is indisputably older. He cautions us, however, that we cannot assume the longer recensions were directly derived from the shortest; instead, it is quite likely that there were different, independent, manuscript traditions that culminated in the various recensions.³⁴ R. S. McGregor suggests that “the main expansion of the Pr̥thvīrāj-rāsau material came late, while the Rajasthani aspect of the language of the larger recensions indicates that it took place chiefly in Rajasthan.”³⁵

Only two manuscripts of the shortest (*laghutam*) recension exist. The one that was obtained from Dharanoj village, Patan taluk, Gujarat, is dated in *samvat* (year) 1667 of the Vikram era or 1610 CE.³⁶ Its colophon states that it was made for the reading or reciting (*pāṭhan*) of Raja Bhagvandas, the son of Raja Bhan, the son of Maharaja Kalyanmalla of Bikaner.³⁷ The second *laghutam* manuscript is dated *samvat* 1697 or 1640 CE, and is said to have been made in an unidentified place called Mohanpur. Because it lists several individuals whose names include the Jain titles *muni* and *gaṇi*, it is likely to have been produced in a Jain context.³⁸

³³ M. Gupta, *Rāso Sāhitya Vimarś*, pp. 77–86.

³⁴ Namwar Singh, *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, pp. 34–6.

³⁵ McGregor, *Hindi Literature from Its Beginnings*, p. 18.

³⁶ This manuscript is at the Jodhpur branch of Rajasthan Prachyavidya Pratishtan (Ms. no. 12069). The other *laghutam* manuscript was once in Muni Jinavijaya’s possession but its current location is unknown.

³⁷ Bora, *Prthvīrāj-rāso*, pp. 103–4; Swami, *Rāso-sāhitya*, p. 58.

³⁸ M. Gupta, “Bhūmikā,” p. 6.

Scholars often describe the edition of *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* prepared by Mataprasad Gupta as the *laghutam* recension.³⁹ This is not entirely accurate, however, for Gupta consulted numerous manuscripts from the other recensions, in addition to a copy of the Dharanojwali manuscript. While almost all the verses in his edition are found in the Dharanojwali manuscript, the converse is not true. That is, some of the Dharanojwali manuscript's verses are omitted from the Gupta edition – this mainly applies to the first canto or chapter but is true overall of about 15 percent of the Dharanojwali text, which has slightly over 400 stanzas.⁴⁰ According to Rajmal Bora, the Dharanojwali verses omitted by Gupta are not found in other recensions; the criterion used by Gupta for inclusion in his edition therefore seems to have been the presence of a verse in both the long recension *and* the Dharanojwali manuscript.⁴¹ Gupta also does not include the thirty or so prose lines (known as *vārtās*) that are found interspersed among the verses in the Dharanojwali manuscript.⁴²

Other deviations from the Dharanojwali manuscript in Gupta's *Rāso* text should be noted, since they collectively undermine the claim that it represents the *laghutam* or shortest recension of the epic. The sequence of verses in Gupta's edition has been changed from that in the Dharanojwali manuscript, for one thing. The most significant adjustment occurs with the series of verses that describe the six seasons (*sat-rtu*) of lovemaking between the king and queen (s). As the verses originally appeared before Prithviraj set forth for Kanauj, the implication is that Prithviraj had other wives before Samyogita with whom he made love. By moving the *sat-rtu* verses so that they appear in the epic *after* Prithviraj has returned to Delhi with Samyogita, Gupta has made Samyogita the sole focus of Prithviraj's amorous feelings.⁴³ Some verses relating to Prithviraj's *sāmans* during the flight from Kanauj have also been repositioned, presumably in order to make the number of dead heroes fit with the figures given in the verses.⁴⁴ Additionally, chapter divisions have been inserted in the Gupta edition, although they do not exist in the original.⁴⁵

Furthermore, Gupta has amended the language of the published *Rāso* text so that it no longer reflects what is found in the *laghutam* recension. He has sometimes substituted vocabulary from other manuscripts for what is found in

³⁹ For example, Shanta Singh, *Chandbaradai*, p. 39.

⁴⁰ In his concordance of stanzas from several different *Rāso* manuscripts, Gupta lists 422 verses from the Dharanojwali manuscript ("Bhūmikā," pp. 87–97). However, Bora asserts that the Dharanojwali manuscript actually contains a total of 417 verses, but also includes a few *vārtās* or prose lines in its numbering (Bora *Rāso* vol.1, pp. 63–4).

⁴¹ Bora, *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*, pp. 105–6.

⁴² On this point, see also N. Singh, *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*, pp. 40–1.

⁴³ Gupta *Rāso* 9.9–14, and Bora *Rāso* vol. 2, vv. 56–60.

⁴⁴ So, for instance, Gupta *Rāso* Chapter 7 vv. 25–31 should go in canto 8, between vv. 27 and 28.

⁴⁵ The chapter titles in this and other published editions of *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* are given in Shanta Singh, *Chandbaradai*, pp. 32–42.

the Dharanojwali; at other times he uses different spellings for nouns or verb endings. It is therefore impossible to get a sense of the *laghutam* text's language from the Gupta edition. Namwar Singh has published a slightly emended version of about three-quarters of the *laghutam* text, the section dealing with the abduction of Samyogita and the ensuing battle with the Kanauj army, commonly referred to as Kanauj Samay.⁴⁶ When comparing that with Gupta's edition, Gupta's numerous emendations are obvious: for instance, he uses less archaic forms such as *calau* instead of *calyo*, *eku* instead of *ika*, *Cahūān* instead of *Cāhuvān*. More recently, the text of the entire Dharanojwali manuscript has been published (and translated) by Rajmal Bora, although it is dispersed over three volumes put out by an obscure press.⁴⁷ Readers needing to closely examine the *laghutam* recension should therefore consult the editions by Namwar Singh or Bora, rather than the Gupta *Rāso*, which resembles the shortest recension but does not reproduce it.

The short (*laghu*) recension is represented by five manuscripts. Three were preserved in the Anup Sanskrit Library, once the Bikaner royal library, and have been edited in a version of the *Rāso* prepared by B. P. Sharma.⁴⁸ One of these Anup Sanskrit Library manuscripts (no. 61) was made for Bhagchand, son of Karmachand Vachchhavat, the prime minister of the Bikaner king Ray Singh. Since Bhagchand died fighting in 1613 CE the manuscript must have been completed sometime earlier. Several manuscripts in this recension contain a stanza referring to the compilation of the *Rāso* by Chandra Singh, son of Sur Singh and nephew of the famous Maharaja Man Singh of the Kachhwaha family of Amer.⁴⁹ Like his older brother Man Singh, Sur Singh was a subordinate of the Mughal emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605) – the likely period of this recension's development is thus the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century.

The remaining two manuscripts of the short recension come from other Bikaner collections. One of these, now in the Abhaya Jain library, was written in Fatehpur in the Shekhavati region of northern Rajasthan ca. 1650 CE. Hence, the short recension is clearly a product of northern Rajasthan and was limited in its circulation to this region.⁵⁰ As the Dharanojwali manuscript

⁴⁶ 346 verses out of the total of 417 are provided in an appendix (N. Singh, *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, pp. 135–80).

⁴⁷ I have called this edition Bora *Rāso* throughout this book, although various essays by Bora are included along with the *laghutam* recension of the *Rāso*. As I only obtained this after I was well into my research on this project, I have often referred to the Gupta *Rāso* instead. The Gupta *Rāso* is also much better known among scholars, because of Mataprasad Gupta's stature as a Hindi literary scholar.

⁴⁸ Chand Bardai, *Prthvīrāj Rāso: Laghu Samskārān*, ed. B. P. Sharma (Chandigarh: Visva Bharati Prakashan, 1962).

⁴⁹ Swami, *Rāso-sāhitya*, pp. 82–3; Bora, *Prthvīrājrāso*, p. 102. Sur Singh and his son are both mentioned in Nainsi's *Khyāt*, 1: 296.

⁵⁰ Swami, *Rāso-sāhitya*, pp. 57, 83.

was also made for a patron from Bikaner (while the provenance of the second *laghutam* manuscript is unclear), both the short and shortest recensions can be linked to northern Rajasthan and particularly to Bikaner. They developed very close in time – their earliest attested dates are 1610 CE (*laghutam*) and 1613 CE (*laghu*).

The medium or *madhyam* is the least studied recension, and there is some disagreement as to which manuscripts can be classified as belonging to it. I enumerate eleven manuscripts in this category, based on a list compiled by Narottamdas Swami – his list has twelve manuscripts but one is a photocopy of another. Three medium-recension manuscripts are unusual among *Rāso* texts in *not* containing the episode of Prithviraj's shooting and killing the sultan.⁵¹ Among them is the earliest example of this recension, dating from ca. 1635 CE. (The classification of this manuscript, no. 82 in the Tod Collection of Manuscripts at the Royal Asiatic Society of Greater Britain and Ireland, in London, is controversial.) Five other manuscripts are dated 1683 or earlier, while another was transcribed ca. 1735 CE. Overall, we can say that this recension is a seventeenth-century phenomenon; it and the shorter recensions were superseded by the long recension during the eighteenth century. The medium recension flourished in a somewhat larger territory than the earlier recensions, notably in a southeasterly direction (including Ratlam in south-western Madhya Pradesh and Bhindar in the Udaipur region), as well as in northern Rajasthan (Churu town in Shekhavati, and Bikaner). Perhaps because it is hard to characterize its spatial distribution, scholars describe it as mainly coming from Jain manuscript collections.⁵² The first chapter ("Ādi Parva") of the medium recension has been published by Mathurprasad Dikshit, but none of the rest has appeared in print.⁵³

The great majority of surviving manuscripts of the *Rāso* belong to the long recension and contain between 65 and 69 chapters. Some long-recension manuscripts contain 800 or more folio leaves, written by several different scribes. When this recension developed is not entirely clear. Scholars agree that a manuscript produced in Udaipur can be partially dated to (Vikram) *samvat* 1760 or 1703 CE, but there is considerable divergence on the dating of other early long-recension manuscripts. Most notably, a manuscript possessed

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 83–4.

⁵² Swami, *Rāso-sāhitya*, p. 56, N. Singh, *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*, p. 243. Bora states that both the medium and long recensions are associated with Mewar, and especially Udaipur. One of his examples is the oldest medium-recension manuscript of 1635, which Swami also states comes from Udaipur (Swami, *Rāso-sāhitya*, p. 84; Bora, *Pr̥thvīrāj-rāso*, pp. 179 and 181). It is true that the final colophon mentions Udaipur, but this colophon (which I have personally seen) is written in a different hand than the lines just before it that provide the 1635 CE date; because this last portion also seems to contain a much later date, it may record the acquisition of this manuscript by someone in Udaipur a long time after it was written.

⁵³ Chand Bardai, *Aslī Pr̥thvīrāj-rāso*, ed. Dikshit.

by the Nagaripracharini Sabha in Benares was originally considered to have been made in *samvat* 1640, but its date has since been read variously as 1340, 1642, 1740, and 1878, with the current consensus being (Vikram) *samvat* 1747 or ca. 1690 CE.⁵⁴ On the other hand, Swami considers the oldest long-recension manuscript to be from *samvat* 1731 (ca. 1674 CE), although it has also been dated a century earlier.⁵⁵ Like several important *Rāso* manuscripts, this one has long been in a private collection and has therefore not received much scholarly scrutiny. Even if we take a conservative stance and take the *samvat* 1760 manuscript to be the oldest surviving one belonging to the long recension, the gap in time between that and the Dharanojwali manuscript (representing the shortest recension) is still slightly less than a century.

Many manuscripts of this class come from the region of Mewar or reveal the influence of Mewar versions of the epic.⁵⁶ Most significant in this respect is the manuscript dated to *samvat* 1760 or 1703 CE, from what was formerly the royal library of the Mewar kingdom. Since it mentions the reign of Mewar's Maharana Amar Singh II (r. 1698–1710 CE), I refer to it as the Amar Singh manuscript.⁵⁷ The text of this manuscript became the standard version of the epic for the Mewar royal court, and at least two close copies of it were made on the order of Maharana Bhim Singh in the early nineteenth century.⁵⁸ Two stanzas (*chappay*) at the end of the Amar Singh manuscript seem to be colophons added at different times and shed some light on the history of the *Rāso*'s redaction at Mewar, as discussed at the outset of Chapter 5. Despite disagreements on the exact time span of its redaction, scholars are unanimous in affirming that the Mewar court at Udaipur had a large role in shaping the form of the *Rāso*'s long recension. More support for situating the main development of the long recension in seventeenth-century Udaipur comes from references to the *Rāso* in other Mewar texts from that era, another topic covered in Chapter 5.

The long recension was the first to be printed and is therefore the best known variant of *Prthvīrāj Rāso* today. A few chapters of it were edited by the Asiatic Society of Bengal as part of their *Bibliotheca Indica* series, but Kaviraj Shyamaldas' refutation of the *Rāso*'s historicity, published in 1886, appears to have led the Asiatic Society to terminate its plans to print the remainder of

⁵⁴ The range of dates is provided by N. Singh, *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, p. 243; a lengthy argument for the *samvat* 1747 date can be found in Bora, *Prthvīrājrāso*, pp. 81–6.

⁵⁵ This and another manuscript that he dates to *samvat* 1734 are both from the Mewar region (Swami, *Rāso-sāhitya*, pp. 84–5).

⁵⁶ N. Singh, *Prthvīrāj Rāso*, p. 243; Swami, *Rāso-sāhitya*, p. 53.

⁵⁷ It is Ms. 1838 at the Udaipur branch of the Rajasthan Prachyavidya Pratishtan.

⁵⁸ These two are the *samvat* 1859 manuscript at Nagaripracharini Sabha, Kashi, and another dated *samvat* 1861 that was originally at Agra College but is now at the National Museum, Delhi (Bora, *Prthvīrājrāso*, p. 87).

the work, as explained in Chapter 6 of this book. The task of publishing all of the long recension was subsequently taken up by the Nagaripracharini Sabha. The work of editing the epic had been begun by Mohanlal Vishnulal Pandya in 1887 and partially published by Medical Hall Press, Benares, but the project progressed very slowly. Nagaripracharini Sabha, therefore, took it over in 1906, with Shyamsundar Das joining Pandya as a co-editor. Pandya died in 1912, a year before Nagaripracharini Sabha completed its publication of the entire *Rāso*. Although a description of the manuscripts used in the edition was never published due to Pandya's untimely death, his editorial comments on difficult textual readings do refer repeatedly to several manuscripts. The most important of these was a copy of the Amar Singh manuscript made in 1802 CE, during the reign of Maharana Bhim Singh.⁵⁹ This copy of Mewar's royally sponsored version of the epic was in Pandya's personal possession, acquired during the many years he resided in Udaipur. In this way, the version of *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* that was redacted at the Mewar court came to be propagated widely across North India through the medium of print. The Nagaripracharini Sabha edition (called Pandya *Rāso* in this book) was reprinted in the 1990s and is still available for purchase.

Another long-recension version of *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* was published at Udaipur in 1954. This edition by Kavirav Mohansimha (or Mohansimha *Rāso*) resembles a few medium-recension manuscripts in ending with Shihab al-Din's capture of Prithviraj at the final battle. It is also like the medium recension in its length, as it contains only 4399 stanzas. But almost all of the fifteen manuscripts consulted by the editor Mohansimha were of the long recension.⁶⁰ Mohansimha believed that the original epic consisted of 5000 stanzas and accordingly pruned the text considerably. Decisions on which verses should be included in the edition were made primarily on poetic merit, because Mohansimha felt that the superior verses were composed by Chand Bardai rather than by his descendants or followers.⁶¹ This Udaipur edition is hence an abbreviated version of the long recension.

According to my own survey of catalogues from manuscript archives, almost 170 manuscripts of all or part of the *Rāso* epic survive, most of which are preserved in Rajasthan. Some are situated in far-flung archives, however, from Kolkata in eastern India to Poona in the Deccan, as well as in several collections in England. Only a fraction of these manuscripts have been

⁵⁹ Bora, *Pr̥thvīrājrāso*, pp. 21–3 and 77–80. The manuscript is in the collection of Nagaripracharini Sabha, Kashi, as is another manuscript utilized by Mohanlal Vishnulal Pandya in his *Rāso* edition – this second text is the one whose date has been variously read as *sanyvat* 1640, 1747, and the like.

⁶⁰ The list of manuscripts is provided in Kavirav Mohansimha, "Sampādakīya," in Mohansimha *Rāso*, vol. 4, pp. 34–5.

⁶¹ Kavirav Mohansimha, "Sampādakīya," in Mohansimha *Rāso*, vol. 1, pp. 1–2.

consulted by the few Hindi literary scholars who have studied the *Rāso* over the past century; as a result our understanding of the development of the epic is quite limited. Thus, despite the inevitable gaps in my database of *Rāso* manuscripts, it is useful in giving us a broad sense of the *Rāso*'s circulation and transmission patterns.⁶²

One important distinction in surveying *Rāso* manuscripts is whether they covered all of Prithviraj's biography or only one or two episodes. Of the existing manuscripts, 102 attempted to tell the *Prithvirāj Rāso* story to its conclusion in Prithviraj's death, even though these manuscripts may not survive in complete form today. Information on who commissioned their copying is unfortunately scarce, with only fifteen of these texts containing such details, according to the archive catalogs. The patrons we are informed about are overwhelmingly Rajput. Occasionally they were reigning kings such as Maharana Svarup Singh, who had a *Rāso* manuscript made ca. 1850,⁶³ but often the epic seems to have been intended for a young aristocrat or noble as when prince Zalim Singh, tenth son of Maharaja Takht Singh of Jodhpur, commissioned a copy ca. 1780.⁶⁴ Not all patrons were associated with ruling families, as with Thakur Hamir Singh whose manuscript was created about 1755, nor were they all Rajputs, as in the case of an early seventeenth-century manuscript intended for a man whose father, Muhta Karamchand, was chief minister to the Bikaner king Ray Singh, and who was probably a Jain.⁶⁵ The scribes appear to have been Bhats, Jains, or Brahmins.⁶⁶ Fifty-two of the manuscripts of the complete epic are dated: seventeen come from the seventeenth century, fifteen are from the eighteenth century, and twenty are from the nineteenth century.

As time went on and the epic grew progressively longer, it became popular to have just a section of the epic transcribed, covering one or two episodes. Sixty-six such partial retellings of the *Rāso* exist, mostly from the eighteenth

⁶² One problem is that many *Rāso* manuscripts must still be in private hands and thus remain invisible in a survey of manuscript catalogs from archives. My database figures may also be flawed through the inclusion of duplicates: manuscripts have sometimes been transferred from one archive to another in the past century, which would be difficult to detect because of the minimal information provided in the typical manuscript catalog. In addition, archives adopt different practices in regards to numbering the various parts of what may be a single manuscript; some archives enumerate each section of a long-recension *Rāso* as separate manuscripts instead of as one. Catalogs also sometimes contain inaccurate information, which can only be detected through inspection of each manuscript. I personally examined about 35 *Rāso* manuscripts.

⁶³ Ms. 2734 at Rajasthan Prachyavida Pratisthan, Udaipur.

⁶⁴ Ms. 26(3) at Maharaj Mansingh Pustak Prakash, Jodhpur.

⁶⁵ Ms. 9335 at Rajasthan Prachyavida Pratisthan, Jodhpur; and Ms. 61, Anup Sanskrit Library, Bikaner.

⁶⁶ These were the primary literate communities of Rajasthan, along with Rajasthan's second bardic community, the Charans.

and nineteenth centuries.⁶⁷ There is virtually no information on the patrons of these manuscripts, which typically ranged from 20 to 200 folios in length. The most frequently copied chapter was that relating to Kanauj (discussed at length in Chapter 4 here), of which I documented sixteen instances. Also popular was the episode on the Mahoba war (discussed in Chapter 6), of which at least twelve manuscripts exist. The so-called *Padmavati Samay*, relating the story of a beautiful bride from the distant seashore, is another independently popular addition to the *Rāso* epic and, like the Mahoba episode, is a relatively late interpolation into the *Rāso* epic.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Two of these partial *Rāsos* were written at the very end of the seventeenth century, 11 in the eighteenth century, 17 in the nineteenth century, and four in the twentieth century. In addition to the 102 (originally) complete *Rāsos* and 66 partial *Rāsos*, I found almost 20 other manuscripts that were too fragmentary to ascertain whether the pages were originally part of a complete epic or not. I have not included this last group of manuscripts in the count of about 170 surviving *Rāso* manuscripts that I have cited several times in this book.

⁶⁸ The earliest Mahoba manuscript in my database was made in 1769 CE, while the oldest independent manuscript of the *Rāso*-related *Padmavati* story dates from the late eighteenth century.

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