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## EPILOGUE TO THE SILK ROADS?

Stephen Frederic Dale. *The Muslim Empires of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals*. Cambridge, etc.: Cambridge University Press, 2010. xiv + 347 pp. ISBN 978-0-521-87095-5 (hardback); 978-0-521-69142-0 (paperback).

Giancarlo Casale. *The Ottoman Age of Exploration*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. xx + 281 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-987404-0 (paperback).

These books – a textbook survey and a scholarly first monograph – complement one another in interesting ways. Both should stimulate readers to re-think the conventional periodization which ends the history of the “Silk Roads” in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century with the advent of the European “Age of Discovery.” The Ottomans, Safavids and Mughals all controlled significant economic resources and invested in their development. They engaged in cultural exchanges in ways that suggest continuities with what has been documented for earlier periods of Eurasian encounters.

Published in a series entitled “New Approaches to Asian History” whose books are “intended as introductions for students to be used in the classroom,” Steven Dale’s volume is an impressive feat of compression, lucidly written and offering some interesting ideas even for those who might have some previous knowledge of the subject. Whether it really achieves the stated goal for the series is another matter – writing a successful “textbook” presents challenges that are not always readily overcome, especially when the subject is as complex as the one tackled here.

Dale brings to the task substantial expertise. His book on Indian merchants in the Eurasian trade published nearly two decades ago opened for many a new and very important subject. His more recent book on the founder of the Mughal empire, Babur, has been warmly received. He defines the subject of the volume under review as

a short history of culturally related and commercially linked imperial entities from their foundation, through the height of their power, economic influence and artistic creativity and then to their dissolution. It focuses on monarchs and the aristocratic elite... It necessarily gives short shrift to a variety of topics, most particularly the daily life of non-aristocratic urban and rural Muslim families, their religious rituals and social life... Women and members of non-Muslim communities also receive relatively little attention... Finally, limitations of space have made it impossible to do justice to the full range of architecture in these empires or to discuss gardens... [pp. 7-8].

Indeed, in many ways his approach might seem old-fashioned, though I think he is absolutely on the mark to focus on particular reigns and rulers under whom these empires achieved their greatest success. While he gives a passing nod to Max Weber’s pronouncements on bureaucratic rule, he wisely dismisses as largely inaccurate such labeling as “gunpowder empires” and “early modern.” Even if a great deal here concerns political history, one of the virtues of the book is its serious attempt to discuss important aspects of high culture: religion, architecture, literature, and painting.

Many readers will find the abundant details of political history here to be a tough slog – I am afraid

too much of it reminds one of why a “textbook” can dampen, rather than stimulate student enthusiasm. The compensation is Dale’s emphasis on explaining the basis for political success and in particular his discussion of the various ways in which the rulers sought to legitimize their rule. Despite the fact that the ruling elites (and the states themselves) were “Muslim,” to a considerable degree religion was subordinated to practical, secular priorities of attaining and staying in power and managing economic resources. While all three empires drew upon a common Turkic political, linguistic, and tribal heritage, there were substantial differences in how they developed politically. In his telling, the role of religion in politics was significant, ultimately, only the case of the Safavids. To say that, however, may be to understate the importance for the Ottomans of their control over the Muslim holy cities in Arabia. The exhibits even today in the Topkapı Sarayı (and some of the discussion in Casale’s book) suggest that the Ottomans were very serious in their role as successors to the Caliphs..

Perhaps the best chapter, for its distilling of what was really important, is the one on the economies, highlighting the importance of natural resources and agriculture, but at the same time underscoring the ways in which all three regimes promoted commerce. The governments invested in infrastructure. Political borders and frequent episodes of hostility (especially between the Ottomans and Safavids) were no obstacle to international commerce. Importantly, as Dale stresses, only in the case of the Ottomans might one make the case that the empire’s decline economically might be connected with the deprivations inflicted by the growing European presence in the Asian trade. (Casale’s different perspective here largely reflect his focus only on the period of Ottoman florescence, not the subsequent decline.)

Dale’s treatment of what we might loosely term “cultural” history is somewhat uneven, reflecting perhaps accurately the level of the author’s investment in the various subjects. We learn quite a bit about the importance of Sufism, though the conscious decision not to delve into aspects of daily life leaves us with little feel for what this may have meant in practice. Dale gives due emphasis to the Persianate literary traditions in all of the empires and provides at least some sampling of poetry. Architecture is one of the areas in which he readily acknowledges his dependence on a few key secondary treatments, but then, unfortunately, the result often reads like a catalogue rather than a considered analysis derived from standing back from those sources and viewing the buildings in their settings. The impression left by his discussion of painting is similar – somewhat mechanical.

Perhaps the problem here is the format, with its inevitable restrictions of space and production cost. Including cultural subjects is laudatory and essential if we are going to be able to appreciate why these empires should attract our interest. Yet, can one really convey a feel for the culture effectively, especially if it is impossible to illustrate properly its visual components? Yes, the book has a good many illustrations, the architecture in photos taken by the author, the painting mainly from work in the Sackler and the Los Angeles County Museum. At least in the paperback edition of the book the grayscale reproductions are often muddy. One might wish for some different choices – “interiors” means here courtyards, but not the real interior spaces under the domes, where, in the case of the famous Ottoman architect Sinan (represented here by only a portion of an external façade) one finds some of the most striking evidence of his genius. For Isfahan, to choose not to discuss “city planning” is certainly unfortunate; the grayscale views of the mosques simply cannot convey the stunning visual impact of their tiles. Given the importance of Firdawsi’s *Shahname* and its illustration, it is unfortunate that we see so little of its visual evocations, and then only indirectly via Nizami.

It seems likely that Cambridge will eventually make this book available electronically, as it has done for others in the same series. That, however, is unlikely to meet the needs of today’s students, for what we have here is what we might characterize as an “old-fashioned” textbook, not something that ultimately might take advantage of the possibilities offered by, say, an iPad. Now don’t get me wrong – I still believe in print books and reading text; I would be the last person to advocate we abandon them for an ephemeral world of often superficial visual experience. It is possible to imagine how this good book could fit into a course which also required primary source readings, had its own website with links to good image collections, and provided the inspiration of lectures by a broadly expert professor such as Dale, who would undoubtedly incorporate rich visual material into a compelling narrative. Cambridge could have provided some of the necessary support for this, but at least so far, has chosen not to. The book has, thank goodness, a good many clear, if small, maps, a glossary, dynastic lists, index and a fairly generous bibliography. Yet unlike what we find in analogous textbook series from Oxford University Press, nary a website is listed, even though there are some good choices of ones that have some of the first-hand accounts from which Dale cites snippets and have generous selections of images in brilliant color for the arts.

Comparing a textbook by an established scholar with a first monograph that is not too many years removed from a dissertation may seem a bit unfair to both. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, if anything the comparison works in favor of Casale's superbly written book. Of the two, his is by far the more compelling read, something that too rarely can be said about most first scholarly monographs.

Not confined to the straightjacket of a textbook, Casale is able to focus sharply on a forceful argument, and a provocative one indeed. By analyzing the development of Ottoman policy regarding the Indian Ocean in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and contextualizing this with reference to the development of Ottoman geographical knowledge, he asserts that we should

put to rest once and for all the notion that the empire was somehow a victim of the first era of European overseas expansion. Quite to the contrary, the Ottomans were among the most direct beneficiaries of that expansion, and in the end were victims of only one thing: their own success [p. 203].

Conventional discussions of Ottoman expansion focus on the concern over the empire's land frontiers, with a supposed lack of vision about the wider world or any significant maritime involvement with it. By contrast, the story of the rise of Portugal and its role in opening the age of European Discovery casts Henry the Navigator in visionary terms, reading back into the beginnings the commitment which led to the creation of a farflung colonial empire. Casale does not shy away from the terminology used to discuss the Age of Discovery. Indeed, he finds striking parallels between the Portuguese and Ottoman experience: both began with little knowledge of Asia, and in both cases the initial steps which ultimately led to its "discovery" and economic engagement were limited in scope and vision. Casale questions whether there was an economic advantage to the sea route around Africa; in fact, the Portuguese really were hoping to be able to take control of the Red Sea route via Egypt to the Mediterranean, recognizing that it had distinct advantages. In both cases, part of the rationale for expansion was religious. I think Casale is quite right (*pace* Dale, whose book he could not have read) that Ottoman control of the Muslim holy cities was extremely important in the development of an Ottoman rationale of world empire.

Before reading Casale, I had never appreciated the degree to which it was the Ottomans in the first instance, not the emerging European maritime powers, who provided the main threat to Portuguese interests in the Indian Ocean. While it may be that he too readily identifies distinct Ottoman political

factions advocating or opposing a forward policy in the Indian Ocean, clearly the success or failure of the Ottoman efforts depended a lot on court politics; certain individuals played a key role in devising visionary plans for what the Ottomans might be able to achieve. In the end, logistical challenges, overreach in conquering distant provinces that proved to be ungovernable, and the pressures of trying to wage war successfully on too many fronts doomed the efforts to maintain a foothold on the Indian Ocean and expand Ottoman influence even to Southeast Asia. For a time though, some remarkable successes were achieved, and there was a real potential for a different historical outcome.

Despite what we might term political failure, the Ottomans had considerable success and economic benefit from controlling a significant part of the spice trade – either by direct government intervention or by creating favorable conditions for private enterprise. Part of Casale's argument is that the private involvement became so successful as to obviate the need for continuing government involvement in the Indian Ocean. The Portuguese seem never to have been able to cut off the trade through what had now become Ottoman territory. It is not Casale's purpose to go very deeply into the economic history, which is too bad, as we are left wanting to know a lot more details about this trade.

Casale's treatment of Ottoman geographic knowledge should also open many eyes. There has long been awareness of some striking achievements in 16<sup>th</sup>-century Ottoman cartography, combined though with a tendency to dismiss Ottoman geographic knowledge for what it apparently did not include. He makes the case that there was impressively rapid change from a situation in which the Ottoman rulers and elite had a very limited understanding of the wider world (not even knowing much about the very substantial accomplishments of medieval Arab geography) to one in which they not only translated some of the Arab and Persian classics but also began to keep abreast of the latest European discoveries. Even what were ostensibly secret Portuguese records of voyages came into the Ottomans' hands with little delay. It turns out that the Ottoman government had descriptive accounts of the Indian Ocean and even China which were better than most of what was available in Europe. And that was what was important for Ottoman policy, not the acquisition of details about the Americas. There is suggestive evidence that this interest in the wider world was not just confined to policy makers but spread more widely amongst the educated Ottoman elite. While these are not Casale's comparisons, my impression is that in England, where at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century there was a similarly limited interest

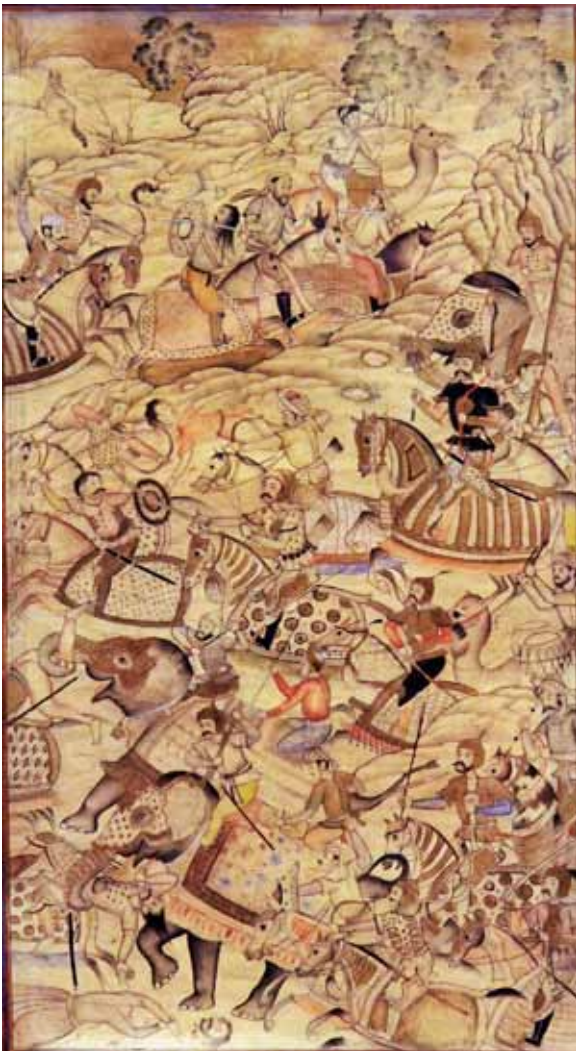
in the wider world, it took somewhat longer to reach the level of awareness the Ottomans achieved, even if by the end of the century, thanks to the fact the English had printing and the Ottomans did not, the spread of geographic knowledge in Britain took off. For parallels with a culture where printing of geographic literature still lay long in the future, we might look at Muscovy. Muscovite “backwardness” makes the Ottomans look very good indeed.

One of the virtues of the book is its extensive use not just of Turkish material (including manuscripts) but of major published series of Portuguese archival documents. So, while we might instinctively impute to Casale some rhetorical exaggeration about Ottoman accomplishments from his read of the often frustratingly incomplete Turkish materials, the Portuguese sources fill in many gaps and provide contemporary assessments which certainly support his argument about the impact of what the Ottomans attempted. Some decent schematic maps, images of 16<sup>th</sup> century maps, illustrations from manuscript

depictions of sea battles and engravings of port cities complement the discussion.

The boldness of Casale’s conclusions should prod others to take his arguments seriously, even if to argue with him. Both Casale and Dale should prompt those interested in the larger patterns of Eurasian trade to consider more carefully the interrelationship between the maritime and overland routes, to examine more closely the history of specific regions and not just generalize for larger polities, to take seriously the active role of governments in developing infrastructure to support trade, and above all to reexamine the impact the European “Age of Discovery” on what we call for convenience the “history of the Silk Roads.” Perhaps the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century is more defensible than the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> to mark the closing of an era. Of course whether we can ever agree on a periodization is less important than how much we can learn about mechanisms of exchange and cross-fertilization of cultures.

— Daniel C. Waugh



(left) Babur (1483-1530), founder of the Mughal Empire, in his conquest of India in 1526. Miniature from late 16<sup>th</sup>-century manuscript of the Akbarnama. Seattle Art Museum, Eugene Fuller Memorial Collection 46.28.



(above) Ottoman Sultan Selim I (1467-1520), whose conquests in the Middle East paved the way for the Ottomans to move into the Indian Ocean. Modern statue in Selim’s home town of Trabzon, Turkey.

(below) Safavid Shah Abbas I (1587-1629) receiving Vali Muhammad Khan of Bukhara, who came to Isfahan seeking aid. Chihil Sutun Palace, Isfahan, 17<sup>th</sup> century painting renewed in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century.



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