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The Dominion of the Scholars: A Preliminary Look into Islām's Civilisational Contribution in the Pre-Modern Region of Khurāsān*

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Abstract
The preliminary discussion of this short essay focuses on some of Islām's intellectual and civilisational contributions in a historical region of Central Asia called Khurāsān. As a starting point, it mentions a number of *ḥadīth*s (sayings from the Prophet Muḥammad) and *athār* (sayings of the Holy Prophet's Companions and their followers) that impute to this region some eschatological importance as well as matters pertaining to the legal aspect of the religion, especially from Muslim Sunnī perspective. As a preliminary discussion and in a non-exhaustive manner, the writing highlights and evaluates a number of important Muslim figures

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that have emerged from that region along with their respective intellectual and cultural contributions to human civilisation as materialisation of the religion's aspirations arising from collective understanding of its worldview.

Keywords
Historical region, intellectual history, graveyard of empires, Black Standards, prophecy, worldview, Muslim conquest, scholarship.

Introduction

Khurāsān, also known as Greater Khurāsān,[1] is a historical region lying in the northeast of Persia during the time it was under the Persian Archaeminid Empire (c. 550–330 BCE). The name Khurāsān is from Persian "Buzurg Khorāsān" or "Kahn Khorāsān." Today, the geographical area of what used to be Khurāsān encompasses a major portion of Uzbekistan called Khwarezm and particularly the cities of Samarkand; some part of western Tajikistan; a huge part of Afghanistan including its major cities of Balkh (north), Kabul (east), Ghazni (south-east), Kandahar (south), and Herat (near the Afghanistan-Turkmenistan border); some part of Iran including the cities of Tus, Sarakhs (which borders Turkmenistan), Nishapur, and Gurgan; and a quarter of Turkmenistan that includes Merv.

The area in Khurāsān known today as Afghanistan has earned the title as the "graveyard of empires" due to its reputation of being untameable by the major world powers that sought to gain dominance over it since ancient times to the modern.[2] These attempts include Persian conquests led by

1. Also spelled Khurasan and Khorasan in non-academic media but for the sake of consistency in transliterating from Arabic sources, "Khurāsān" will be used throughout this article.
2. There are several works that mention and/or attempt to deal on the description of Afghanistan as "graveyard of empires", for example, Mehar

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Darius I (r. 522–486 BCE) and Greek conquest of Asia led and sustained by Alexander III of Macedon (336–323 BCE), which was part of Greek war against Persia. Known as Alexander the Great, he carried out his military campaign over a period of six years from 329 BCE until his unexpected death in 323 BCE. Alexander's demise generated the squabble among his generals and ultimately led to the disintegration of his empire.[3]

After Alexander's death, the Persian Sassanid Empire asserted its influence over the land. Wars with the Roman Byzantines may have weakened the Empire but it was the engagement with the emerging Muslims that sealed its fate; a pathway is opened for Islamisation of the region, which lasted more than 200 years from 642 CE to 870 CE.[4] This was a remarkable turning point in Khurāsān's history considering the resistance that it had with the two earlier world powers and the time span a Muslim world power managed to sustain its influence.

Later, Khurāsān would suffer several more invasions including the Mongol invasion of Khwarezmia led by Genghis Khan from 1219 to 1221 CE;[5] the conquest led by Temūr-i Lang (Tamerlane) from 1383 to 1385 CE;[6] and the invasion by the Sikh Empire in 1846 CE. In recent times, Afghanistan has been the brunt of successive colonisation attempts as well

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Omar Khan, *Policy Failures in the Graveyard of Empires: How Policymakers Failed the Soldiers in the British, the Soviet, and the American Wars in Afghanistan* (California: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2001); Seth G. Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009); David Isby, *Afghanistan: Graveyard of Empires: A New History of the Borderland* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2010); Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

3. Peter Green, *Alexander the Great and the Hellenistic Age* (London: Phoenix, 2007), 29–34.
4. Frank L. Holt, *Into the Land of Bones: Alexander the Great in Afghanistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 8–9.
5. David Morgan, *The Mongols* (Hoboken: Basil Blackwell, Inc., 1986), 69, 74.
6. Justin Marozzi, *Tamerlane: Sword of Islam, Conqueror of the World* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005), 1–3.

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as the imposition of order by Western powers—the British (1838–1878),[7] the Soviet Russian (1873–1885 & 1979–1989),[8] and the American (2001–present).[9] The failure of world powers to conquer and subjugate it fully further added to the aura of mystery that surrounded the land.

Several *hadīth*s (sayings from the Prophet Muḥammad) and *athār*s (sayings of the Prophet Muḥammad's Companions and their followers) impute eschatological importance as well as matters pertaining to the legal aspect of the religion to the region of Khurāsān. For example, Ibn ʿAbbās once entertained a query from a Khurāsānite, which then served as a clarifying point for the religious injunction against the consumption of any intoxicating substance made from raisins and grapes;[10] from a historico-legal point of view it demonstrated the precedence of the *Sharīʿah* primary sources over the *ʿurf* (local custom), particularly of those who permit the consumption of intoxicants.

The *ḥadīth* narrated by Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq pertaining to *Ākhir al-Zamān* (the End Times) wherein Prophet Muḥammad prophesied the emergence of the Dajjāl, an evil being of immense power from "a land in the East called Khurāsān (*al-Dajjāl yakhruju min arḍ bi-ʾl-mashriq yuqālu lahā Khurāsān*)," may serve to indicate its future as well as eschatological importance.[11] Another companion, Abū Ḥurayrah, narrated a *ḥadīth* where the Holy Prophet prophesied a future emergence of "Black Standards" (*rāyāt sūd*) from the region, which is presumably a Muslim force so superior in many ways that nothing would be able to stop them "until they are planted in Jerusalem (*ḥattā tunṣaba bi-Īlīyāʾ*)."[12]

The *ḥadīth* of the Black Standards has been instrumentalised as justification by post-Khulafāʾ al-Rāshidīn quasi-religious political movements, particularly those styling themselves as

7. Ibid., 4.
8. Ibid., 5–6.
9. Ibid., 1, 6–8.
10. *Sunan al-Nasāʾī*, Book 51, Ḥadīth 151.
11. *Jamīʿ al-Tirmidhī*, Book 33, Ḥadīth 80.
12. *Jamīʿ al-Tirmidhī*, Book 33, Ḥadīth 112.

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champions of the underdogs, to go up against larger established political order perceived to be so transgressive, unjust, and tyrannical to the point its removal is warranted.[13] For instance, the political revolution launched by Banī-'l-ʿAbbās (the ʿAbbāsids) in 750 CE that eventually threw off the yoke of oppressive Umayyad rule saw ʿAbbāsid armies flying black standards engaging in battle with those of the Umayyad whose white flags were therefore argued to be exclusive of the forces mentioned in the *ḥadīth*.[14] In retrospect of the ʿAbbāsid Revolution, Muslim traveler and geographer, Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad Shams al-Dīn al-Muqaddasī (c. 945/946–991 CE),[15] in his book *Aḥsan al-Taqāsīm fī Maʿrifat al-Aqālīm* (The Best Divisions for Knowledge of the Regions) said the following:

> And when God—may He be praised—saw the conduct of the Umayyads, with their tyrannies and provocations against the family of His prophet—on whom be peace—He sent against the Umayyads armies from the area of Khurāsān which He assembled from its provinces and put together from its districts. And they marched against them like the

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13. A government is primarily established to regulate people's affairs as well as provide peace and security, therefore a government that performs in contrast to these roles, for example causing disruption in people's affairs or oppressing and killing its own population may, as a result, become illegitimate. According to Muhammad Hamidullah, the framework of *al-Siyar* (Islamic Law of Nations) calls a type of insurrection launched against such an illegal government as war of deliverance, regardless "whether the government under which the Muslim community is toiling is Muslim or non-Muslim". For further explanation, see Muhammad Hamidullah, *The Muslim Conduct of State* 1st ed. (Hyderabad-Deccan: Islamic Culture, 1941–2; 5th revised ed. Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1973; this edition Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2012), 192.
14. Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, 3 vols. (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 1: 274.
15. His birth in Bayt al-Maqdis or Jerusalem explains the nisbah al-Muqaddasī, while the origin of his maternal grandfather Abū Bakr al-Banna from Biyar in Khurāsān establishes his connection to the land. See *Description of Syria including Palestine* by Mukaddasi (circ. 985 A.D.), trans. Guy Le Strange (London: Palestine Pilgrims' Text Society, 1886), iii–v.

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> last darkness of the night. And what is expected from them when the Mahdī [Muslim messianic guide to appear before the last day] comes is more than that, for they are the people of the state, and of victory; and supporters of the truth when it appears.[16]

The motivation to fulfil a *ḥadīth*'s prophecy is not unlike Umayyad conquest of Hispania in the period of 711–788 CE, which was initially intended to conquer Byzantine's imperial capital of Constantinople in fulfilment of the prophecy regarding its conquest by a leader and an army whose virtues are good to a very significant degree (*la-taftaḥanna al-Qustantiniyyah wa la-niʿma al-amīr amīruhā wa la-niʿma al-jaysh dhālika al-jaysh*).[17]

At a glance, that attempt ultimately failed because, as history later showed, that special privilege would belong to Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II (1432–1481 CE), whose army conquered Constantinople in 1453. While it could be postulated that Umayyad army's unsuccessful attempt was due to failing to meet certain preconditions of the *ḥadīth* (i.e. a leader and an army being virtuous to a very significant degree), there is a need for an examination of these preconditions and what they entail, because its lack thereof may be a factor contributing to misuse of the Prophetic Traditions. The hypothesis is that they must be more than just military prowess but also the civilisational and intellectual superstructure (i.e. the qualities of the army of Black Banners) that would have granted such ability.

In modern times, these eschatological *ḥadīth*s from authentic sources such as the *Ṣaḥīḥayn* are still being politically instrumentalised to serve today's version of quasi-religious political and militant movements. Modern-day militant terrorist groups such as Islamic State/DAESH which used the religion's

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16. Al-Muqaddasī, *The Best Divisions for Knowledge of the Regions: Ahsan al-Taqāsīm fī Maʿrifat al-Aqālīm*, trans. Basil Collins (Reading: Garnet Publishing, 2001), 240.
17. Aḥmad, *al-Musnad* 14: 331 no. 18859; al-Ḥākim, *al-Mustadrak* 4: 421–422; al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Muʿjam al-Kabīr* 2:38 no. 1216; al-Bukhārī, *al-Tāʾrīkh al-Kabīr* 2: 81 and *al-Ṣaghīr* 1: 306; Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, *al-Istīʿāb* 8: 170.

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name to justify acts of terror as well as those who make ignorance their capital often make use of the key words such as in the *ḥadīth* of the Black Standards, barring the contexts and prerequisites of prophetic fulfilment, in order to lure and recruit the unsuspecting into joining their illegitimate causes.[18]

A truncated view of the region's history may only serve to downplay the fact that it was once an intellectual and civilisational epicentre of Islām in its heyday.[19] Yet, whenever Islām enters into a region, it contributes to the civilisational and cultural growth of its people without causing them to lose their national identity. This is because "permeation of the basic elements" of Islām that occur without the removal of pre-Islamic "basic and praiseworthy elements" deemed as socially binding and compatible with the religion can cause the emergence of a diversity of Muslim cultures that is capable of reaching a civilisational stage, as a result of which it becomes an Islamic civilisation. [20] This process comes into play through the civilising power of Islām, whose clarity of guidance enabled within mere decades the Prophet Muḥammad to trigger his society's change from one that was rife with barbarism into a civilisation that reached the heights of culture and learning. Such is the religion's civilising power that stems from its ability to reshape worldviews through the imbuing of new meanings into words and terminologies, reflecting its ontology into human languages.[21] Bearing these in mind, any

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18. For an example of such usage, see Jasmine Jawhar, *Terrorists' Use of the Internet: The Case of Daesh* (Kuala Lumpur: The Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism [SEARCCT], 2016), 35.
19. An example would be C. E. Bosworth article "Khurāsān", wherein he only highlighted events which were primarily political and military, with little or no mention of scholarly figures and civilisational contributions which this article is attempting to address. See C. E. Bosworth, "Khurāsān", *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 12 vols. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1986), 5: 55–59.
20. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Historical Fact and Fiction* (Kuala Lumpur: Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Press, 2011), xiv–xv.
21. S. M. N. al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism* (First impression Petaling Jaya: Muslim Youth Movement Malaysia (ABIM), 1978; this impression Kuala Lumpur: IBFIM, 2014), 51–54; S. M. N. al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islām: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islām* (Kuala Lumpur: The Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1995), 20.

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contributions made by Muslims including the Islamised people of the region, can be counted as Islām's contribution to it.

Therefore, based on these suppositions, this article aims to highlight the historical significance of the Khurāsān region in Transoxiana, which included in the area today known as Afghanistan. The question this article hopes to answer, by evaluating (in a non-exhaustive manner due to space constraint) some of Islām's intellectual and civilisational contributions to Khurāsān, is this: What were the qualities of Khurāsān and its denizens that warranted its mention in the *ḥadīth*s?

Khurāsān before Islām

Alexander saw Khurāsān as the gateway to Bactria and India where he was headed in his quest for territorial expansion and so in 330 CE he mobilised his army to conquer it.[22] This conquest proved the region's strategic value because later he was able to establish the Greek cities Arochsia (present day Kandahar) and Alexandria Arion (present day Herat).

According to the historian and Shāfiʿite scholar Shams al-Dīn Abū Al-ʿAbbās Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Khallikān (1211–1282 CE), the city of Alexandria Arion that later had its name changed into Harāt (present day Herat), was built by Iskandār Dhū'l-Qarnayn on his expedition to the East.[23] This is most probably why it is easy to associate Dhū'l-Qarnayn mentioned in the Qurʾān with Greek conqueror Alexander the Great.[24] Also, it is worth mentioning here that prior to the city's capture, pillage, and destruction by the Mongols in the year 1221 CE, Harāt had already become a bustling trading centre that connected the trade routes between the Mediterranean Sea and China and India.[25]

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22. Bosworth, "Khurāsān", 5: 56.
23. Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-Aʿyān wa anbāʾ Abnāʾ al-Zamān*, ed. Iḥsān ʿAbbās, 8 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Ṣādr, 1994), 3: 348.
24. The name "Dhu'l-Qarnayn" is mentioned in *Sūrah al-Kahf* (18): 94.
25. R. N. Frye, "Harāt," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd. ed. 12 vols. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986), 3: 177.

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By 7th century CE, the Sassanid Empire reasserted its dominance over the region of Khurāsān which then comprised the cities of Nishapur, Harāt, Marwa (present day Merv), Faryab, Taloqan, Balkh, Bukhara, Badghis, Abiward, Gharjistan, Tus or Susia, Sarakhs and Gurgan. Later, the list of cities would include Kabul and Transoxiana.

Khurāsān after Islām

Early Islamic usage often regarded everywhere east of western Persia as Khurāsān. Muslim conquest of Khurāsān represented the last phase of war between the Rāshidūn caliphate (during the time of ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān) and Persian Sassanid Empire.

According to al-Muqaddasī, Khurāsān was considered to be the nearest to the region of the Arabs, therefore it was only natural that the direction of the religion's expansion would encompass it first. In 651 CE, Arab commanders al-Aḥnaf ibn Qays and ʿAbd-Allāh ibn ʿĀmir spearheaded the Muslim conquest of Khurāsān. The campaign began with Fars and then moved towards Rayy and Marwa (today Merv in Turkmenistan). In the year 652 CE, al-Aḥnaf led the conquest of Harāt. The conquest of Bukhārā (today's Uzbekistan) took place 20 years later, with Umayyad governor and general ʿUbayd-Allāh ibn Ziyād at the head of the expedition in 674 CE.[26]

Based on al-Muqaddasī's observation, Muslim conquest of Khurāsān was met with ease and little resistance. When Islām was introduced to the region, it was hurriedly embraced by throngs of Khurāsānites. Al-Muqaddasī said the following that when God caused the religion of Islām to be brought to the people of Khurāsān:

> … they became Muslims with the greatest eagerness of all people, and were quickest to do so by the grace

26. Richard Nelson Frye, *Bukhara: The Medieval Achievement* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), 14–15.

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> of God on them. They adopted Islām voluntarily and in multitudes, and made a lasting peace [with the Muslims] on behalf of their country. Hence their land taxes were light and their calamities few; nor was it necessary to take them into captivity. No blood was shed among them, despite their own capacity for fighting, their great numbers, and the strength of their power.[27]

Khurāsān's Significance as Islām's Civilisational Epicentre of Learning

Before evaluating some of Islām's intellectual and civilisational contribution in Khurāsān, there is a need to clarify the constitution of that contribution. Islām places great importance on learning, as could be seen in the endeavours of the Holy Prophet Muḥammad (peace and blessings of God be upon him), his Companions, and those after them in the many teaching circles as well as the establishment of early forms of the *madrasah* (traditional learning centre or college); they had actively planted the seeds for intellectual and scientific inquiry in the nascent Muslim community.[28]

After the period of *Khulafāʾ al-Rāshidīn* ('The Rightly-Guided Caliphs"), the scholars and intellectuals during Umayyad period (661–750 CE) continued building on the intellectual groundwork in areas of law and medicine. The 720's saw the emergence of the Islamic knowledge tradition.[29] Umayyad and later ʿAbbāsid periods saw many great libraries and centres of learning of Islām being established. The ʿAbbāsid period

27. Al-Muqaddasī, *The Best Divisions*, 240.
28. Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, *Budaya Ilmu: Satu Penjelasan* 1st ed. (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1991; 2nd ed. Singapore: Pustaka Nasional Pte. Ltd., 2007), 22–23; Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, *The Concept of Knowledge in Islam and its Implications on Education in a Developing Country* (New York: Mansell Publishing Limited, 1989), 2–3, 36.
29. Alparslan Açikgenç, *Islamic Scientific Tradition in History* (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit IKIM, 2014), 303–304. See also Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 4–5.

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(750–1258 CE) marked "…the time at which intellectual activity among Muslims was at its most dynamic stage in the process through which sciences began to emerge in Islamic civilization."[30]

The reign of Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 786–809 CE) can be identified as one of the most significant periods in the history of Islām, owing to the evidence of the literary development in the caliphate. This context is important to consider, since Khurāsānites were the strongest supporters of the ʿAbbāsids and contributor of manpower and military forces especially in the ʿAbbāsid Revolution. This allows the understanding as to why and how the region remained significant for the ʿAbbāsids in terms of being the recipient of their favours, benefits, and assistance in kind.[31] Retrospectively evaluating the religious and intellectual qualities of the Khurāsānites and the factors that contributed to the success of the revolution, al-Muqaddasī wrote:

> Moreover, the people of Khurāsān are the most devoted to the law, the most steadfast in holding on to the truth. The Prophet—God's peace and blessings be upon him—said: "They will enable you to become victorious in the future, as followers of the faith, even as you enforced it on them in the past." By this he means that they will enable you to gain victory by the sword, in conformity with the religion of God; and the verification of this is to be found in the era of Abū Muslim.[32]

He also said the following in an overall positive evaluation of the Khurāsānites:

> You should know that the territory on this side of the river is indeed Khurāsān, and it is the more

30. Ssekamanya Siraje Abdallah, *Al-Ghazālī and Ibn Taymiyyah on the Legitimacy and Status of ʿilm kalām*, unpublished PhD thesis (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization [ISTAC], 2000), 17.
31. Bosworth, "Khurāsān", 5: 57.
32. Al-Muqaddasī, *The Best Divisions*, 241.

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> important of the two sides, since, [in comparison with Haytal], the larger metropolis is here, its people are more elegant, wiser, and more knowing about good and evil. They are, moreover, closer to the regions and the customs of the Arabs; their capital is more pleasant and better, and they have least cold in the weather, and in the disposition of the people. They are more honourable, have more righteous and intelligent people, and profound knowledge, and remarkable mental retention of the *Qur'ān*; they have wealth aplenty, and rightmindedness.[33]

Learning is what gives knowledge and knowledge enables proper administration of the empire, as the Umayyads had learned from the Persian and the ʿAbbāsid would be quick to learn from Umayyad administrative experiences as soon as they took over. During his reign, Caliph al-Manṣūr (714–775 CE) established Khizānat al-Hikmah (Treasure Trove of Wisdom) in Baghdad. Later, under the rule of Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (763–809 CE), it was upgraded into Bayt al-Ḥikmah (The House of Wisdom). Institutions of learning such as Bayt al-Ḥikmah remained proper places for community of scholars to perform their role in disseminating knowledge and religious sciences. Later, al-Niẓāmiyyah in Khurāsān would prove that there were efforts to resume the continuity of the Prophetic tradition in establishing centres of learning.

As institutions of specialised learning, Bayt al-Ḥikmah and al-Niẓāmiyyah served the function of a nerve centre that secures the support of the masses. Effective caliphs of the ʿAbbāsid dynasty like al-Manṣūr, Harūn al-Rashīd, al-Maʾmūn, and al-Mutawakkil understood the prime importance of public support in legitimising their position and therefore dedicated the resources at their disposal towards attracting scholars and their followers into their fold.[34] Later, it could be seen that

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33. Ibid.
34. George Makdisi, "On the Origin and Development of the College in Islam and the West," *Islam and the Medieval West: Aspects of Intercultural Relations*, ed. Khalil I. Semaan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980), 37.

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the case was similar with Niẓām al-Mulk's establishment of his Niẓāmiyyah group of colleges. It could be seen here how sympathetic patrons of learning institutions were able to develop resources while being sensitive to changes in interests in science and knowledge, without the need for personal commitment to the scholars or scholarship.

The digression of the preceding two paragraphs only aims to demonstrate the continuity of the Prophetic tradition in establishing centres of learning in places where the religion of Islām is spreading. Therefore, let us now turn our attention to Khurāsān again, bearing in mind of the continuity mentioned. During the Saljūq phase of the ʿAbbāsid caliphate, the vizier to the Saljūq Sultan Malik Shah I (r. 1072–1092 CE), Abū ʿAlī Ḥasan ibn ʿAlī Ṭūsī Niẓām al-Mulk (1018–1092 CE), was trying to combat the ideologies and propaganda of deviant sects like the Qarmatians (al-Qaramiṭah) which were threatening the fabric of Sunnī unity through insurrections as well as assassinations of Sunnī leaders and scholars.[35] In fact, he dedicated several chapters in his book *Siyāsat-nāmeh* (*The Book of Government*) dissecting the movement's history and ideology. This could be counted as part of psychological warfare and intellectual assault against the Qarmatian sect, whose ideology was spreading and inciting unrest and rebellion in the areas of Iraq, Khurāsān, al-Shām (Syria), Harāt, Baṣrah, and Baḥrayn.[36]

As an accomplished Shāfiʿī scholar, Niẓām al-Mulk possessed deep respect towards knowledge and valued learning

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35. Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fī al-Tāʾrikh*, ed. Muhammad Yūsuf al-Riqāqah, 4th ed., 11 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 2002), 8: 478–479. See also James Waterson, *The Ismaili Assassins: A History of Medieval Murder* (Yorkshire: Frontline Books, 2008), 79; Mohamed Abu Bakr A. Al-Musleh, *Al-Ghazālī The Islamic Reformer: An Evaluative Study of the Attempts of Imam Al-Ghazālī at Islamic Reform* (*Iṣlāḥ*) (Petaling Jaya: Islamic Book Trust, 2012), 41.
36. Niẓām al-Mulk, *Siyar al-Mulūk*, trans. Yūsuf Bakkār, 2nd ed. (Amman: Wuzārah al-Thaqāfah, 2007), 247–268. See also *The Book of Government or Rules for Kings: The* Siyar al-Muluk *or* Siyasatnama *of Nizam al-Mulk*, trans. Hubert Darke (London & New York: Routledge, first published 1960; this edition published 2002), 208–227.

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highly.[37] He saw that the ideological as well as epistemic confusion which produced the likes of the Qarmatians could only be counterpoised by means of quick dissemination of information and education in the comprehensive and inclusive Sunnī framework. He therefore sought not only to establish, but also accelerate the building of madrasahs that focused on teaching the religious sciences with an emphasis of the Shāfiʿī *madhhab* (jurisprudential school of thought).

Niẓām al-Mulk's honorific name later identified this conglomerate of learning institutions funded by *waqf* (religious endowments)—the Niẓāmiyyah.[38] In 1091, he had the opportunity to meet the rising star of Sunnī scholarship, Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī al-Ṭūsī al-Shāfiʿī (c. 1058–1111 CE), during the latter's visit in one of his military camps. Niẓām al-Mulk extended an invitation for al-Ghazālī to head the Niẓāmiyyah, which the latter accepted. By al-Ghazālī's own account, his responsibilities would later encompass the conglomerate's administration and its syllabus as well as the teaching of over 300 students.[39]

The Niẓāmiyyah colleges would grow into prominence that by 13th century CE a traveler whose family originated from Herat, Shaykh ʿAlī ibn Abī Bakr al-Harawī (c. 539–611 AH / 1145–1215 CE), would mention in his travelogue *Kitāb al-Ishārāt fī Maʿrifat al-Ziyārāt* (*The Book of Signs to the Knowledge of Places of Visitation*) three cities in Khurāsān as the finest places dedicated to the learning of *ḥadīth* and the religious sciences:

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37. Al-Musleh, *Al-Ghazālī The Islamic Reformer*, 41.
38. Ibid., 41. See also translator's introduction, *The Book of Government,* ix–x; C. E. Bosworth, "The Political and Dynastic History of the Iranian World (A.D. 1000–1217)," *The Cambridge History of Iran*, ed. Richard N. Frye, 7 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 5: 71; Farouk Mitha, *al-Ghazālī and the Ismailis: A Debate on Reason and Authority in Medieval Islam* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers & Co. Ltd., 2001), 7–8.
39. See translator's introduction, *Deliverance from Error: An Annotated Translation of* Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl *and Other Relevant Works of al-Ghazālī*, trans. R. J. McCarthy (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2001) 14–18.

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Herat, Balkh, and Sijistān.[40] All these are clearly indications of a living civilisation as well as a thriving intellectual culture in the region.

Some Notable Khurāsānites

In order to further demonstrate the vibrant intellectual culture that Khurāsān once possessed, this part of the article highlights some selected notable figures from Khurāsān arranged in a chronological manner to reflect a continuity. The highlights of this article are not exhaustive due to lack of space, so a whole study can still be proposed to analyse and evaluate the contributions. In the author's opinion, the figures selected for this writing are adequate in demonstrating what this article sets out to do as spelled in the introduction, that is, to evaluate some of Islām's civilisational and intellectual contribution in the region.

As discussed in the early part of this article, Khurāsān is a region that has seen numerous conquests and warfare on its soil since ancient times. Throughout history, it has been the meeting point of major world powers, even if it means many of the meetings took place on battlegrounds. Therefore, it is no surprise that many of the virtues and excellences of Khurāsān and the Khurāsānites were known to the Arabs during the time of Prophet Muḥammad. Without neglecting to mention the resilience, the fighting spirit, and the military resourcefulness of its people, al-Muqaddasī wrote in his *Aḥsan al-Taqāsīm*:

> I read in a book in the library of ʿAdhud al-Dawla that Khurāsān, in salubrity of air, goodness of water, healthiness of soil, perfection of fruit, skill of artisanship, in perfection of disposition, tallness of physique, beauty of countenance; in the swiftness of boats, the excellence of weapons; in its trade,

40. ʿAlī ibn Abī Bakr al-Harawī, *A Lonely Wayfarer's Guide to Pilgrimage: ʿAlī ibn Abī Bakr al-Harawī's* Kitāb al-Ishārāt ilā Maʿrifat al-Ziyārāt, trans. & ed. Joseph W. Meri (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2004), 32.

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> science, probity, law, knowledge,—Khurāsān in all these is a shield against the Turks, who are the most powerful enemies, the most stubborn, and the most patient of their hardships with the least interest in enjoying an easeful life.[41]

A specimen demonstrating these virtues can be found in the military general of the ʿAbbāsid Caliphate, Ṭāhir ibn Ḥusayn (755–822 CE), who was born in Pushang near Herat. He served al-Ma'mūn during the civil war that occurred 810–811 CE against the latter's half-brother Caliph al-Amīn (r. 809–813 CE). Ṭāhir's excellence as a military strategist and commander was established when, despite commanding a small force of only 4,000–5,000 men, he was unexpectedly able to defeat the army that al-Amīn fielded—a considerably ten times larger force of more than 40,000 men under the command of Khurāsān's governor at the time.[42] Ṭāhir's victory over the governor of

41. Al-Muqaddasī, *The Best Divisions*, 240–241. According to Collins, al-Muqaddasī was writing around 985–988 CE (op. cit., xv), only several decades prior to the famous Muslim traveler Aḥmad ibn Faḍlān (fl. 922 CE) who was traveling on a mission under the order of ʿAbbāsid Caliph al-Muqtadir (r. 908–929 CE) to the Volga Bulgars, during which he encountered the Oghuz who were the pre-Islamic ancestors of the Turks in al-Muqaddasī's time. In the eyewitness account of Ibn Faḍlān, the facts show at that time 1) the Islamisation of the Turks had only just begun, 2) not all Turks had become Muslims in the 900s, 3) and the attitude shown by the Turks towards Islām was somewhat mischievous; this could possibly explain al-Muqaddasī's view towards the Turks and the apparent need to counterbalance them with the Khurāsānites. See Ibn Faḍlān, "Mission to the Volga," *Two Arabic Travel Books*, trans. & ed. Tim Mackintosh-Smith and James E. Montgomery (New York/London: New York University Press, 2014), 200–207.

42. al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-Ṭabarī*, ed. Muḥammad Abū Faḍl Ibrāhīm, 11 vols. (Cairo: Dār Maʿārif bi-Miṣr, 1976), 8: 390–412. The forces commanded by ʿAlī ibn ʿIsā were in turn comparable to the combined might of Muslim armies totaling 30,000 men under Khālid ibn al-Walīd which were brought to bear in the conquest Shām (Syria) in 640 CE. For further discussion on the Muslim conquest of Syria and the mobilisation of such an army, see Hugh Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests: How the Spread of Islam Changed the World We Live in* (Boston: De Capo Press, 2007), 57–59.

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Khurāsān ʿAlī ibn ʿĪsā earned him a handsome reward in the form of appointment as the new governor of Khurāsān.[43]

The Khurāsānites would continue to play significant role in the military history of Islām, even as the ʿAbbāsids were losing their grip on power and the Saljūq Turks were on the ascension in 11th century CE. In 1115 CE, an Arab-Syrian warrior-knight and gentleman by the name Usāmah ibn Munqidh met with some troops from Khurāsān and observed them in action during Muslim siege and successful capture of a Crusader fortress in Kafarṭāb (known to the Crusaders as Capharda), northwestern Syria.[44]

It was the period of the First Crusade—between this time and mid-1160s—during which Christian armies were continually pouring down from Europe as aggressors advancing upon Muslim territories.[45] In 1133 CE, Usāmah would again witness the deployment of Khurāsānite forces, this time by Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī, the man who would liberate Jerusalem from the Crusaders 54 years later, in an assault against a castle in Mosul defended by Turkoman chief al-Amīr Qafjāq, who was defeated in the engagement and subsequently had his castle taken over by Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn.[46] These are some samples of Khurāsānite military acumen that would serve them well into the modern times and may explain historical elements that shaped the social psychology of modern-day Afghans.

Moving on to the next part of this article in highlighting the intellectual contributions, this article selected for highlight Imām Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn Abī Sahl Abū Bakr al-Sarakhsī (d. 1096 CE). He was a *faqīh* (jurisconsult), *qāḍī* (court

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43. Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates: The Islamic Near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century*, 2nd ed. (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd., 2004), 148–150.
44. Usāmah ibn Munqidh, *An Arab-Syrian Gentleman & Warrior in the Period of the Crusades: Memoirs of Usāmah ibn-Munqidh* (*Kitāb al-Iʿtibār*), trans. Philip K. Hitti (New York: Columbia University Press, 1929), 102–103.
45. Malcolm Lambert, *Crusade and Jihad: Origins, History, Aftermath* (London: Profile Books Ltd., 2016), 111.
46. Ibid., 187–188.

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judge), and *imām mujtahid* (leading expert who is qualified to formulate independent legal or theological matters based on fundamental principles of the religion) originally from Sarakhs, an Iranian city that sits near the Iran-Turkmenistan border, 115 miles (185 kilometres) east of Mashhad and approximately 308 miles (495 kilometres) north of Herat, Afghanistan.

Author of the 30-volume work on Ḥanafī jurisprudence *Kitāb al-Mabsuṭ*, al-Sarakhsī based his works on the works of Imām Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Shaybānī (749/50–805 CE) who in turn was a companion and student of Imām Abū Hanīfah (702–772 CE), the pioneer of the Ḥanafī *madhhab*.[47] In 803 CE, al-Shaybānī was in Baghdad when Imām Muḥammad ibn Idrīs al-Shāfiʿī (767–820 CE) came to be his student.[48] Al-Shāfiʿī later went on to establish the Shāfiʿī *madhhab*, which became predominant in lands of the African continent including Egypt, Somalia and Ethiopia; lands in the Middle Eastern including Yemen, Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and Saudi Arabia; Asia including the Maldives; and the Malay world which encompassed today south-east Asian countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, and Singapore.[49]

In addition to the voluminous *Kitāb al-Mabsuṭ*, al-Sarakhsī's other major work is *Sharḥ al-Siyar al-Kabīr* (*The Commentary on the Major Conduct* [of War]), which is a commentary on his master's *Kitāb al-Siyar* (*The Book on Conduct* [of the Holy Prophet]). These two works established the guidelines as well as the proper conduct of *jihād* (religious war) against disbelievers, rules of engagement against Muslim rebels, and the treatment of *dhimmī*s (non-Muslims) under Muslim rule and protection.[50]

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47. See translator's biographical notes, *Reliance of the Traveler: A Classic Manual of Islamic Sacred Law ʿUmdat al-Salik* by Ahmad ibn Naqib al-Misri, trans. & ed. Nuh Ha Mim Keller (Beltsville: Amana Publications, 1994), 1093. For Imām al-Shaybānī's background, see Ibid., 1077.

48. Jonathan A. C. Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet's Legacy* (London: One World Publications, 2014), 35.

49. Majid Khadduri, *Translation of al-Shāfiʿī's* Risāla*: Treatise on the Foundations of Islamic Jurisprudence* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2011) 8 and 11–16.

50. Hamidullah, *The Muslim Conduct of State*, 11–12.

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Next is the figure already introduced—Imām Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī who was a jurisconsult, theologian, and prolific writer. Born in Tus, which was the same place where he would later return upon his retirement, al-Ghazālī was one of the greatest scholars in Islām acknowledged even by Western scholars through his role in Sunnī revival that occurred during the time between Muslims' loss of Jerusalem to the Crusaders in 1087 CE and its recovery in 1187 CE—a hundred years later.[51]

An Ashʿarite in *Kalām* school of thought and Shafiʿite in jurisprudence, al-Ghazālī earned the title *Hujjat al-Islām* (the Proof of Islām).[52] During his intermission retirement from al-Niẓāmiyyah, al-Ghazālī wrote the 40-book *Iḥyā' ʿUlūm al-Dīn* (The Revival of the Religious Sciences) with the aim of restoring the original meaning of *fiqh* (religious understanding) that had become obscure due to the constriction of the term and reviving the religious sciences through beneficial learning as well as the clarification of key concepts and ideas.[53]

The *Iḥyā'* is considered to be al-Ghazālī's magnum opus and one of the greatest scholarly masterpieces ever produced in the history of Islām still being read, taught, translated, commented upon, and studied today after more than 900 years. His other well-known works in Persian classified under the "Mirror for Princes" genre were *Kīmiyā-yi Saʿādet* (The Alchemy of Happiness) and *al-Tibr al-Masbūk fī Naṣīḥat al-Mulūk* (Melted Gold Ingot in the Counsel for Kings). The contents and organisation of *Naṣīḥat al-Mulūk* follow that of *Kīmiyā*.[54] Originally written for Saljūq Sultan Malik-Shah I, the translation of *Naṣīḥat al-Mulūk* into Arabic was later commissioned by the governor of Mosul, Qaymāz (d. 595 AH/1199 CE), presumably sometime

51. Lambert, *Crusade and Jihad*, 53–54.
52. See translator's biographical notes, *Reliance of the Traveler*, 1046.
53. Al-Ghazālī, "Khutbah al-Mu'allif," *Iḥyā' ʿUlūm al-Dīn*, 1st ed., 10 vols. (Jeddah: Dār al-Minhāj, 2011), 1: 8–9.
54. George F. Hourani, "A Revised Chronology of Ghazālī's Writings," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 104, 2 (1984): 301.

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before 1190 CE.[55] Al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil, an adviser to Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī (commonly known by his anglicised name "Saladin"), commissioned ʿImād al-Dīn al-Iṣfahanī to translate *Kīmiyā-yi Saʿādet* from its original Persian into Arabic, which al-Iṣfahanī completed in four months.[56] Al-Ghazālī would return to teach at al-Niẓāmiyyah and produce a few more important works such as *al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl* (Deliverance from Error), *al-Mustaṣfā min ʿIlm al-Uṣūl* (The Purified from the Principal Knowledge [of Religion]), *Iljām al-ʿAwwam min ʿIlm al-Kalām* (Warding the Masses from the Science of Discursive Theology), and *Mishkat al-Anwār* (The Niche of Lights) before passing away at the age of 53.[57]

The earlier mentioned avid traveller, Shaykh Taqiyy al-Dīn Abū'l-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn Abī Bakr al-Harawī, was born in Mosul, Iraq. Even though this makes him practically an Iraqi, his family was said to have migrated from Harāt. This explains the appellation "al-Harawī," which means "belonging to Harāt." His travelogue, *Kitāb al-Ishārāt fī Maʿrifat al-Ziyārāt*, mentioned previously contained much information about the many places he has visited. Active in the Second Crusade and beginning of Third Crusade, al-Harawī became one of the counsels to Saladin (r. 1174–1193 CE) who advised him on matters pertaining to warfare and later to Saladin's son and successor al-Malik al-Ẓāhir Ghāzī (r. 1193–1216 CE) who was the lord of Aleppo.[58]

Al-Malik al-Ẓāhir was reportedly fond of al-Harawī that he built a *madrasah* for the latter to teach in. It is also reported that al-Harawī once received an appointment by ʿAbbāsid Caliph al-Nāṣir li-Dīni-'Llāh (r. 1180–1225 CE) as *khaṭīb* (sermoniser) and

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55. See translator's introduction, *Al-Ghazālī's Book of Counsel for Kings* (*Nasīhat al-Mulūk*), trans. F. R. C. Bagley (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), xxii.
56. A. R. Azzam, *Saladin: The Triumph of the Sunni Revival* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2009, reprint 2014), 117.
57. Hourani, "*A Revised Chronology of Ghazālī's Writings*," 301–302.
58. Zayn al-Dīn ʿUmar ibn al-Wardī, *Tatimmah al-Mukhtaṣar fī Akhbār al-Bashar* (*Tārīkh Ibn al-Wardī*), 1st edition, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifah 1970), 2: 60.

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muḥtasib (market regulator) in Syria. It is possible that al-Harawī took up the position as *khaṭīb* because there is a lost work called *Kitāb Khutab al-Harawiyyah* (*al-Harawī's Book of Sermons*) attributed to him by Khayr al-Dīn al-Ziriklī (1893–1946)[59] and by al-Harawī's own admission.[60] However, for the *muḥtasib* position, one can be sure that it was an assignment that he, also by his own admission, ultimately refused.[61]

Next, it is also worth mentioning an earlier al-Harawī by the name of Shaykh Abū Saʿd (d. 1125 CE). He held the position of *qaḍī al-quḍah* (chief judge) in the city of Baghdad, which goes to demonstrate the mobility of the Khurāsānites. In the year 1099, he traveled from Damascus to Baghdad in order to raise alarm and urge ʿAbbāsid Caliph al-Mustaẓhir, who was only nine years-old at the time, to take up arms against the Frankish crusaders descending upon Jerusalem at the time.[62]

A contemporary of ʿAlī ibn Abī Bakr al-Harawī, Imām Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad ibn ʿUmar ibn al-Ḥusayn Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī was born in Rayy in the year 1149 CE. A Shafiʿite *faqīh* and a *mutakallim* (theologian) of the Ashʿarite *Kalām* school of thought, he wrote the voluminous exegesis on the *Qur'ān* called *Tafsīr al-Kabīr* (The Major Exegesis), which is also known as *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb* (Keys of the Unseen). His known work on the principles of jurisprudence is called *al-Maḥṣūl fī ʿIlm al-Uṣūl* (The Fruits of Harvest in the Science of Principles [of Jurisprudence]). Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī died in Herat in the year 1209 CE.

Last but not the least in the list of notable figures this article intended to highlight is Imām Saʿd al-Dīn ibn ʿAbd-Allāh al-Taftāzānī (1322–1390 CE), polymath and commentator of

59. Khayr al-Dīn al-Ziriklī, *al-Aʿlām*, 8 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-ʿIlm lil'-Malāyīn, 2002), 4: 266. See also Al-Harawī, *Kitāb al-Ishārāt fī Maʿrifat al-Ziyārāt*, ed. ʿAlī ʿUmar (Port Said: Maktabah al-Thaqafah al-Dīniyyah, 2002), 41.
60. Al-Harawī, *Lonely Wayfarer's Guide*, 104.
61. Translator's introduction, *Lonely Wayfarer's Guide*, xxi–xxii.
62. Mājid ʿIrsān al-Kaylānī, *Hakadha Ẓahara Jīl Salāḥ al-Dīn wa hakadhā ʿĀdat al-Quds* (Dubai: Dār al-Qalam, 2002), 90–91.

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Aqāʾid al-Nasafī[63] who lived during Tamerlane's time. He obtained his education in the cities of Herat, Ghijduvan, Feryumed, Gulistan, Khwarizm, Samarkand, and Sarakhs. The fact that al-Taftāzānī was able to travel to these places for the sake of knowledge and education also reinforces this article's assertion of the thriving intellectual culture in Khurāsān.

Conclusion

As demonstrated in the many places of this article, Khurāsān holds far greater value in terms of civilisational development in history. These values are not limited to political, but also civilisational and intellectual which take the form of individuals with exemplary achievements as well as their scholarly outputs as this article has sampled.

These achievements could be compared to today's general view, that is, its status as backwater, undeveloped, poor, and uncivilised country as well as so-called breeding ground for terrorists and terrorism especially post-9/11 and the US-led War in Afghanistan (2001–present).[64] As a way to move forward, the figures highlighted in this article can be given further prominence in a kind of campaign to boost public image or a kind of motivation for people to be interested in emulating the successes of the past.

Based on several Prophetic sayings, this article has attempted to explore some of the mysteries in the region of

63. *Aqāʾid al-Nasafī* or *al-Aqāʾid al-Nasafiyyah* by Imām Abū Ḥafs ʿUmar Najm al-Dīn al-Nasafī (1067–1142 CE) is the comprehensive summary work on the creed of Islām. According to S. M. N. al-Attas: "The great esteem accorded al-Nasafī by eminent Muslim savants and scholars, his renown throughout the Muslim world, was indeed largely due to the remarkable nature of the brief treatise that he composed and which was recognized as of paramount importance to the understanding of the articles of belief and faith in Islām." See S. M. N. al-Attas, *The Oldest Known Malay Manuscript: A 16th Century Malay Translation of the* ʿAqāʾid *of al-Nasafī* (Kuala Lumpur: Department of Publications Universiti Malaya, 1988), 7.
64. Holt, *Into the Land of Bones*, 1.

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Khurāsān that speak about its past, its present, and its future in order to push the discourse from simplistic view to a larger, if not wholesome, bird's eye view. This is done by examining some of its ancient history, the establishment of its cities, the virtues of the region as described by Muslim scholars, the notable figures raised for the region and their intellectual and cultural contributions, and the manifestation of its cultural and civilisational aspects ultimately attributable to the religion of Islām.

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