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Project Title: The Great Seljuq Sultanate and the Formation of Islamic Civilization (1040-1194): A Thematic History

Institution: University of Notre Dame

Project Director: Deborah Tor

Grant Program: Fellowships

Deborah Tor

**The Great Seljuq Sultanate and the Formation of Islamic Civilization (1040-1194):
A Thematic History**

The Great Seljuq Dynasty ruled over the Islamic heartlands for over a century and a half (1040-1194). Their reign was, in important respects, unprecedented: They were the first dynasty since the political dissolution of the 'Abbāsīd caliphate in the 9th century to rule over the entire Middle East, from the Mediterranean to India and the steppes of Central Asia; they were also the first wave of Turkic nomads to invade and conquer the Islamic heartlands, and their coming inaugurated a thousand year-long period of Turco-Mongol rule in the Middle East, which lasted until War World I. Yet, despite the seminal nature of the period, it is also one of the least studied. The first – and only – political history of the period was a book-length chapter appearing in the *Cambridge History of Iran* forty years ago (Bosworth); the first real monographs on the subject were written only in the last six years, and each of those is quite limited in scope: One covers only the question of Seljuq origins and early conquests (Peacock); a second is devoted solely to examining the tensions between a small group of prominent Sufi mystics and the famous Seljuq vizier Nizām al-Mulk (Safi); and the last – the only one to deal with the twelfth century at all – is a micro-history of the city of Isfahan (Durand- Guédy). No monograph has been written about the period in its entirety, and many of the most important historical issues have not yet been investigated – most egregiously, the sixty-year reign of Sultan Sanjar, considered by the primary sources to have been the culmination of Seljuq rule.

This book, therefore, aims to explore and elucidate the major religious, political, and social developments, issues, and institutions throughout this era, in order to demonstrate the manifold ways in which many of the final contours of classical Islamic society took shape, with ramifications extending to the present. It will not be a chronological narrative of events, but a thematic history: each chapter will be devoted to a particular issue or theme, and will trace its vicissitudes and changes over the course of the century and a half of Seljuq rule.

Chapter One: The New 'Sultān' will be dedicated to illuminating the unprecedented challenge the Seljuqs presented, not only to the 'Abbāsīd caliphs, but to Islamic political thought. For the first time since the dissolution of the political rule of the Caliphate in the 9th century, the caliphs were conquered and controlled by a Sunni dynasty. Moreover, these Sunnis, instead of restoring the caliphate to what Islamic political thought considered its rightful role, the Seljuqs perpetuated the de facto divorce between the rightful political authority – namely, the caliph – and the actual wielding of power. Indeed, they even arrogated to themselves the former caliphal title of “Sultan”, with its implicit claim to universal political authority. As a result of the dissonance this anomalous situation produced, the period witnessed the formulation of new normative Sunni ideas confirming this division of authority and power between the caliphate and the sultanate, by three of the most influential Islamic thinkers: al-Juvaynī, Nizām al-Mulk, and al-Ghazālī. The first two expounded their theories in advice manuals written for the Seljuq sultan Malikshāh and his court; al-Ghazālī, though he, too, was intimately associated with Malikshāh's court while composing many of his works, addressed his pious treatise for rulers to Sultan Sanjar (the identity of the addressee Sultan, apostrophized as "*Malik al-Mashriq*" – “King of the East” – is proven by the numismatic evidence; only Sanjar's coinage bears this title).

Chapter Two: Caliphs Versus Sultans, will trace the actual relations between the Seljuqs and the 'Abbāsīd caliphs from 1040 until the death of the last Seljuq claimant. These relations were far more fraught than is commonly thought. In the beginning of their rule, the Seljuqs had come very near to replacing the 'Abbasid caliphate (Makdisi), and on at least two occasions they were complicit in the murder or deposition of a caliph (Tor); on the other hand, they defended the 'Abbāsīds against the Ismā'īlī threat, which reached its peak between the late eleventh and mid-twelfth centuries. (Ibn al- Athīr, Nīshāpūrī)

Chapter 3: The Taming of the Clerics and Sufis, will elucidate the sea-change wrought by the Seljuqs in the relationship between Sunni clerics and Muslim rulers. The Seljuqs were responsible for the close tying, and subsequent subservience, of the Sunni 'ulamā' (clerics) to the government. This success was in large part due to the 'ulamā's desire for strong protection and support in the face of the heterodox Shi'ite threat. This led not only to the Seljuq sultans' beginning to subsidize the previously existing and independent institution of the *madrasa*, or schools for religious education, including the establishment of institutions funded and sponsored by the government, but also to a close alliance with, and a large court contingent of, scholars and Sufi mystics (Ḥusaynī, Ghaznavī). This was a particularly great achievement for the Seljuq government since the new reality constituted a complete reversal of the traditional Sunni attitude toward the political rulers, which had always proclaimed the need for the 'ulamā' to distance themselves from such rulers and, above all, to refrain from accepting any money from them. The eventual subsumption of the Sunni religious system under governmental control resulted in the almost complete loss of Sunni 'ulama' independence; indeed, so thorough and long-lasting was the change in the conception of the proper relations between the religious and the political authorities that this original, lost Sunni ideal of clerical independence began to revive only in the twentieth century.

Chapter 4: Combatting the Heretics and Infidels. This chapter will examine Sunni intra- and inter-confessional attitudes in Seljuq society. Relations among the various branches of Sunnism were a prominent issue during the Seljuq period for a number of reasons: First of all, because it was the era of *ta'ṣṣub* (partisanship), particularly in relation to the *madhhab*, or religious school. During the Seljuq period – probably connected with the growing importance of the *madhhab* and the institutionalization of the madrasa – one encounters, throughout the length and breadth of the Seljuq dominions, intra-Sunni violence on a very large scale: Ḥanbalites and Shafi'ites, and Shafi'ites and Ḥanafites, kill one another on a regular basis in the streets, prevent prayers from taking place in one another's mosques, and declare each other to be infidels (Ibn al-Athīr; Ibn al-Jawzī; al-Ḥusaynī). There are vivid descriptions by Niẓām al-Mulk of his terror of his employer Alp Arslān because of the sultan's enmity towards his vizier's Shafi'ite *madhhab* (Niẓām al-Mulk).

Another important aspect of Seljuq religious life was the Sunni attitude toward the heterodox, including both infidels and Shi'ite Muslims. This chapter will explore not only the Seljuq attitude toward, and engagement in, Jihad on its borders, but also the long-neglected question of the status of Christians and Jews within Seljuq society, about which the sources provide a good deal of evidence that illuminates many other aspects of the Seljuq era, from ideals of rulership and proper government to bureaucratic norms and institutions. Perhaps the religious question that most preoccupied the society over which the Seljuqs presided, however, was that of heterodox Muslims, particularly Isma'ili Shi'ites. Although much has been written about the so-called "Assassins," comparatively little has been written about the ongoing – and confused – Seljuq reaction to this threat, which alternated between vigorous campaigns against Isma'ili strongholds and attempts at appeasement or accommodation, or about the mutual influence upon each other of Seljuq political stability on the one hand, and Isma'ili flourishing and expansion on the other.

Chapter 5: A Double-Edged Sword: The Turkmens. Seljuq rule was a delicate cultural balancing act. On the one hand, the Seljuqs were Turkmens themselves, and the tribal Turkish forces constituted the mainstay of their might. Unfortunately, Turkish tribal nomadic culture, customs, and expectations were not always compatible with Perso-Islamic sedentary ones. In general, therefore, the co-existence of the Turkmens with Islamicate settled society was an uneasy one, with friction persisting between the two different systems throughout the entire Seljuq period – causing, among other things, the succession wars that took place upon the death of every Sultan, as the Perso-Islamic norm of rule passing to the son clashed with the Turkmen ideal of the eldest surviving brother succeeding to power. In many cases, the Seljuq attempt to placate simultaneously these two radically differing constituencies failed. The most spectacular example of this kind of failure is Sanjar's

attempt to control, and his subsequent captivity amongst, the Oghuz tribesmen in the 1150s, and the chaos this wreaked in much of the East. (Ḥusaynī, Bundārī, Rāvandī). The thorny problem of the nomads is also intimately related to questions of land tenure and land utilization, the position of the agricultural oases, the effects of pastoralization, and local and long-distance commerce across the Eastern Islamic lands, all of which will be examined in a sub-section of this chapter.

Chapter 6: The Prominence of Seljuq Women. One of the completely unexplored, unique aspects of Seljuq society was the very prominent public and political role played by Seljuq women. In this the Seljuqs followed Turkmen steppe norms, in which women were neither veiled nor secluded, rather than Perso-Islamic custom, in which elite women would never be seen outside the harem. The chronicles are filled with accounts of women endowing charitable foundations; conducting political negotiations; and even leading armies, as they did during the decade of civil war (1092-1104) ensuing upon the death of Malikshāh, when not only each of the widowed queens attempted to install her young son on the throne, but even various aunts and their warrior retinues became involved in the fray (Qazvīnī, Rāvandī).

Finally, Chapter 7: Chivalry and Paramilitary Groups, will examine warrior ideals and organization outside the framework of the army. This period was a time of great social ferment and, perhaps as a result, a time of the proliferation of armed groups of multifarious sorts. While the Turkmen tribes constituted one variety of these, no less important was the plethora of diverse autochthonous militias. The Seljuq era witnessed a flowering of non-governmentally controlled militias, whether in religiously-oriented groups (Sunni volunteer holy warriors or Isma'ili armed bands); local city militias – which were surely a sign of the heightened civic particularism manifested as well in the writing, in Persian, of local histories at this time (e.g. Anon; al-Harawī) – or chivalric brotherhoods.

This last social development – the flourishing of chivalric brotherhoods – was perhaps the most characteristic social phenomenon of the era; in fact, the eleventh and twelfth centuries constituted what one might well call the age of Islamic chivalry (*futuwwa/javānmardī*). It even led to the composition of the earliest surviving Persian literary romance, *Samak-e 'ayyār* (Farāmarz). When the greatest of all post-ninth century 'Abbasid caliphs, al-Nāṣir li-Dīn Allāh, began his reign in 1180, he sought to unite the various new social, military, and religious developments of the era in his much-touted but hitherto under-researched policy of enrolling the leaders of the Islamic world in an order of *futuwwa* (chivalry) under his own leadership.

In conclusion, the Great Seljuq era constitutes one of the most exciting, innovative, and formative periods in all of Islamic history. Great as its significance is for an understanding of the final fruition of classical Islamic civilization, the period's importance transcends the purely medieval, since many of the institutions and practices it established lasted until the modern era, with ramifications until the present day. Yet, as with all of post-'Abbāsīd history in the Islamic heartlands, Seljuq history has remained largely unexplored, due primarily to the requirements for its study: Not only a thorough acquaintance with both the classical Arabic and Persian primary sources, across a wide range of literary genres, but also a good command of the numismatic corpus. This is precisely the type of source base that I have utilized in all my previous works (see resume). I am already thoroughly conversant with the Seljuq sources and material, having spent the past five years researching various aspects of Seljuq history (resulting in 4 published research articles, 3 encyclopaedia articles, and numerous conference presentations, some of which will form the basis for several of the chapters), and I have compiled the entire corpus of Seljuq coins in all the major European and American collections.

I have a signed contract with Cambridge University Press to complete the manuscript by August 31, 2014, for their series *Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization*, and intend to commence drafting chapters during AY 2012-13. I plan to devote the entirety of my NEH research leave the following year to finishing the book.

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