Introduction

Cultures of Taḥqīq between the Mongols, the Mughals, and the Mediterranean

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Abstract

Across wide-ranging areas of Islamic thought, taḥqīq is an essential “way of knowing,” an epistemology broadly rooted in independent reasoning, empirical observation, openness to allegorical interpretation, and skepticism towards “received tradition.” Over the past few years, it has attracted the attention of an increasing number of scholars of both the Islamic Mediterranean and the Indo-Persian world, who have found taḥqīq to be a richly productive frame for re-interpreting and re-invigorating the study of intellectual, cultural, scientific, and literary life during the centuries stretching, roughly speaking, from around 1300 to around 1700. As they have done so, however, Mediterraneanists and Indo-Persianists have developed ways of conceptualizing taḥqīq that are vastly divergent – in some sense, even incommensurate. Against this background, the present collection of essays proposes a new, shared history of early modern taḥqīq as an epistemology of empire, with common origins in the Mongol conquests of the thirteenth century, and with ramifications stretching well into the era of European modernity.
Keywords

Islamic philosophy – History of Islamic Science – Global Intellectual History – Comparative Empires – History of the Mongols

Introduction

Between the fourteenth and the seventeenth centuries, a sweeping intellectual movement transformed the world of ideas, characterized by a collective fascination with ancient wisdom, historical philology, humanistic translation, nature’s mathematical code, and the essential comparability of world religions (to name just the most salient of its essential features). Yet, however closely this description may seem to match the familiar history of Europe’s path through the Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution to the Enlightenment, this is not what we are describing in this volume, at least not in any traditional way. Instead, ours is a movement with origins much further to the east, in post-Mongol Iran and central Asia, and defined by the Islamic epistemology of tahqīq.

For many readers of the Journal of Early Modern History, the word tahqīq is likely to be an unfamiliar one. A causative Arabic verb derived from ḥaqq (“truth” or “right”), it literally means “to make true,” hence “to realize” or “implement,” but also “investigate,” “verify,” or even “edit carefully” (as in the English “proofread”). A still wider range of meanings, meanwhile, stem from the fact that its root word, ḥaqq, can also be a name for both “the law” and for God himself. As a result, across diverse fields of Islamic thought, from jurisprudence and rational theology to mysticism, speculative philosophy, and observational science, tahqīq is an essential “way of knowing,” an epistemology rooted in the intuition that the superficial meaning of sacred texts is a veil masking deeper divine truths that can be revealed (“made true”) through active and creative searching. For muḥaqqiqs (practitioners of tahqīq), the possible ways of accessing these deeper truths are manifold, running the gamut from mystical gnosis and the contemplation of nature to rational speculation and the science of letters. A common thread running through all these disparate approaches, however, is a shared intuition that the world itself is an extension of scripture, a book of nature (including “human nature,” which is to say, society) whose secrets one can aspire to unlock, and to decode, in order to gain a more complete understanding of the divine.

Typically, tahqīq also appears as one half of an oppositional pair, such that its full meaning depends, in part, on a definition of what it is not: the rival
epistemology of taqlīd (literally “imitation”). Suggestively, in contrast to the idea of actively “making truth” conveyed by taḥqīq, the term taqlīd instead derives from the word for “necklace” (qilāda), rendering the idea of a string of pearls, each one perfect and exactly like the next in an uninterrupted chain. Thus, if taḥqīq is generally associated with the search for truth as a creative process, open to constant re-interpretation and rooted in skepticism towards “received tradition,” taqlīd is based instead on a conviction that access to divine truth is essentially rooted in sacred texts, and that these texts have a self-contained and stable meaning. As such, it offers a system of verifying arguments based on the extent to which they conform to canonical interpretation, recognized precedents, and the consensus of traditional authorities.

Importantly, there is nothing fundamentally “early modern” about either taḥqīq or its oppositional relationship with taqlīd. On the contrary, their pairing fits comfortably into a wider set of dialectical opposites characteristic of Islamic thought through most of its history: of reason (ʿaql) vs. transmission (naqīl), of the hidden (bāṭin), vs. the external (zāhir), of Sufism vs. Shariʿah, and, arguably, even Sunni vs. Shiʿa. If anything, traditional historiography has in fact tended to see the early modern period as one in which, rather differently from the other dialectical pairings listed above, taqlīd gained a definitive preponderance over taḥqīq – the effect of a longer-term phenomenon known in classical Orientalist terminology as “the closing of the gates of ijtihād.” This paradigm of “closure” has, in turn, retained a powerful influence over the portrayal of later Islamic history as a period of general intellectual stagnation.

In the realms of philosophy and natural science, for example, it is central to the (still very resilient) idea that, after a “golden age” lasting until around the eleventh century CE, Muslim intellectuals in later centuries were left with increasingly restricted space for rational thought and for the systematic investigation...

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1 In the history of philosophy, for example, taḥqīq is closely associated with Avicenna and his followers. See Robert Wisnovsky, “Avicennism and Exegetical Practice in the Early Commentaries on the Ishārāt,” Oriens 41, no. 304 (2013): 349–378. For a history of science perspective, see Sonja Brentjes, Teaching and Learning the Sciences in Islamicate Societies, 800–1700 (Turnhout, 2018), 175–177.


of the natural world. Similarly, in the realms of law and political theory, it is over roughly the same period that jurists are thought to have consolidated a concept of “the law” as fixed, all-encompassing, and directly mandated by God – thereby depriving earthly sovereigns of virtually any authority to legislate.

Over the past few years, however, a growing number of scholars of both the Islamic Mediterranean and the Indo-Persian world have challenged this paradigm, and in doing so have found taḥqīq to be a particularly productive frame for re-interpreting and re-invigorating the study of intellectual, cultural, scientific, and literary life during the centuries stretching, roughly speaking, from around 1300 to around 1700. Within this frame (as we shall see below), some have even gone so far as to suggest, albeit tentatively, causative connections between the flourishing “cultures of taḥqīq” across the post-Mongol Islamic world and the major touchstones of Western early modernity: the Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment. As they have done so, however, scholars specializing respectively in the histories of the Mongol-Timurid world, of early modern Indo-Persia, and of the Ottoman Mediterranean have developed their own vocabularies and understandings of taḥqīq that are vastly different from one another, in some sense, even incommensurate.

The modest goal of this volume, then, is in the first instance to bring together a few like-minded specialists of the Mongol, Mediterranean, and Indo-Persian worlds to begin a dialogue about what, exactly, we all mean by “cultures of taḥqīq.” And then, somewhat more ambitiously, to ask what potential a collective, trans-regional understanding of taḥqīq may hold for a larger reconceptualization of early modernity, perhaps even one that extends past the boundaries of Islamic history to the world beyond (including our own). This larger goal, to which we shall return later in this essay, is premised on the idea that taḥqīq, beginning with the Mongol conquests, was fundamentally transformed into something it had not been before: an epistemology of science in the service of empire, based on the radical decentering of Islamic law. Before fully developing this argument, however, it will be useful to first present a brief outline of some recent milestones of scholarship on taḥqīq – intended not as an exhaustive bibliographical review, but as a general illustration of the divergent paths

5 See, for example, Toby Huff, Islam and Science (Armonk NY, 2007).
taken by scholars in different fields, and the potential signposts their work presents towards a reconvergence.

*Tahqiq in the Mughal East: Exception or Rule?*

Let us begin with the most intensively studied and most explicitly political site of early modern *tahqiq*, although one not traditionally understood as such: the court of the mighty Mughal emperors of South Asia. Here, beginning with the reign of Akbar the Great (r.1566–1605), the Mughal dynasty adopted a much discussed, radically universalist doctrine known as *Ṣulḥ-i Ḵull* (literally “Universal Peace”), which famously mandated mutual respect between the empire’s various religious communities. For obvious reasons, this doctrine has been frequently compared (sometimes in a quite simplistic way) to post-Enlightenment principles of liberal tolerance, although recent scholarship has emphasized that *Ṣulḥ-i Ḵull* was developed, in the first instance, as an ideology designed to affirm the limitless sovereignty of the Mughal emperor himself. It accomplished this by replacing a traditional, vertical confessional hierarchy, at the top of which stood Islam, with a horizontal equivalency between confessional groups, above which stood the emperor. In this way, it was the emperor himself who maintained harmony between the different religious communities of his realm through a position of equidistant superiority to all. In turn, this superior position necessarily left him unbounded by the norms of any one confessional “law” – including, most importantly, the *sharīʾah*.7

But what, exactly, does *tahqiq* have to do with this model of “Universal Peace”? The key lies in understanding *tahqiq*, at least potentially, as a position of systematic skepticism towards the self-referential, textualist worldview of proscriptive Sunni jurists, for whom “the law,” based in Islamic scripture, and *not* the ruler, was sovereign. From this starting point, *tahqiq* offered an obvious way – both as an intellectual practice, and as a kind of performative language – to articulate the Mughal emperor’s position above (and therefore outside) this juridic worldview. For example, one of the most characteristic ways to perform “Universal Peace” at Akbar the Great’s court was the *ʿIbādet Khāna* or “House

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7 The present discussion relies heavily on a recent re-evaluation of the *Ṣulḥ-i Ḵull* in a special dedicated issue of the journal *Modern Asian Studies*. In addition to several articles cited below, see the general introduction by Azfar Moin, “*Ṣulḥ-i Ḵull* as an Oath of Peace: Mughal Political Theology in History, Theory, and Comparison,” *Modern Asian Studies* 56, no. 3 (2022): 721–748.
of Devotion,” a regularly scheduled courtly forum where representatives of different confessional communities engaged in intellectual exchanges, presided over by the emperor himself. Similarly, both Akbar and his successors are well known for sponsoring the translation of texts, including sacred texts, from one language and confessional community to another, in part as a means of facilitating and systematizing these kinds of inter-confessional exchanges beyond the restricted circle of the imperial court.8

In scholarly literature, these forms of officially sponsored religious dialogue have been rather extensively studied, and have long occupied an established place in the narrative of Mughal history. But it is only recently that historians have developed an awareness of the central role played by taḥqīq in their articulation, and how explicitly taḥqīq was deployed in giving these intellectual pursuits a specific political meaning. We have an unusually clear illustration of this in the Razmnāma or “Book of War,” a Persian-language translation of the ancient Sanskrit epic the Mahabharata that was prepared for Akbar by a team of scholars under the direction of his grand vizier and dynastic ideologue, Abūl-Fazl (d.1602). As recent studies by both Audrey Truschke and Christian Pye have shown, the result is a work of taḥqīq not only in purely intellectual terms, as a self-conscious attempt to engage with ancient knowledge beyond the canonical boundaries of “Islamic tradition,” but also as an openly political project, to the extent that the Razmnāma has been described by Pye as the “political manifesto” of Akbar’s reign.9

These political objectives are, in fact, stated openly in the panegyric introduction to the text, in which Abū Fazl describes Akbar’s rule as a Universal Caliphate, but replaces the established terminology of the “Caliphate of Islam” (khilāfat-i Islām) with the new and highly suggestive formulation “Caliphate of Taḥqīq” (khilāfat-i taḥqīq). Conversely, Abūl-Fazl describes those who oppose Akbar’s world order of Universal Peace as “religious bigots” who defend the “tyranny of taqlīd” (tasallut-i taqlīd).10 Moreover, he affirms that it is precisely in order to combat such tyranny that taḥqīq-infused projects such as the Razmnāma must be composed and distributed “to the ends of the earth,” so

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8 See the contribution to this volume by Rajeev Kinra for a fuller discussion of the Ḥibādet Khāna.


that members of all faiths might “be saved from foolishness ... and orient themselves towards the goal of truth (ḥaqīqa).” Thus, in unusually direct terms, the Mughal grand vizier used a translated Sanskrit epic as the vehicle to articulate for his sovereign, and for his eventual readers, a definition of taḥqīq as a self-conscious form of imperial cultural politics: inseparable from the universalist pretensions of the emperor, deeply invested in questions of transcendent knowledge and the translatability of essential religious truths, and dedicated to probing – and transgressing – the normative boundaries of Islam itself.

The Razmnāma is, moreover, by no means an isolated case: similar language can be found in many other texts from Akbar’s reign (see the article in this volume by Rajeev Kinra for more examples), and most Mughal historians would recognize the same basic model of cultural politics, perhaps in a more attenuated form, as a pattern that continued for several subsequent generations of Mughal sovereigns. At the same time, however, most specialists who recognize this continuity would be likely to explain it in terms of an enduring, quintessentially South Asian form of “cosmopolitanism” – and, in consequence, as an aberration with respect to the larger Muslim world, where such a transgressive attitude towards Islamic legalism is imagined to have been unthinkable.

**Taḥqīq in the Arab West: Closing the Gates**

Surprisingly, this Indo-centric view is substantially confirmed by the most important recent work on taḥqīq to emerge in the field of Ottoman studies, Khaled El-Rouayheb’s *Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century* – albeit, as we shall see below, for reasons that have as much to do with methodological framing as with scholarly intent. El-Rouayheb’s is a wide-ranging and ambitious study, with a complex series of arguments that are difficult to summarize succinctly. But at least in chronological and geographical terms, his purview is relatively circumscribed: rather than the “Islamic world” writ large, as his title might suggest, El-Rouayheb is in practice concerned with the Arabic-speaking regions of the Ottoman Mediterranean, with occasional excursions as far as Yemen and Morocco. Within this frame, his primary

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objective is to argue against an older narrative of seventeenth-century intellectual life as one of stagnation, insularity, and Arab subalternity to the Turkish-speaking heartlands of the Ottoman state. Quite to the contrary, El-Rouayheb recasts the period as one of intellectual dynamism, characterized by new reading practices, a new willingness to challenge received paradigms of scholarship, and a new taste for intellectual rigor in the rational sciences: in other words, of taḥqīq. In his framing argument, El-Rouayheb even goes so far as to turn on its head the old Orientalist paradigm of the “closing of the gates of ijtihad.” Instead, citing contemporary references to the “opening of the gates of taḥqīq,” he redefines the seventeenth century as a veritable “Age of Taḥqīq.”

Considering the many apparent parallels with the situation in contemporary South Asia, El-Rouayheb’s meticulously documented and elaborately argued case inevitably raises the question of how such a Mediterranean “Age of Taḥqīq” might relate to the Mughal “Caliphate of Taḥqīq” described above. Unfortunately, his study provides little obvious way to either ask or answer this question. This is partly a simple consequence of language: El-Rouayheb is an Arabist, and limits his study to texts in Arabic, while the most significant expressions of Mughal taḥqīq tend to be in other languages (particularly Persian). Even within his Arabic corpus, however, El-Rouayheb is very restrictive in terms of which kinds of texts he considers, preferring to focus on certain categories of scholarly discourse among the ʿulemā (what he calls “high intellectual life”) at the expense of poetry, self-narration, travel literature, and other forms of literary and intellectual expression (including, curiously, history, geography, and political theory). In a similarly restrictive way, he also explicitly eschews any deep analysis of the social, economic, or political context of the trends he identifies, preferring what he calls a “self-standing narrative of intellectual history.” And despite attributing taḥqīq’s resurgence in the seventeenth-century Mediterranean to the influx of scholars, in the first instance, from further east, particularly Kurdistan and Iran, he remains singularly dismissive of considerations related to translation and cultural transmission. Or, to be more precise, he is passively dismissive of these issues in the case of transmission between Arabic and the other languages of the Islamic world,

and actively so in the case of transmission between Arabic and European languages.\footnote{For his views on questions of transmission to and from Europe, see El-Rouayheb, *Islamic Intellectual History*, 356–357. With regard to the Persianate world, his position seems to be that *taḥqīq* there was a vestige of a much earlier period of history, introduced to the Ottomans by scholars such as Jalal al-Din Davani.}

The outcome of all of this is a surprising disconnect between Ottoman *taḥqīq*, as described by El-Rouayheb, and the emerging new scholarship on Indo-Persian *taḥqīq* discussed previously. For if, among Indo-Persianists, *taḥqīq* has been understood as a form of imperial cultural politics, grounded in strategies of translation and cultural transmission to purposefully undermine the self-referential worldview of *shariʿah*-minded *ʿulema*, for El-Rouayheb it is rather the self-referential worldview of *shariʿah*-minded *ʿulema* that constitute the entire universe of inquiry. The result is that, for the moment, Ottomanists and South Asianists have disappointingly little room to talk to one another about an area of intellectual history of increasingly central interest to both.

**Timurid *Taḥqīq*: A Middle Path?**

To restate the matter more positively, one might say that the curious disconnect in the approaches of Ottoman/Arabists and Mughal/Persianists presents both sides with a potential shared research agenda for the future, in order to develop a more commensurate understanding of *taḥqīq* through new sources, methodologies, and perspectives. In fact, a possible path to accomplishing precisely this has already begun to emerge from some very recent directions of scholarship that focus on wider geographies and on earlier periods of history. The first of these, returning to the *Sulḥ-i Kull*, has begun to build a longer, more dialogic historical genealogy for Mughal “Universal Peace” that decenters and significantly predates early modern South Asia, beginning instead with the Mongols and early Timurids of central Asia, and with parallel branches extending from there to the early Ottomans and Safavids as well as the Mughals.\footnote{On Mongol precedents for interfaith debates at the Mughal court, see Jonathan Brack, “Disenchanting Heaven: Interfaith Debate, Sacred Kingship, and Conversion to Islam in the Mongol Empire, 1260–1335,” *Past & Present*, 259, no. 1 (February 2021): 11–53. For a parallel case at the Ottoman court, Giancarlo Casale, “Mehmed the Conqueror between *Sulḥ-i Kull* and *Prisca Theologia*,” *Modern Asian Studies* 56, no. 2 (2022): 840–869. On connections between Mughal translation philosophy and the thought-world of sixteenth-century Iran, see Daniel J. Sheffield, “Exercises in peace: *Āz̲ar Kayvānī* Universalism and Comparison in...} Admittedly, much of this research has so far been engaged...
only tangentially with the specific question of *taḥqīq*. However, it builds upon, and complements, another body of work, pioneered by the scholars Mathew Melvin-Koushki and Evrim Binbas, that reimagines the entire post-Mongol age as one of occult science employed in the service of empire.19 And within this schema, Melvin-Koushki and Binbaṣ, in different but intersecting ways, each directly highlight the centrality of *taḥqīq* in this new regime of imperial knowledge.

In making their case, both scholars focus primarily on a specific place and time, the Timurid lands of Iran and central Asia in the early fifteenth century. Both also deal with dense and highly technical material from a realm of occult knowledge that, of necessity, eludes easy synthesis for the non-specialist. Nevertheless, their findings have wide-ranging ramifications, many of direct relevance to our present discussion. First, both agree that *taḥqīq* was a pervasive epistemology in the Timurid era that was also a political epistemology, used to promote absolutist rule to the detriment of Shariʿa-minded legal traditionalism (read: *taqlīd*). In this sense, their findings fundamentally agree with the version of *taḥqīq* proposed for the later Indo-Persian world – and, contra El-Rouayheb, both provide concrete evidence of the same brand of imperial *taḥqīq* also among the early Ottomans.20 Along similar lines, both also highlight the ways in which Timurid-era *taḥqīq* was inflected through various forms (actual or imagined) of pre-Islamic “ancient wisdom,” ranging from Greek Neo-Platonism, to Hermeticism, to Zoroastrianism – again, in a way that roughly corresponds to the cultural politics of the latter Mughal court. Finally, both scholars assert that Timurid-era *taḥqīq* was the starting point of a...
much broader intellectual transformation, with reverberations not only across the Islamic world but also beyond (including, particularly for Melvin-Koushki, essential features of the scientific culture of Renaissance Europe).\textsuperscript{21}

When placed together, these elements clearly indicate a way of reconciling the contrasting portrayals of early modern taḥqīq in South Asia and the Mediterranean, by reframing their history within a wider shared geography and from a common starting point in an earlier era. A significant challenge in doing so, however, is presented by Binbaş and Melvin-Koushki’s singular emphasis on defining taḥqīq through arguably the most esoteric of all forms of occult knowledge in Islam: the “science of letters” (‘ilm-i hūrūf) or Islamic Kabbalah, by means of which the hidden meaning of words (particularly the Qur’an) could be decoded by conversion into numeric equivalents. The subtitle of Binbaş’s monograph, The Islamicate Republic of Letters, is in fact a wordplay on exactly this point: to the un-initiated, it notionally gestures to the European Republic of Letters, while to a select few it refers instead to Islamic “lettrism” and the secret society (the ehl-i taḥqīq) trained in its secrets (a double entendre that Binbaş, true to the spirit of his historical subject, never directly explains to his readers). For his part, Melvin-Koushki is even more insistent on this point, several times positing in his many articles on the subject that taḥqīq, in its post-Mongol iteration, “was lettrism,” and implying that all other manifestations of taḥqīq (ranging from translation to mathematical astronomy) were merely derivative of, or even irrelevant to, this essential practice.

In fairness to both scholars, part of the rationale for their shared emphasis on ‘ilm-i hūrūf is the extremely rigorous intellectual effort required to fully reconstruct this esoteric science – to the extent that, before Melvin-Koushki and Binbaş, it had remained largely ignored by modern scholarship. But even as we acknowledge, thanks to their work, the very real importance of Islamic lettrism, it is also undoubtedly true that most scholars attentive to taḥqīq in other contexts, be they Indo-Persianists or Mediterraneanists, will have difficulty recognizing the same centrality of ‘ilm-i hūrūf in their own sources (one would be hard pressed, for instance, to argue that the previously discussed Razmānā, as a self-evident work of imperial taḥqīq, was for that reason necessarily “lettrist” in an essential way). In fact, to insist on such a methodologically narrow definition of taḥqīq could even be said to run directly against

\textsuperscript{21} Melvin-Koushki is, however, not always consistent about whether the “Islamo-Christianate continuity” he observes is the result of direct connectivity or rather comparative similarity. Compare arguments in “Taḥqīq vs. Taqlīd” (cited above) with Melvin-Koushki, “Powers of One: The Mathematicalization of the Occult Sciences in the High Persianate Tradition,” Intellectual History of the Islamicate World \textit{5} (2017): 158.
the way early modern *muḥaqqiqs* themselves described their undertaking: as a creative re-combination of multiple ways of knowing, continually balanced against one another, and refracted through multiple lenses, in order to arrive at a deeper version of the truth.22

**Towards a New Post-Mongol Synthesis**

This brings us, finally, to the present collection of essays in this special issue of the *Journal of Early Modern History*, assembled with the aim of stitching together a new historical synthesis across the many disparate geographies and approaches discussed to this point. To this end, they take as their starting point a moment even earlier than the one proposed by Binbaş and Melvin-Koushki: the Mongol conquests of the thirteenth century. A central premise of this volume, in fact, is that the new reality of Mongol rule, rather than any dynamics intrinsic to “Islamic thought” per se, upended the pre-existing balance between *taqlīd* and *tahqīq*, decisively tipping it in favor of the latter. Moreover, by placing *tahqīq* in the service of their state, the Mongols imbued it with a new, explicitly political inflection, giving birth to a new language of “absolutist knowledge.”

Why this should be is a rarely-addressed question in existing literature, but one with a relatively straightforward answer: as non-Muslim conquerors of a vast realm, in which their Muslim subjects formed but one community of many, the Mongol khans had little use for a model of rulership according to which “the law” was understood as fixed, stably based in Muslim scripture, and requiring sovereign deference to established legal authorities (the political essence of *taqlīd*). Instead, they naturally favored a model according to which the ruler himself, through privileged access to the “real truth” hidden behind superficial perception (that is, *tahqīq*), could transcend the limitations of any specific set of religious laws, and, from above the fray, legislate at will to ensure harmony between all of his subject communities.23 In other words, if the legalism of *taqlīd* was a non-starter for the Islamic world’s new Mongol rulers, *tahqīq* provided Muslim intellectuals with a way, through a recognizably Islamic idiom, to come to terms with unbounded vastness of Mongol power. And, through the same idiom, it also gave Mongol rulers an incentive to

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22 See, for example, Yazdi’s discussion of “balancing opposites” as described in Binbaş, 99.
23 For a recent overview of Mongol pluralism, see Christopher Atwood, “A Secular Empire? Estates, nom, and Religions in the Mongol Empire,” *Modern Asian Studies* 56, no. 3 (April 2022): 796–814.
patronize the intellectual endeavors of Muslim muḥaqqiqs as a way to perform their own universal sovereignty.24

Through two discrete case studies, one from the Persianate East, and the other from the Arabophone West, the first two articles in this volume investigate the origins of this political reconfiguration of taḥqīq at the highpoint of Mongol rule in the early fourteenth century. In his essay, Francesco Calzolaio takes us to the court of the Mongol Ilkhanids to examine the career of Rashid al-Din (d.1318), a scholar and statesman who served – in a manner directly anticipating Abul'l-Fazl at the much later Mughal court of Akbar the Great – as both grand vizier and dynastic ideologue to two successive Ilkhanid rulers. As an intellectual, Rashid al-Din is best known as the author of the Collected Chronicles (Jamʿ al-Tawārīkh), the final result of a remarkable, coordinated, state-sponsored project to compile a comprehensive universal chronicle of human history, based on primary sources translated from all of Eurasia’s major written languages (including Chinese, Greek, Persian, Arabic, and Mongolian, among others). Focusing specifically on its sections on China, evaluated together with a series of other Sinological texts written or commissioned by Rashid al-Din over more than a decade, Calzolaio presents the Collected Chronicles as a “taḥqīq-infused project” that aimed, on the one hand, to reflect the universal reach of Mongol sovereignty across disparate systems of law and belief, while on the other demonstrating the inadequacy of pre-Mongol intellectual traditions in Persian and Arabic to fully describe the world beyond Islam’s borders. In both of these respects, the parallels with the above-discussed case of Abul'l-Fazl’s “Book of War” are striking, to the extent that Rashid al-Din’s efforts are likely to have served, nearly three centuries later, as a direct model for his counterpart at the Mughal court.

Continuing in a similar vein, my own contribution reconsiders the writings of an exact contemporary of Rashid al-Din, the scholar-prince Abu'l-Fidā (d.1331), who ruled the small emirate of Hama in what is now Syria. Although technically an independent ruler just outside the Mongol political orbit – in contrast to Rashid al-Din, who worked directly for the khans – I argue that Abu'l-Fidā nevertheless adopted an essentially Mongol perspective in composing the Taqwīm al-Buldān or “Arrangement of Countries,” a monumental encyclopedia of world geography that remains his most famous work. He did so by attempting to describe the world as it would appear outside of any

limited human vantage point, as a globe viewed from outer space. And from this cosmic perspective, as a self-proclaimed muḥaqqiq, he openly questioned the intellectual coherence of traditional Islamic cosmological knowledge in ways that, once recognized as such, demand a fundamental reconsideration of our own understanding of the origins of modern, mathematicized spatial thought – usually imagined to have begun in Renaissance Europe rather than the wide-open steppes of Central Asia.

Then, from this fourteenth-century starting point, our volume’s remaining four essays undertake a four-part circuit of the Indo-Mediterranean world over the following four centuries. Efe Balıkçıoğlu takes us first to the fifteenth-century Ottoman empire, reconstructing the vibrant network of muḥaqqiqs that flourished there, particularly under the patronage of the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror (d.1481). Focusing on intra-scholarly debates, primarily in the intersecting realms of Sufism, rational theology, and Avicennian philosophy, he provides an organic bridge, both in space and time, between the Mongol moment of the fourteenth century and the latter, seventeenth-century Mediterranean world described by El-Rouayheb. More concretely, his case study presents a fascinating example, from a different time and place, of yet another scholar-statesman in the mold of Rashid al-Din and Abu’l-Fazl, this time in the figure of Sinan Pasha, muḥaqqiq par excellence as well as vizier in the service of the Ottoman state.

Thereafter, Maria Vittoria Comacchi takes us still farther afield, to sixteenth-century Italy and France, as she explores the deep imprint of taḥqīq on the intellectual vision of Guillaume Postel, a pioneering linguist, radical cartographer, Utopian theologian, and self-proclaimed “cosmopolitan.” As Comacchi shows, an essential part of Postel’s intellectual development can be ascribed to two relatively brief voyages to the Ottoman empire, from whence he returned with a number of Oriental manuscripts, including the first known copy to reach Christian Europe of Abu’l-Fidā’s Taqwīm al-Buldān or “Arrangement of Countries” (discussed above). Through a careful analysis of Postel’s own marginal notes made in this manuscript, together with a selection of Postel’s other writings related to both the Arabic language and Utopian politics, Comacchi is able to recast Postel as an aspiring muḥaqqiq in ways that reconfigure his place in the history of Renaissance thought, while at the same time connecting him directly to the fourteenth-century thought world of Abu’l-Fidā.

The remaining two essays, in a real sense, complete our voyage in time and space, closing the circle between the Mediterranean and South Asia while drawing us chronologically all the way to the edge of scientific modernity. Rajeev Kinra does so through a return to the ʿIbādet Khāna of Akbar the Great, and particularly to the related, taḥqīq-infused writings of his grand vizier Abu’l
Fazl, which became something of a literary and philosophical cannon for later generations of Mughal men of the pen (and sword). As such, one particularly striking element of Abu’l Fazl’s writings on the search for truth through cross-confessional dialogue is their steadily expanding “global” horizon, culminating in a fascinating letter to none other than King Philip II of Spain, inviting him to send a representative to the Ṭbādet Khāna and, in so doing, to free himself “from the yoke of taqlīd.” Just as intriguingly, Kinra notes the persistent use, in this and other examples of Abu’l Fazl’s writings, of imagery associated with light, enlightenment, and illumination to describe taḥqīq, and of intellectual and spiritual darkness to describe the religious bigotry he associated with taqlīd – imagery that, for obvious reasons, was directly legible to later Orientalist intellectuals of the European enlightenment.

Finally, Stefano Pellò takes us to an even more unlikely site of post-Mongol taḥqīq: the southern-Italian wilds of seventeenth-century Calabria, and the thought world of the radical hermetic philosopher (and condemned heretic) Tommaso Campanella. From him, he traces a meandering but surprisingly clearly etched line to late seventeenth-century Mughal India and the taḥqīqi poetry of the Indo-Persian literatus Mirza ‘Abd al-Qādir Bīdil (d.1720). Through a particular, and particularly relevant, focus on Bīdil’s poetic perception of nature, Pellò reveals the semantic continuum between “making real” as a language of poetry and the metaphoric impulse that lies at the heart of scientific naturalism. From this experiential vantage point, our own twenty-first century, post-Global, post-human, and even “post-Real” world is palpably in sight, bringing us truly full circle in our exploration of post-Mongol taḥqīq.

As this brief introduction draws to a close, let me end with a word about the physical dimensions of the present volume of essays, kept intentionally small, despite the breadth of topics it addresses, to reflect the modest aims of the original workshop that inspired it: a one-day meeting, in June of the pandemic-ravaged year of 2021, in the hills above Florence, Italy. By coincidence, our meeting took place only a few hundred yards from the spot where, nearly seven centuries earlier, Giovanni Boccaccio’s ten youths took refuge from the Black Death to spin the one hundred tales of his Decameron. In a similar spirit, our own party was kept purposefully small (just six people). But in the course of our day together, we quickly realized that we had stumbled onto a topic of vast proportions, and with equally vast potential implications. As such, this volume is intended only as a signpost, marking a few tentative scratches on the illusory surface of a subject whose “real truth” (ḥaqq-i haqīqī) is still waiting to be revealed.