

CYNTHIA TALBOT:

The Last Hindu Emperor: Prithviraj Chauhan and the Indian Past 1200–2000.

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This book is not about the Prithviraj Chauhan that died shortly after confronting Muhammad Ghori on the battlefield in 1192, but about the Prithviraj Chauhan that was kept alive in the historical memory of India up to the present day. And, less overtly but just as importantly, it is about the dynamics of historical memory itself, the ways in which the past is continually redetermined and reinvested with significance. The stakes of these processes are high, especially for culture heroes like Prithviraj. Interventions into them can seem tendentious, and popular discourse and scholarship often diverge. One form of historical scholarship responds by reasserting its authority to speak the truth about them, and another by investigating how and why these figures have been constituted as a past that exists in someone else's present.

This book demonstrates the advantages of the latter approach. Cynthia Talbot's study of Prithviraj as a "site of memory" focuses on what this twelfth-century figure meant to later generations. In doing so, it offers insights into the individual texts that memorialized him, above all the *Prithvīrāj Rāso*. Despite its manifest importance – it was believed at various times to be the earliest work of literature in a North Indian vernacular – the *Rāso* has proven difficult to fit into a historical narrative, given the uncertainty, disagreement, and outright confusion about the date of the text and the interrelation between its four major recensions. Talbot's book, the most sustained engagement with the *Rāso* in English-language scholarship in roughly a century, presents these issues clearly and offers a compelling narrative of the text that will undoubtedly form the basis for future scholarship.

The *Rāso* is just one of the traditions that figures in the "mnemohistory" (p. 11) of Prithviraj: historical poems and narrative literature in Sanskrit and the vernacular, Persian historiography, Sanskrit inscriptions, nineteenth-century scholarship, and twentieth-century plays and novels all come in for discussion, showing the diversity of ways in which a historical consciousness operated in India. Talbot's lucid expositions of these materials are joined with insightful analyses that often up-end our assumptions. Rather than using Persian historiography as a baseline for establishing "what really happened", for example, Talbot shows that it was subject to the same pressure "to adjust the past to make it more intelligible to the present" (p. 88) as poems like the *Rāso*, and in particular, to situate the story in a geopolitical imaginary centred on Delhi.

The book's eight chapters are roughly chronological in sequence, ranging from the *Prithvīrāja Vijaya*, composed at the king's own court around 1191, to the inauguration of the Qila Rai Pithora Conservation Complex in Delhi in 2002. Two moments, however, are particularly important to this story. The first is the later sixteenth century, when Talbot, following the lead of eminent Hindi scholars such as Namwar Singh, locates the composition of the *Prithvīrāj Rāso*. Talbot argues convincingly for a close connection between the text and the community of Rajput princes in Rajasthan who were in, or at the margins of, the Mughal imperial service. Prithviraj, who had been an ambivalent figure for earlier generations, was the hero that exemplified their ideals. And to be a Rajput meant to have ancestors who fought

by Prithviraj's side. The nexus between text and community is demonstrated particularly clearly in chapter 5, which recounts the investment of the Sisodiya kings of Mewar in the *Rāso* and the interventions into the text that they sponsored.

The second moment was the rediscovery of the *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* by Colonel James Tod in the early nineteenth century. Talbot notes several times that the confrontation between Prithviraj and Muhammad Ghori takes up relatively little space in the *Rāso*, especially in comparison to Prithviraj's conflict with Jaychand of Kanauj and his heroic abduction of the princess Samyogita. Being a Rajput, according to the *Rāso*, meant going to war with other Rajputs. In Tod's reading, however, being a Rajput meant going to war with Muslim invaders. Prithviraj was thus transformed from the hero of a small and aristocratic community into a national hero who marked the transition between Hindu and Muslim rule in North India (pp. 217–8). This is the vision of Prithviraj that has prevailed in modern times, notwithstanding a scholarly reaction in the later nineteenth century to Tod's credulity in the *Rāso* as a historical document.

My criticisms relate to the perennial problem of the *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso*'s date and authorship. Talbot maintains that the *Rāso* was composed not long before the earliest extant manuscripts. To use the terminology of the medievalist Paul Zumthor, its "manifestation" is more or less coincident with its "formation". But the fact that several versions of the *Rāso* were in circulation in the early seventeenth century, and that by the late sixteenth it had evidently become the standard narrative of Prithviraj's career, suggests that we should take seriously a hypothesis that Talbot gives little credence to (pp. 61–63), namely that it was composed and transmitted orally by the bardic communities of Rajasthan long before it was written down. Talbot also sidesteps the question of the text's authorship, although it is unanimously ascribed to Chand Bardai, Prithviraj's court poet and a character in the *Rāso* itself. I am not suggesting that we read the *Rāso*, like Tod did, as an "eyewitness" account, but that we think about Chand, too, as a figure of historical importance, whom successive generations revered, emulated, and impersonated, and who represented the very project of "creating a past" that Talbot's book so admirably traces.

Despite the broad scope of the book, and the difficulty of its source materials, Talbot writes with an enviable clarity and coherence. The book will interest a cross-section of readers as wide as its temporal parameters, but even more than this, it models a type of historical scholarship that meaningfully connects the past to a series of presents – including, but not limited to, "our" present.

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VIDYA DEHEJIA and PETER ROCKWELL:

The Unfinished: Stone Carvers at Work on the Indian Subcontinent.

280 pp. New Delhi: Roli Books, 2016. £39.95. ISBN 978 93 5194 114 9.
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This generously illustrated volume is a welcome addition to Indian architectural history, since it concentrates not on building typologies and styles, as is customary in most surveys and specialized monographs, but on stone-cutting techniques. The earliest surviving examples of Buddhist and Jain architecture in India dating back to the third–second centuries BCE were excavated into cliffs to create "caves" with