

## **Imagining the Metropolis on the Islamic Periphery:**

### **Commerce, Scholarship, and Architecture in 15<sup>th</sup> c. Bidar and Timbuktu**

Richard M. Eaton

University of Arizona

One might rephrase our conference topic by asking: Which comes first -- an imagined polity, followed by a political reality? Or does the political reality appear first, and is only retroactively imagined -- that is, theorized?

There is evidence for both views. American school children are conventionally taught that the Founding Fathers more or less dropped out of the sky, held a collective séance in Philadelphia during the summer of 1787, and then dreamed the American republic into reality. Conversely, some argue that we always first experience the world, and theorize it only retroactively. Today, nation-states are dissolving under our feet, yet we still imagine ourselves living in a 19<sup>th</sup> century world of such states. Just look at how most departments of history still organize their curriculum. We experience a world that has been radically and willy-nilly globalized, though not yet theorized. That is the dilemma. The American empire, which has been around for some time now, has only just begun to be acknowledged, much less theorized. In this second view, then, historians are merely the attendants who follow an elephant parade, cleaning up afterwards, trying to make sense of a procession that has already passed. Our imagination is deployed solely in theorizing something that has already happened.

Perhaps this opposition is far too stark, and what we really have is a dialectic, something akin to Clifford Geertz's notion of religions as embracing both "model for" and "model of" dimensions. In this formulation, a religion as a "model for" serves as an imaginative blueprint for bringing into reality something that didn't exist before; whereas a religion as a "model of" is the world-view that flows from an existing reality. Substituting "imagination" for Geertz's "model," one might distinguish between two different sorts of imagination – the *creative*, which precedes and shapes an emerging reality; and the *retrospective*, which tries to make sense of – i.e., theorizes – an existing reality, or one that has just receded into the past. We can see both kinds of imagination operating in the case of two cities that came into being, flourished, and declined at roughly the same time – the 14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries – but on opposite sides of the Islamic world, and on the very edges of that world. On the southern and eastern frontier of the Islamic world emerged Bidar, capital of the Bahmani sultanate that was launched in 1347, after the Delhi sultanate had failed to impose colonial rule over the central Deccan. The Bahmani state reached its apogee in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, but then swiftly declined in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. Meanwhile, on the southern and western edges of the Islamic world there emerged Timbuktu, a town perched at the northern apex of the Niger River between West Africa's rainforest and the Sahara Desert. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century the town was part of the kingdom of Mali. When that empire declined in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, it remained relatively independent until 1463, when it was forcibly annexed to the Songhay Empire, whose capital lay to the east, in Gao. But from the late 16<sup>th</sup> century on Timbuktu, like Bidar, suffered a long period of decline, emerging in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as, in the European romantic imagination, a metaphor for the ultimately remote.

In this paper I wish to explore the similarities and differences that these two cities exhibit in terms of their evolution, their relationship to political power, and most importantly, the ways they imagined themselves in relation to metropolitan centers in the Islamic heartland. For Bidar this would have been the Persianized world of Iran and Central Asia; for Timbuktu it was the Arab world of Islamic Spain, Cairo, and Mecca.

Timbuktu emerged in the 12<sup>th</sup> century as a camp for nomads coming down to the banks of the Niger in summer months. But soon, owing to its location where the Sahara meets the northernmost point in the bend of the Niger, Timbuktu emerged as the nexus for a flourishing north-south trade between West Africa and the Mediterranean world. Gold mined in the forests of Ghana was brought north from the upper reaches of the Niger River and at Timbuktu loaded on camels destined for the Mediterranean. By the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, when caravans of up to 10,000 camels each were passing through Timbuktu, West African gold comprised fully 2/3 of all the gold produced in the world.<sup>1</sup> It was this gold that facilitated the rise of banking houses in Marseilles, Genoa, Venice, and Florence, providing the wealth that fueled the Italian Renaissance. Traveling in the opposite direction was salt, which was mined in the northern Sahara Desert and taken down to the Sudan, its demand driven by the human body's need to replace salt lost through perspiration.

By the early 14<sup>th</sup> century a wealthy class of merchants had already emerged in Timbuktu, owing to the city's strategic position in this trading system. What really put the place on the map, though, was the extravagant pilgrimage to Mecca made in 1324-25 by Mansa Musa, the king of Mali. Accompanied by thousands of slaves, state officials, and guards, and carrying an immense quantity of pure gold, Mansa Musa and his vast entourage worked their way across North Africa to Cairo, where they camped out by the pyramids for three days in July

1324. While there, the king sent a gift of 50,000 dinars to the sultan of Egypt, who reciprocated by giving Mansa Musa a robe of honor. The king and his men spent so much gold that summer that the metal's value dropped considerably, causing price inflation in local markets.<sup>2</sup>

The return trip was equally noteworthy. When he reached Mecca, the king announced that he would give 1,000 mithqals of gold to any descendant of the Prophet who would return to Mali with him. Four accepted.<sup>3</sup> He also picked up the Andalusian poet and architect Abu Ishaq al-Saheli, who happened to be in Mecca when Mansa Musa was there. Saheli's trip to Mali would lead to a transformative event in the history of Timbuktu, which up to this point had been little more than a rising commercial center. Musa commissioned Saheli to build a mosque, the so-called Jingere-Ber, or "Grand Mosque," which was finished in 1330. From this point on, the imams of Timbuktu's several mosques, and especially the Grand Mosque, would wield enormous influence in the city's affairs, contributing in great measure to the city's political autonomy.

Mansa Musa's extravagant pilgrimage prompted different imaginings around the world. In Cairo the Egyptian historian Ibn Iyas, writing about 1525, recorded that Musa's pilgrimage had been *the* outstanding event of 1324.<sup>4</sup> The fact that the chronicler was writing fully two centuries after the fact points to the impact the pilgrimage had made on the people of Cairo. In Europe, which by this time was importing massive amounts of West African gold, the king's pilgrimage had literally put Mali and Timbuktu on the map. In 1374, Charles V of France commissioned the famous Catalan Map of the known world, in which we see Mansa Musa's imposing figure, holding up a big chunk of gold.<sup>5</sup> Needless to say, it was West Africa's renown as the source of gold that spurred Portuguese navigators to find a maritime

route to African gold, which they accomplished within a century of the publication of this map.

In Timbuktu itself, Mansa Musa's pilgrimage consolidated the city's religious links with the Islamic heartland. With four descendants of the Prophet now in residence, and with Saheli's Great Mosque dominating the growing city, Timbuktu could boast of tangible connections with Mecca. What made possible this imagined connection, of course, was gold – lots of it. Gold had financed Musa's pilgrimage, it had facilitated a robe of honor from the sultan of Egypt, it had lured four descendants of the Prophet to Timbuktu, and it paid for the building of the city's Great Mosque.

Significantly, though, all this wealth did not translate into political ambitions or political imaginings that might extend beyond the city itself. When he returned from Mecca in 1325, Mansa Musa asserted Mali's sovereignty over Timbuktu, which he ruled from a distant capital to the west. A century later when Mali's power declined, Timbuktu's leaders allowed effective control of the city to pass to Tuareg nomads who roamed the Sahara to the north. During the city's so-called Golden Age, which stretched from 1468 to 1591, the city was subordinate to the Songhay Empire, based several hundred miles to the east, in Gao. Indeed, having no political aspirations of its own, Timbuktu would never be the capital of any state. It never had a local ruling family. It was as though the city's elites shunned not just empire or kingship, but the very idea of statehood, of politics itself.

What substituted for the city's political ambitions was its cultivation of scholarship, and the city's self-identity as a fount of Islamic knowledge.<sup>6</sup> Wealth acquired from the trans-Saharan gold and salt trade was transmuted not into vainglorious pursuits of power, but into the cultivation of the medieval curriculum modeled on Cairo's al-Azhar. By the early sixteenth

century, a quarter of Timbuktu's population, or 25,000, were either students or masters affiliated with one of the city's several great mosques.<sup>7</sup> "The core of the Islamic teaching," writes John Hunwick, was

the receiving (*akhdh*) of a text (*matn*), which was handed down through a chain of transmitters (*isnad `ali*). The student made his own copy from his teacher's dictation and then read it back to him, or listened whilst another student read his. When he had a correct copy – and some shorter works might at the same time be memorized – he could then study the meaning of the text and its technical intricacies from lectures delivered by his teacher, and at a higher level, by question and answer. Many texts would be studied along with commentaries written in other times in other parts of the Muslim world.<sup>8</sup>

Such activity naturally spawned an enormous output of written copy. In Timbuktu today as many as a million manuscripts have survived, some imported from North Africa or the Middle East, some copied in Timbuktu, and others composed there. They comprise chronicles, correspondence, works of poetry, and contracts, in addition to the standard corpus of Islamic education – Qur'an, traditions of the Prophet, commentaries, biographies, and especially legal literature.<sup>9</sup> All this activity centered on the city's three principal mosques, in particular the Sankore mosque, with its 180 Qur'an schools. This mosque was built in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, probably in connection with the increasing immigration of Arabs and Berbers, for "Sankore" means "white lords", and Arabs and Berbers were both called "whites" by the Sudanese.<sup>10</sup>

The most renowned scholars of Timbuktu came from wealthy trading families, for trade had created an affluent ruling elite whose members had the means to buy books and the time to read them. Moreover, since students often married the daughters of their masters, kinship networks overlapped with academic networks, further consolidating the city's identity as a center of scholarship.<sup>11</sup> The imams and qazis attached to the city's great mosques acquired immense prestige owing to their expertise in resolving commercial disputes that inevitably arose in Timbuktu's business climate. Such men represented the city to the outside world, which meant, in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the Mali kingdom, and in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, first the nomadic Tuaregs and finally the Songhay rulers to the east. Their authority and prestige, together with their ability to self-govern, contributed to the considerable political autonomy that the city enjoyed vis-à-vis the outside powers that claimed sovereignty over the city.<sup>12</sup> One recent study has even compared the social power of the city's scholarly elite with that of the scholar-gentry class of imperial China – the so-called Mandarins – whose authority and social power similarly derived from a mastery of classical knowledge.<sup>13</sup>

In several ways medieval Timbuktu imagined itself to be participating in metropolitan Islamic culture, thereby collapsing the vast space separating itself from the Islamic heartland. An emphasis on scholarship – especially Islamic scholarship -- was one such way. Another was through Sufis spiritually linked to the great orders of the Middle East. Prominent among these was the city's patron saint, Sidi Yahiaal-Tadallisi (d. 1461), who arrived from the Mediterranean coast east of Algiers around 1450. The Tuareg governor was so honored by his presence that he built a mosque in his name.<sup>14</sup> Another was Muhammad al-Maghili (d. ca. 1503-06), a Moroccan who traveled to Cairo en route to Mecca and got permission to transmit Sufi teachings of the Qadiri Order from the eminent Sufi of Cairo, Jalal al-Din al-

Suyuti (d. 1505), whose writings were highly esteemed among West African scholars.<sup>15</sup> A third mechanism tying Timbuktu to the Islamic heartland was ceremonies of pilgrimage and investiture, which date back to Mansa Musa's spectacular pilgrimage of 1325, in the course of which the sultan of Egypt gave him a robe of honor.<sup>16</sup> When Ibn Battuta passed through Timbuktu in 1353, he witnessed the Mali governor promote a Berber chieftain by giving him a robe of honor.<sup>17</sup> Clearly, the pan-Asian ceremony of investiture, which was thoroughly assimilated into the courtly culture of the Islamic heartland since Abbasid times, had by now been incorporated into Timbuktu's political culture.<sup>18</sup>

The ultimate such investiture, however, came in 1497, when Askia Muhammad, the ruler of the Songhay empire which had recently annexed Timbuktu, made a pilgrimage to Mecca. This pilgrimage so impressed the people of West Africa that he was known thereafter as the "pilgrim-king", Askia *al-Hajj* Muhammad.<sup>19</sup> Like Mansa Musa before him, Askia Muhammad passed through Cairo. But Askia Muhammad upstaged Mansa Musa, who had only received a robe of honor from the sultan of Egypt. Askia Muhammad spent some with the celebrated Egyptian Sufi and scholar al-Suyuti (d. 1505), on the basis of which he claimed to having been a student of the same sheikh with whom al-Maghili had earlier studied. While still in Cairo, the king also got an audience with the puppet 'Abbasid caliph, who gave the Songhay ruler the title of "*amir* of the lands of Takrur," a term vaguely referring to the whole of the western Sudan. Returning to the Songhay capital of Gao, Askia Muhammad immediately took advantage of his new title by launching a *jihad* against the non-Muslim Mossi to the south. What is more, once back home, far from the Middle East, he brazenly adopted the most audacious title possible in the Islamic universe: *amir al-muminin* and "*khalifa* of Muslims" – that is, the Caliph.<sup>20</sup>



Architecture, too, linked Timbuktu with the Arab-Muslim heartland. Despite the distinctive style of West African Islamic monuments – with their sloping dried-mud walls and projecting timbers – the ground plans of Timbuktu’s mosques suggest attempts to replicate Middle Eastern prototypes. I mentioned earlier that Timbuktu’s Great Mosque was built by al-Saheli around 1330, after he had accompanied Mansa Musa back to West Africa from Mecca. It has been argued that the floor plan of that mosque was actually patterned on the Great Mosque of Damascus,<sup>21</sup> and if one compares features like the overall plan, the number of chambers in the prayer-hall, etc., the resemblance is clear. Moreover, the mosque’s vaulted limestone arches are unique in West Africa, an apparent attempt to replicate models in North Africa, where such arches date to Roman times.<sup>22</sup> The most explicit attempt at replicating the Islamic heartland in Timbuktu is seen in the town’s other principal mosque, that of Sankore, which was originally built in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century. In 1581 the *qazi* and *imam* of the mosque, Aqib bin Umar, performed the pilgrimage to Mecca. While there, he measured the Ka’ba with a cord, which he brought back with him to Timbuktu. Using that cord as a measuring device, he rebuilt the Sankore mosque in such a way that its interior courtyard exactly conformed to the dimensions of the Ka’ba.<sup>23</sup>

All these activities suggest what Geertz would call the “model for” dimension of religious activity, and which I am calling “creative imagination:” a metropolitan template informs an imitation produced somewhere on the periphery. But we also see in Timbuktu a “model of” dimension – that is, a retroactive theorization of something that had already occurred, or what I am calling “retrospective imagination.” Nearly everything we know about the city’s scholarly elite and its interactions with the wider world derives from two local chronicles written around 1655 -- the *Tarikh al-sudan* by ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Sa’di, and the *Tarikh al-*

*fattash* by Mahmud Ka'ti. Unlike the accounts of foreign travelers like Ibn Battuta or Leo Africanus, which give us only descriptive snapshots of what these men saw first hand, the chronicles of Sa'di and Ka'ti both attempt to construct linear, connected narratives of the city's history. As Timbuktu's earliest such narratives, their simultaneous appearance suggests several things. First, they reflect the migration of the literary genre of the *tarikh*, or historical chronicle, from the Middle East to Timbuktu, and the assimilation of that genre by the city's elite. Their appearance also reflects the crystallization of the city's self-consciousness, a sense that Timbuktu had acquired a distinctive identity that had been forged by men, mainly scholars, whose memory was now deemed worthy of preservation. Significantly, both were written some sixty years after the city had been conquered by Morocco, which had led to the flight and exile of most of its scholars. The two chronicles thus construed the period before that event as something of a "Golden Age," very much a retrospective construction.

While all this was happening in West Africa, thousands of miles to the east in the central Deccan plateau, in Bidar, a very different tale was unfolding. Perched on the edge of the Muslim world, Bidar, like Timbuktu, looked to the Middle East for ideological inspiration. Bidar, too, was heavily involved in interregional trade, which was transmuted into at least the aspiration for scholarship. But the two cities differed profoundly in one critical respect. Whereas Timbuktu eschewed political ambitions, and even statehood, Bidar aspired to imperial grandeur on an impressive scale. And while Timbuktu looked to al-Azhar in Cairo and the Ka'aba in Mecca – both of these having specifically religious importance – Bidar looked to Samarqand and Herat, cities associated with high Persian culture, and especially, Timurid aesthetic and imperial ideals.

The city was created in 1424 nearly from scratch when the new ruler of the Bahmani sultanate, Ahmad I, transferred his capital from Gulbarga to Bidar. In this respect Bidar compares with other made-to-order capital cities, such as Washington, Brasilia, or Islamabad, since nothing much was there before 1424. Importantly, the transfer occurred soon after the catastrophic events of 1399, when the infamous Central Asia conqueror Timur sacked the sprawling imperial capital of Delhi, massacred 100,000 of its inhabitants, and effectively ended north India's once-mighty Tughluq dynasty. Although Timur is universally renowned for his ruthless yet successful pursuit of raw power – think of Christopher Marlowe's play, *Tamburlaine* – in the Deccan he was hailed as a hero. After all, Bahmani sultans had already won their independence from the Tughluqs fifty years before Timur's invasion of north India and so had reason to harbor feelings of *schadenfreude* at Delhi's misfortune. In fact, at the time of that invasion, Sultan Firuz, the reigning Bahmani sultan, sent Timur a congratulatory letter and offered his humble services. In return, the Central Asian prince generously bestowed upon Firuz the province of Gujarat – a somewhat hollow gift since Timur had neglected to conquer the region in the first place. Timur also addressed Firuz as his son (*farzand*), sent him a belt, a gilded sword, four royal robes (*qaba*), a Turkish slave, and four splendid horses.<sup>24</sup> These were all powerful symbols of political incorporation, well understood by both parties.

Firuz no doubt heaved a sigh of relief when Timur, after devastating Delhi, returned to Samarkand rather than pay a visit to the Deccan. Yet there is no mistaking Firuz's deep admiration of Timur, who represented the acme of opulent court culture and lavish patronage, not to mention the greatest success-story in world conquest since Alexander or Genghis Khan. In 1399, even as Timur was marching toward Delhi, Sultan Firuz embarked

on building a palace-city, Firuzabad, just south of Gulbarga. In its high, vaulted gateways we already see aspirations for grandeur that would anticipate Bidar. Especially revealing of the sultan's attempt to mimic Timur is his use of the lion and sun motif, just barely visible in the spandrels of the gateway to his palace. Timur himself had revived this pre-Islamic Persian motif on the spandrels of his Aq Sarah palace (1379-96) near his capital of Samarqand.

Even though the entire arch of Timur's palace is now destroyed, we know the lion and sun motif was there because in 1403 a Spanish ambassador saw and described it.<sup>25</sup> When Firuz's brother Ahmad shifted the capital to Bidar, the same motif was emblazed in glazed tile on the spandrels of the new capital's royal palace. It, too, is only barely visible today, though it was in good shape in 1947, when the first survey of Bidar's architecture was published.<sup>26</sup>

In this and other ways, the Bahmanis endeavored to mimic the metropolitan Timurid style.

After all, everywhere Timur conquered – which included Damascus, Tabriz, Baghdad, Shiraz, Isfahan, and Delhi -- he conscripted the finest architects he could find and brought them to Samarqand. Ordered by their patron to build the most majestic monuments ever constructed, these men blended their individual visions and created the so-called “metropolitan Timurid style.” This was characterized, first, by its colossal scale, achieved by high drums and new vaulting techniques that enabled arches and domes to soar upward. Timurid monuments were also free-standing, with all or nearly all exterior surfaces covered with mosaics of glazed tiles. Because these monuments were intended to make bold and powerful visual statements, they had to be seen from far away -- another hallmark of Timurid architecture.<sup>27</sup>

But there were deeper reasons why the Bahmani sultans looked to Central Asia. The state was born in 1347 after disaffected colonists from north India had rebelled against their own

Tughluq imperial overlords. With relations between the Deccan and north India severed, Bahmani rulers had to look elsewhere for military and civil talent to run their kingdom. To this end, Sultan Firuz annually sent ships to the Persian Gulf to recruit thousands of Iranians to serve in his army and civil administration.<sup>28</sup> By the time Firuz's brother shifted the capital to Bidar in 1424, Timurid ideals – notions of statecraft, aesthetic sensibilities, etc. – had been thoroughly absorbed. The city self-consciously imagined itself as an Indian outpost of Central Asian and Persian culture. Nor was this only a matter of creative imagination. The influx of so many Persian-speaking foreigners effectively transformed the kingdom's ruling elite into a settler-colony. In the 1470s, the Russian horse merchant Anafasy Nikitin remarked that "the rulers and the nobles in the land of India are all Khorassanians" – that is, people from Iran and Central Asia.<sup>29</sup> Referring specifically to Bidar, Nikitin bluntly stated, "Khurasanians rule the country and serve in war."<sup>30</sup> Commerical ties also connected Bidar and the Middle East. The Bahmanis needed overseas trading partners to whom to sell textiles produced in the Deccan. They also needed sources from which to purchase war-horses, since horses do not breed well in India. In fact, it was Bidar's insatiable demand for horses that attracted foreign merchants such as Anafasy Nikitin, who remarked on one market near Bidar where 20,000 horses were sold.<sup>31</sup>

Among the many merchants who flocked to the Deccan was Mahmud Gawan, a high-born Iranian whose career in Bidar perhaps best epitomized that city's strenuous efforts to transplant Timurid Central Asian culture into the heart of the Deccan plateau. Like Nikitin, Gawan was a long-distance horse-merchant. But he was more than that. Even before reaching India in 1453, he was well-travelled, having plied his horse-trading enterprise through Anatolia, Khurasan, Turkistan, Iraq, Syria, and Egypt. He was also well-educated,

having studied in Cairo and Damascus. And he was well-connected politically, having been offered but declined the post of chief minister both by the ruler of Khurasan and by that of Iraq.<sup>32</sup> Recognizing his competence and experience, the Bahmani sultan gave Gawan a modest government rank, but within only five years he was promoted to chief minister. Yet the title by which he was most widely known was *malik al-tujjar*, or Prince of Merchants, suggesting the very high regard that the court and the people attached to long-distance trade, Bidar's umbilical cord with the outside world. Toward the end of his life Gawan had become as big an exporter of textiles as he had earlier been an importer of horses. In this enterprise, his son served as his agent in Iran, while other agents transacted his business in Samarqand, Arabia, Egypt, western Anatolia, and even the Balkans.<sup>33</sup>

Just as merchant families in Timbuktu had transmuted commercial wealth into the cultivation of Islamic scholarship, Gawan aimed to use his commercial and political capital for making his adopted home a dazzling center of Persian culture and Islamic scholarship. To this end he did two things. First, he patronized the building of one of the most impressive *madrasas*, or schools, to be found in all of India. Completed in 1472, this extraordinary monument contained a large central courtyard flanked on three sides by three-storeyed wings, two large lecture halls, a library that originally held 3,000 manuscripts, a mosque, and thirty-six suites of rooms intended to accommodate more than a hundred students and at least twelve teachers. Its patron unabashedly compared the *madrasa* with paradise, for the Qur'anic text he chose for the inscription by the monument's principal entrance quotes the words of angels as they greet the faithful into heaven.<sup>34</sup>

Just standing before this monument, one can easily imagine oneself in Bukhara or Samarqand, so closely did Gawan's architects adhere to Timurid building techniques and

aesthetic sensibilities. These included, most importantly, the structure's sheer monumentality, together with the brilliant glazed tile work covering the exterior. On its eastern side was a huge portal entrance – now vanished – with an outer arch that spanned 21 feet. Covering its façade and its only remaining minaret is glazed tile work in cobalt blue, green, yellow, and white. The structure finds plenty of models in Central Asia and Iran, which Gawan would certainly have seen during his travels through those places before settling in the Deccan. Perhaps the closest model is the *madrasa* of Khargird, in eastern Iran near the present Afghan border, which was completed in 1444; or Ulugh Beg's *madrasa* in Bukhara, completed in 1417. The building's tiled minaret also finds antecedents in Iran and Central Asia, such as the one at the *madrasa* of Gawharshad in Herat, built in 1432.

To populate his splendid *madrasa*, Gawan personally invited the best and brightest stars in the Persian-speaking world to come join him in the Bahmani capital. In his pitch to attract Abu Bakr Tehrani, for example, Gawan boasted that "India is famous among all eminent persons of the world, and many learned persons live here."<sup>35</sup> Attempting to lure Shaikh Sadr al-Din Rawwasi (d. 1466-67) from Herat, he stated that "had our heart not been waiting for meeting you, it would have got burnt in despair," and, with some hyperbole, that the only thing keeping him and his men at Bidar alive was the hope of meeting the shaikh in the Bahmani capital.<sup>36</sup> No fewer than seven times did he write the great poet Maulana Jami (d. 1492), also of Herat, inviting him to come settle in the Deccan.<sup>37</sup> He was also in close touch with, among other luminaries, Jami's spiritual master, the Naqshbandi Sufi `Ubaid Allah al-Ahrar (d. 1491), and Sharaf al-Din Yazdi (d. 1454), author of *Zafar-nama*, the history of Timur. In all, 145 letters of Gawan have survived, including 38 to his relatives in Iran, 34 to foreign scholars, 13 to ministers of foreign states, 11 to rulers of Indian states, and 32 to

rulers of foreign states. The latter included the Ottoman sultan Mehmet II ("the Conqueror"), and the sultans of Malwa, Jaunpur, Gujarat, Iraq, Egypt, and his native Gilan.<sup>38</sup>

But in the end, despite Gawan's best efforts to recruit renowned Persian scholars to Bidar, nearly all of them declined to come. The only theologian of any repute who actually came was Shams al-Din Muhammad Lari, the former teacher of Gawan's private secretary.<sup>39</sup> From this failure Jean Aubin concluded that the literary life in Bidar must have been poor indeed, and that the theological teaching at the *madrasa* lacked luster. In his view, Bidar's rude society of adventurers and soldiers was simply not favorable for the blooming of elite scholars.<sup>40</sup> This is true. Despite Gawan's splendid *madrasa*, whose soaring architecture presents certainly the appearance of intellectual might, the city's scholarly atmosphere was actually bleak. In fact, the place was an intellectual backwater. The earliest Bahmani chronicles make no mention of any resident scholars in the city. The 3,000 manuscripts once housed in the *madrasa* have disappeared long ago. Even today the city has no libraries, no archives, no known private collections housing texts from the Bahmani era. With its massive walls of stone and mortar, its thirty-seven bastions jutting into a triple-moat dug thirty feet deep from solid laterite rock, its seven gates and adjoining draw-bridges, and with the largest cannon of its day surmounting its parapets,<sup>41</sup> the city's magnificent citadel hardly suggests a refuge for the cultivation of the mind. To the contrary, Bidar in Bahmani times presents itself as an armed camp, perched on the edge of the Islamic world.

What is most striking about Mahmud Gawan's *madrasa*, then, is not just its apparent attempt to replicate a bit of Timurid Samarqand in the Deccan plateau. What is most astonishing is why it is there at all, in this rough, frontier environment. What, one might ask, was Gawan doing there? The answer seems to lie in the sectarian conflicts then raging in his Iranian



homeland during the 15<sup>th</sup> century, provoked by the rise of a powerful Shi'i movement among Turkoman tribes in northwestern Iran, the same movement that would ultimately propel the Safavid dynasty to power in 1501. The Timurids, who were firm Sunnis, had earlier swept over the Iranian plateau, but by the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century their authority in northern and western Iran was steadily giving way to the rising Shi'i power. Gawan, on the other hand, was described as a "rigid Sunni,"<sup>42</sup> which might explain his decision to leave his home. That is, this horse-merchant was also, to some extent, a refugee. The Sunni-Shi'i conflict that Gawan had experienced first hand could also explain why he patronized the building of the *madrasa*. For the *madrasa* as an Islamic institution was particularly associated with Sunni Islam. Just as the Jesuit order was created to combat the Protestant "heresy," large, state-funding *madrasas* had been created in the 10<sup>th</sup> century as an intellectual weapon against the rising tide of Shi'ism. The Seljuk Turks endowed such institutions for precisely this purpose in Iraq and Egypt, and their Timurid successors did the same in Central Asia and Iran. Thus Gawan the scholar – but also Gawan the Sunni refugee -- had a very personal motive for patronizing an institution understood as a tool for Sunni propaganda.<sup>43</sup> If this was Gawan's motive, however, the idea of the *madrasa* was tragically misplaced, for the real conflict in the 15<sup>th</sup> century Deccan was not Sunni-Shi'i antagonism, but the deep rift between native Muslims of the Deccan and *all* foreign-born newcomers. It was this conflict, and the poisonous intrigues and destructive civil wars it spawned, that ultimately brought down the Bahmani state. Indeed, it claimed Gawan himself as one of its victims. In 1481 a group of Deccani Muslims conspired to trick the sultan, while drunk, into believing that the foreign-born Gawan had committed an act of treason, which led directly to his

execution by beheading.<sup>44</sup> Consumed by such internecine strife, the state broke apart just twenty years later.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, I have been considering two cities, Bidar and Timbuktu, that emerged roughly simultaneously but on opposite sides of the Muslim world. While both looked to the Middle East for inspiration, they imagined very different things. In terms of its physical layout, Bidar was essentially an armed camp. A refuge first for rebels against a north Indian empire, and then for victims of sectarian strife in Iran, it was also the seat of an Indo-Persian state with grandiose, imperial pretensions. Hence its fortress-like character. But its nemesis was its self-destructive inter-ethnic strife. The city's earlier colonists from north India who had "gone native" in the South and called themselves Deccanis never reconciled themselves politically to colonists who came later, straight from Iran and Central Asia. At the same time, these foreign-born settlers refused to embrace their new home and its culture; instead, they flaunted their foreign origins. Mahmud Gawan's *madrassa* is the architectural manifestation of precisely such chauvinism. Nonetheless, its construction was certainly an act of creative imagination, with an eye to replicating a bit of metropolitan Samarkand in the heart of the Deccan.

Timbuktu, by contrast, had no walls, no gates, no fortifications. Its various quarters were named not after ethnic communities that lived in them, as is the case in places like Jerusalem's old city, but after the several great mosques that served as the nuclei of the city's scholarly networks. Such networks constituted Timbuktu's central ethos, which even today survives in the city's one million Arabic manuscripts that, thanks to the generous support of

UNESCO, are being carefully preserved and catalogued. Timbuktu, then, also exercised a creative imagination in its dialogue with the Middle East, but one that differed vastly from that of Bidar. In one of its mosques Timbuktu managed to replicate the Ka'aba in Mecca, and in the person of one of its sovereign overlords, it replicated the Caliph himself. Looking eastward, the city imagined religious sites, religious figures, religious ideas. Bidar, by contrast, looked westward and imagined emblems of worldly power – the lion-and-sun motif, dazzling glazed tile-work, soaring arches, etc. The city was not only the capital of a sprawling Deccan sultanate with pretensions to Timurid glory, but the home of several waves of mutually hostile immigrants. Its most fateful themes were perfectly captured in the tragic career of Mahmud Gawan, who was a long-distance merchant from overseas, a political refugee, the patron of a stunningly Timurid but totally foreign monument, and finally, the victim of Deccani hostility toward men of his class.<sup>45</sup>

Many years ago Clifford Geertz contrasted Islam in Morocco and Java by noting, rather poetically, that while believers in the two lands may have said the same prayers, they prayed in opposite directions.<sup>46</sup> Yet both Javanese and Moroccan Muslims faced the same Ka'aba, which represented one and the same “model for” template (to use Geertz's own term), even though that model would be perceived through very different cultural lenses. Muslims in Timbuktu and Bidar, by contrast, not only faced the Islamic heartland from opposite directions; they also imagined very different “models for” in that heartland, with one city fixed on Cairo and Mecca, and the other on Samarkand and Herat.

Yet for all their differences in terms of their creative imaginings, the two cities shared a very similar trajectory with respect to another sort of imagining – namely, the sort that appears only retrospectively. For both cities, the first coherent narratives did not appear until some

five or six decades after their respective glories had receded into the past. The first comprehensive chronicle of the Bahmani dynasty, the *Burhan-i ma'thir* of `Ali Tabataba'i, was composed in 1591, or 53 years after the last Bahmani sultan had died, by which time the once-glorious capital of Bidar had been reduced to a mere provincial town.<sup>47</sup> It happens that 1591 was also the year that Moroccans conquered Timbuktu, a disruption that scattered its scholarly elites and crippled its scholarly tradition. Sixty-four years later, in 1655, both the *Tarikh al-sudan* and the *Tarikh al-fatash*, the two great chronicles of Timbuktu, were composed.<sup>48</sup>

One should perhaps not make too much of this chronological coincidence, except to note that fifty or sixty years is the approximate horizon beyond which surviving witnesses to any event begin dying off. Each of these chronicles, then, may be considered a conscious reconstruction of a past era. Viewed in retrospect, those eras were seen to have had a definable beginning and a definable end. From that point on, down to our own times, the histories of both cities would necessarily be projects of retrospective imagination – the normal activity of most professional historians (as opposed to antiquarians) – but not of creative imagination.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Nehemia Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana and Mali* (London, 1973), 132

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>4</sup> Marq de Villiers and Sheila Hirtle, *Timbuktu: the Sahara's Fabled City of Gold* (New York, 2007), 76.

<sup>5</sup> John Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire* (Leiden, 1999), lvi.

<sup>6</sup> See Elias N. Saad, *Social History of Timbuktu: the Role of Muslim Scholars and Notables, 1400-1900* (Cambridge, 1983). See also H. T. Norris, "Sanhajah Scholars of Timbuctoo," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 30/3 (1967), 634-40.

<sup>7</sup> John Hunwick and Alida Jay Boye, *The Hidden Treasures of Timbuktu: Rediscovering Africa's Literary Culture* (New York, 2008), 88.

<sup>8</sup> Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, lviii.

<sup>9</sup> Hunwick and Boye, *Hidden Treasures*, 9.

<sup>10</sup> John Hunwick, *Shari'a in Songhay: the Replies of al-Maghili to the Questions of Askia al-Hajj Muhammad* (Oxford, 1985), 20.

<sup>11</sup> Hunwick and Boye, *Hidden Treasures*, 10, 128.

<sup>12</sup> This argument has been made most forcefully in Saad, *Social History*. However, there has been debate over the extent of Timbuktu's political autonomy. See Michael A. Gomez, "Timbuktu under Imperial Songhay: a Reconsideration of Autonomy," *Journal of African History* 31 (1990), 5-24.

<sup>13</sup> See Saad, *Social History of Timbuktu*, esp. 160-64.

<sup>14</sup> Hunwick and Boye, *Hidden Treasures*, 130.

<sup>15</sup> Hunwick, *Shari'a in Songhay*, 45.

<sup>16</sup> To be sure, Mansa Musa was not the first West African king to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca. The son of the founder of Mali, Mansa Wali, had made the pilgrimage soon after 1260. A later king of Mali, Sakura, also made the *hajj* sometime after 1298. Neither of these kings, however, passed through Timbuktu or even claimed sovereignty over the town yet. Sakura, in fact, never made it back to Mali, having died during his return from Arabia. By contrast the pilgrimage of Mansa Musa, owing to his extravagance with his gold and his bringing back scholars from the Middle East and planting them in Timbuktu, had an enormous impact in both the Middle East and Timbuktu itself. See de Villiers and Hirtle, *Timbuktu*, 72, 73.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>18</sup> See Stewart Gordon, ed., *Robes and Honor: the Medieval World of Investiture* (New York, 2001).

<sup>19</sup> Hunwick, *Shari'a in Songhay*, 26-28.

<sup>20</sup> De Villiers and Hirtle, *Timbuktu*, 112

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- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., 80.
- <sup>22</sup> Labelle Prussin, *Hatumere: Islamic Design in West Africa* (Berkeley, 1986), 150.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid., 149.
- <sup>24</sup> Muhammad Qasim Firishta, *Tarikh-i Firishta* (completed 1611) (Lucknow, 1864-65), 1:312; John Briggs, tr., *Rise of the Mahomedan Power in India* (1829; Calcutta, 1966), 2:234.
- <sup>25</sup> Thomas Lentz and Glenn Lowry, *Timur and the Princely vision: Persian Art and Culture in the Fifteenth Century* (Los Angeles, 1989), 42-43.
- <sup>26</sup> G. Yazdani, *Bidar, its History and Monuments* (Oxford, 1947), Plate xxxvii.
- <sup>27</sup> Lisa Golombek, "Discourses of an Imaginary Arts Council in Fifteenth-Century Iran," in Lisa Golombek and Maria Subtelny, eds., *Timurid Art and Culture: Iran and Central Asia in the Fifteenth Century* (Leiden, 1992), 1-17.
- <sup>28</sup> Firishta, *Tarikh-i Firishta*, 1:308; Briggs, *History of India*, 2:227.
- <sup>29</sup> Athanasius Nikitin, "The Travels of Athanasius Nikitin, of Twer," trans. Count Wielhorsky, in R.H. Major, ed., *India in the Fifteenth Century* (Hakluyt Society First Series no. 22; repr. NY: Burt Franklin, 1970), 12.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid., 14.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., 12.
- <sup>32</sup> Firishta, *Tarikh-i Firishta*, 1:358; Briggs, *History of India*, 2:315.
- <sup>33</sup> Halil Inalcik, "Bursa and the Commerce of the Levant," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 3 (1960), 141.
- <sup>34</sup> "Peace be on you! Ye have been good; wherefore enter ye into paradise, to remain therein forever." Qur'an 39:73-74. Cited in G. Yazdani, *Bidar, its History and Monuments* (Oxford, 1947), 95.
- <sup>35</sup> Khwaja 'Imad al-Din Mahmud Gawan, *Riyaz al-insha'*, ed. Shaikh Chand bin Husain (Hyderabad, 1948), letter no. 43. The translation is that of M. A. Nayeem, "Foreign Cultural Relations of the Bahmanis (1461-81 A.D.)," in *Studies in the Foreign Relations of India*, ed. P. M. Joshi and M. A. Nayeem (Hyderabad, 1975), 403.
- <sup>36</sup> *Riyaz al-insha'*, no. 1. Translation is that of Nayeem, "Foreign Cultural Relations," p. 402.
- <sup>37</sup> See H.K. Sherwani, *Bahmanis of the Deccan* (2nd edn., 1977; repr. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1985), 228. When Gawan learned that Jami was considering a pilgrimage to Mecca, he wrote and tried to persuade the poet to come to the Deccan en route to Arabia. *Riyaz al-insha'*, letters nos. 2, 38, 40, 58, 64, 102, and 131.
- <sup>38</sup> *Riyaz al-insha'*: for 'Ubaid Allah al-Ahrar, nos. 3 and 44; for Sharaf al-Din Yazdi, no. 11; for Sultan Mehmet II, nos. 5, 56, 143, and 144; for the sultan of Malwa, nos. 76 and 86; for the sultan of Jaunpur, see no. 65; for the sultan of Gujarat, nos. 12, 18, 23, 51, 67, 81, 85, 118, 140; for the sultan of Iraq, no. 135; for the sultan of Egypt, no. 134; for the sultan of Gilan, nos. 6, 7, 13, 21, 39, 54, 62, 63, 91, 101, 104, 109, 115, 127, and 132.
- <sup>39</sup> Jean Aubin, "Indo-Islamic I: La vie et l'oeuvre de Nimdihi" *Revue des etudes islamiques* 34 (1966), 70.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., 66.

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- <sup>41</sup> The best description of the fort is found in Yazdani, *Bidar*, 28-44.
- <sup>42</sup> Firishta, *Tarikh-i Firishta*, 1:359; Briggs, *History of India* 2:316. Briggs's translation. The original text reads "U basi pak-din va pak-i'tiqad bud."
- <sup>43</sup> Elizabeth Schotten Merklinger, "The Madrasa of Mahmud Gawan in Bidar," *Kunst des Orients* (1977), 153-55.
- <sup>44</sup> Firishta, *Tarikh-i Firishta*, 1:356-57; Briggs, *History of India* 2:311-14.
- <sup>45</sup> In fact, Gawan's life was interwoven with that of the Bahmani state in still other ways. In the 1460s and '70s when the Bahmani sultan ordered Bidar's citadel to be rebuilt to accommodate the age of gunpowder that had just dawned in India, Mahmud Gawan supervised the project. And the first certain use of gunpowder anywhere in the Deccan was ordered by Gawan in 1472, when he supervised the laying of gunpowder under the walls of an enemy fort his army was besieging. See Yazdani, *Bidar*, 30. Firishta, *Tarikh-i Firishta*, 1:352; Briggs, *History of India*, 2:303.
- <sup>46</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Islam observed; religious development in Morocco and Indonesia* (New Haven, 1968).
- <sup>47</sup> Saiyid 'Ali Tabataba'i, *Burhan-i ma'athir* (Delhi: Jam'i Press, 1936).
- <sup>48</sup> Mahmud Ka'ti, *Tarikh al-fattash*. Edited and trans. M. Delafosse and O. Houdas (Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1964). 'Abd al-Rahman Sa'di, *Tarikh al-Sudan*. Edited and trans. O. Houdas (Paris, 1898-1900; repr. Paris, Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1966).