Chapter 15
Islamisation through the Lens of the Saltuk-name

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A marked increase in the production and dissemination of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish popular literatures took place during the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. An extremely rich body of oral popular literature (romances/epics, cycles of tales, popular hagiographies) in the three major Middle Eastern Islamic languages appear to have been recorded in writing for the first time in this period.\(^1\) In the process, old genres were refashioned, new genres emerged, and written popular literary traditions developed side by side existing oral tales and epics. This corpus of popular literature, which preserved its vitality and continued to grow well into the modern period, is without doubt the richest mine of information on popular beliefs and habits of thinking in premodern Middle Eastern Muslim communities. The present chapter is an attempt to explore the conceptions of and knowledge about Islam that are reflected in one major exemplar from this wider corpus, the Saltuk-name.

**Methodological Observations**

Any attempt to study aspects of premodern Muslim popular cultures on the basis of popular literary texts is hampered by several difficulties. First and foremost among such obstacles is the confusion that surrounds the use and definition of the term ‘popular’\(^2\). Without engaging the multiple debates that


\(^2\) A valuable and still useful survey of scholarly views on popular culture from different disciplines is *Approaches to Popular Culture*, ed. C.W.E. Bigsby (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1976). Not represented in this collection are debates within the discipline of history of religions, for which see Catherine Bell, ‘Religion and Chinese Culture:
have occurred in a variety of disciplines on this topic, ‘popular’ here will be used as the intermediate category in a tripartite paradigm of premodern Middle Eastern Islamic cultures, the two terminal areas of which are ‘elite’ and ‘folk’. According to this paradigm, the distinguishing feature of popular culture is its accessibility to, and dissemination among, a majority of the population within any given cultural region or set of regions. While access to and spread of elite and folk cultures are restricted along various axes, access to popular culture is relatively open and its spread almost continuous throughout the whole of society in a specified cultural region. All three cultures require specialisation at the production end (though folk culture also harbours generalists and amateurs), but only popular culture entails diversification at the reception end. In the realm of literature, for instance, while oral compositions and literary texts are produced mostly by specialists in all three areas, only popular literature is aimed at a general audience, as opposed to, on the one hand, the literate and, on the other hand, the strictly local audiences of elite and folk literatures respectively.3

A second obstacle in a research project based on the study of premodern popular literary texts is the traditional prejudice of scholars against popular culture in general and popular literature in particular. Until recently, literary scholars – Muslim and non-Muslim, premodern and modern – considered popular, ‘low’ culture inferior to elite, ‘high’ culture. Due to this ingrained bias, popular literature has received a disproportionately low ratio of scholarly attention and has been confined to the margins of mainstream literary research. As a result, popular literary texts remain much less accessible and much less studied than their elite counterparts.4

A third difficulty, which is a direct corollary of the previous one, is related to the use of popular texts as historical sources. Although it is legitimate to see this literature as in some sense a reflection of popular mentality, the exact modality of this reflection cannot be ascertained, if at all, until the texts in question are subjected to literary analysis on their own terms.5 It is essential to emphasise


4 Analogous situations abound in other fields; see, for instance, the preface to The Popular Literature of Medieval England, ed. Thomas J. Heffernan (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1985).

here that for the majority of these popular works, even the first phase of such analysis, namely, the attempt to recover the historical and literary contexts of texts, remains unaccomplished. With specific reference to literary context, for instance, the determination of ‘generic horizons’ is the crucial step in the critical approach to a text, since the generation of literary meaning is inextricably bound with generic operations and conventions. The generic profiles of most premodern Islamic popular literary texts, however, in particular, that of the long narrative cycles, remain blurred. In practical terms, this fuzziness of generic horizons seriously hampers the attempt to reconstruct aspects of the popular worldviews these texts reflect on the basis of information extracted from them. In the absence of fundamental literary analyses of the primary source material used here, this paper will simply present the results of an initial attempt to cull indices or markers concerning Muslims and Islam from one Turkish ‘religious-heroic prose tale’ and to make some observations about what these markers indicate about Islamisation. Expressed differently, our major concern will be to probe the role Muslim identity and Islam played in the social and mental contexts of the popular literary text in question.

**The Saltuk-name and its Historical Context**

Even though the premodern popular epic tradition in Anatolian Turkish is extensive, it would be fair to state that four epic cycles have attracted more attention from researchers than all the others: these are Kitab-i Ebu Müslim, Battal-name, Danişmend-name, and Saltuk-name. In this presentation, I will focus exclusively on the Saltuk-name.

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7 Two studies by Peter Heath are noteworthy exceptions: *Thirsty Sword* (note 3) and ‘Romance as Genre in The Thousand and One Nights’, *Journal of Arabic Literature* 18 and 19 (1987 and 1988): 1–21 and 1–26, respectively. In this context, one should also mention Hanaway, ‘Persian Popular Romances’ (note 1), and Marina Gaillard, *Le Livre de Samak-e ‘Ayyār: Structure et idéologie du roman persan médiéval* (Paris: Publié avec le concours du Centre national de la recherche scientifique et de l’Association pour l’avancement des études iraniennes, C. Klincksieck [distributor], 1987). Following scholarly custom, I continue to use the terms ‘popular romance’ for the works in question here, even though the meaning and scope of this genre remains to be established.

First, a few words about Sarı Saltuk, the hero of the Saltuk-name. Sarı Saltuk (or Saltık) is the most famous ‘warrior-saint’ associated with the Islamisation and Turkicisation of Rumelia (the Ottoman Balkans). His historical personage is shrouded in obscurity, and the most that can be asserted about his historical life, though not with complete certainty, is that he was a prominent figure who played a significant role in the large-scale migration and settlement of Turkish nomadic clans from north-western Anatolia to the region of Dobruja south of the Danube in present-day Bulgaria and Romania in the 660s/1260s. It is not possible to disentangle the saintly from the warrior Sarı Saltuk on the basis of the meagre historical evidence we have about him. His spiritual lineage was later linked to such famous Turkish Anatolian saints of the seventh/thirteenth century as Barak Baba, Taptuk Emre, and the poet Yunus Emre, but this may be more attribution than actual linkage. As for his image as a warrior hero, this no doubt developed in the shadow of such epic figures as Ebu Müslim, Battal Gazi, and Melik Danişmend, all protagonists of the heroic narratives that were popular among Turkish speakers of Anatolia and Southeast Europe, yet it is impossible to state with any degree of certainty that he actually was a warrior.

A third dimension to Sarı Saltuk’s image that is equally impervious to historical scrutiny outside the narrative context of the Saltuk-name is his versatility in the complex cultural environments of north-west Anatolia and south-east Europe. At present, it is hardly possible to know whether or not the historical Sarı Saltuk was indeed at home in at least some aspects of the ethnically, linguistically and religiously variegated milieu of these regions as his epic hagiographical tale would suggest, yet the idea that he himself may have been a product of this highly porous multicultural environment is certainly attractive.

The warrior-saint-cultural chameleon was, in any case, the image captured in the Saltuk-name, the only surviving ‘epic hagiographical wonder-tale’ about Sarı Saltuk, which was compiled between 878–85/1473–80 by a certain Ebu’l-Hayr-i Rumi for the Ottoman prince Cem (d. 900/1495). Even though it would be foolhardy to make an attempt to place the events narrated in the Saltuk-name...

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9 The following few paragraphs as well as the selection from the Saltuk-name have been previously published as ‘Sarı Saltık Becomes a Friend of God’, in Tales of God’s Friends: Islamic Hagiography in Translation, ed. John Renard (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 136–44.


in precise historical context, the narrative was likely woven around a historical core that can be roughly dated to the middle two quarters of the thirteenth century and connected to the north-west Anatolian, south-east European and Ukrainian/Crimean coastal regions of the Black Sea. This is the era, on the one hand, of the Latin Empire of Constantinople (1204–61) and Byzantine Empire of Nicaea (1204–61), followed by the restoration of Constantinople to Byzantine control during the reign of the Byzantine emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos (r. 1259–82) and, on the other hand, the vigorous expansion of the Seljuq sultanate of Rûm in central Anatolia during the first half of the century, followed by its diminution and tenuous survival under direct and indirect Mongol control during the second. It is important to note here that while the narrative is threaded around this vague historical core, it ranges widely over a much wider geographical area that takes its hero to practically all regions around the Mediterranean basin, the Horn of Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, South and Central Asia (but not Iran) as well as southern and south-central Europe, not to mention mythical subterranean and extra-terrestrial domains, notably the vast expanse around Mount Qāf. Similarly, although the narration is seemingly anchored by references to the Muslim sultan (some actual Seljuq rulers are cited by name) and the Christian caesar (normally identified not by name but simply as kaysar-i rum) as well as many other purportedly historical figures (whose names are cited, as a rule, in garbled form), the narrative includes many non-human actors, ranging from the immortal Muslim saints Khîdr (Khaḍîr), and Ilyâs to jinns, demons, sorcerers, mythical beasts, fairies, angels and the Devil himself. The Saltuk-name is as much a wonder-tale as it is a heroic epic and a hagiography.

In structural terms, the Saltuk-name fits easily into the general narrative framework of Islamicate popular romance, which can be identified as the ‘Heroic Cycle’, normally consisting of the following four phases: (1) the Rise of the Hero; (2) the Love Story; (3) Heroic Service; and (4) the Death of the Hero. While the Heroic Cycle is readily discernible in the Saltuk-name (as it is in all four of the Anatolian Turkish epic cycles mentioned earlier), it is noteworthy that the narrative places the emphasis squarely on Heroic Service and marginalises, even excludes, the Love Story altogether. Clearly, the Saltuk-name is a ‘religious-heroic cycle,’ in the sense that the protagonist is at the exclusive service of a higher, normally communal, cause (in this case ‘true religion’), as opposed to an ‘amorous-heroic cycle,’ where higher causes such as communal identity and valour in battle are subordinated to the Love Story, which dominates the plotline. In the Saltuk-name, Sarı Saltuk appears as the ultimate religious hero who possesses superior physical strength and unmatched fighting skills, exceptional intelligence and cunning, unwavering faith and profound scholarly knowledge, as well as all the supernatural powers of sainthood. As a descendant of the Prophet Muḥammad, he is of distinguished religious lineage, and his Islamic credentials are established through his special contacts with saintly figures (Khîdr, Ilyâs) and supernatural beings. He is a formidable warrior and, at

13 Both the phrase ‘Heroic Cycle’ and its outline, much shortened, is adapted from Heath, Thirsty Sword, 67–88 (see note 3).
the same time, also a picaresque, trickster-like figure (paralleling the ʿayyār in Persian cycles). He toils ceaselessly for the faith throughout Eurasia, West and South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, but he is especially attached to the western half of the Black Sea coastal regions from Rumelia in the south to Crimea in the north, and the brunt of his zealous struggles on behalf of Islam is often, but by no means exclusively, directed towards Christians (Muslim heretics and pagans of all kinds also receive their fair share of Sari Saltuk’s salvific touch). He propagates Islam both by the sword on the battlefield and by a peculiar and highly colourful form of one-upmanship in religious expertise, even bravura: he often disguises himself as a Christian monk or a priest, displays stunning skills in scholarly debate and ritual performance in foreign languages, then reveals his true identity to his Christian audiences (typically clergy and aristocracy) and invites them to Islam.

Before going further with our analysis of Islam in the Saltuk-name, it is appropriate to convey something of the flavour of this colourful work with a selection from the beginnings of the narrative that captures the story of Sari Saltuk’s sanctification as an 18-year-old during his first foray into Christian Rumelia. At this early stage in the narrative, Sari Saltuk’s heroic credentials have already been marshalled. He has been hailed as a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad both as a seyyid (Ar. sayyid; descendant of Muḥammad through his grandson Ḥusayn) and a şerif (Ar. sharif, descendant of Muḥammad through his grandson Ḥasan), and, indeed, both of these titles are used throughout the text to refer to him. His lineage has been linked also to Battal Gazi, who functioned as the premier Muslim warrior hero for all Turkish speakers of Anatolia. His proper name has been cited as Hızır, which is a move that associates him permanently with Khiḍr the immortal prophet-saint of Islam, at whose hand Saltuk is initiated into sainthood in the episode translated below.14 The name Saltuk, which, we are told in the text itself, means ‘mighty man’, though this is almost certainly not an accurate etymology, was bestowed on him by a Christian opponent whom he defeats and converts to Islam. This ‘blond’ Saltuk (san literally means ‘yellow’) is now venturing for the first time into Rumelia, which is Christian territory formerly unpenetrated by Muslims.15

A Selection from the Saltuk-name

Şerif immediately headed into Rumelia.16 He arrived at a place called Migalkara,17 where there was a large church. He entered the church and greeted the clergy.18

The monks asked him, ‘Where are you coming from?’ He said, ‘I’m coming from

14 A.J. Wensinck, ‘al-Khaḍir (al-Khiḍr)’, EI.
15 The section translated here is pages 29–36 in the Akalin edition of the Saltuk-name (see note 8).
16 The original text does not have any paragraphs.
17 Present-day Malkara in Turkey.
18 Throughout the text, the words for clergy, priest, and monk are used interchangeably.
the town of Kilaşpol [Gelibolu?].’ The priests said, ‘Did the patriarch Filyon of the Franks cross over?’ Şerif replied, ‘I heard that they set sail to go back.’ Suddenly, a man appeared and informed the priests that the patriarch was about to arrive. The priests told Şerif, ‘You were saying that he wasn’t coming and yet here he is – you fooled us.’

They welcomed the patriarch with gifts and presents and honoured him. The patriarch came directly to the church. The lords arrived with wine and they sat down to eat and drink. Şerif busied himself with serving them. As the infidels got totally drunk, the patriarch said, ‘Get up and close the church door so that no one can enter in on us.’ Şerif rose from his place and closed the door. The patriarch offered the wine cup in his hand to Şerif. Şerif took the cup but set it down and did not drink. The patriarch said, ‘Why don’t you drink?’ Şerif replied, ‘I have some trouble with my stomach, and I was told not to drink wine. I’m being cautious and refraining from it.’ Filyon said, ‘So be it, young man.’

After they all got drunk they fell asleep. Şerif took this opportunity to knock them out. He carried the patriarch outside the church and tied him up to a tree by the stream. When morning came, the patriarch opened his eyes and saw Şerif standing opposite him with a bare sword in his hand like Mars [the icon of the planet Mars was a standing man wielding a drawn sword]. Gathering his wits, Filyon then said, ‘Who are you to put me into this state?’ Şerif replied, ‘I’m Şerif. Proclaim the [true] faith fast or I’ll destroy you.’ The patriarch said, ‘O Şerif, for the sake of the religion you follow, I’m not an infidel. I secretly hold [that] religion. I came here only because infidels in great numbers gathered around me. I pledge not to mobilise troops against Muslims from now on.’ Şerif said, ‘No, proclaim faith in front of me so that I believe you.’ The patriarch said, ‘If I do as you say, I’ll lose my country, instead let me give you a thousand gold coins annually as tribute.’ Şerif insisted, ‘Profess in front of me so that I hear you.’ The patriarch said, ‘I’ll lose face.’ Şerif said, ‘I won’t mention it to anyone if you don’t tell anyone that I was here.’ Filyon perforce came to the [true] faith. Şerif said, ‘I’ll leave you here and go inform your army.’

He returned to the infidels and said, ‘Saltuk arrived and tied up your ruler to a tree in such-and-such-a place and he is torturing him, hurry!’ The lords rushed and found him tied up to the tree; they untied him and brought him to his post. Soon afterwards, some infidels arrived in an agitated state and announced, ‘Last night, Şerif Saltuk the magician came and knocked out the priests of the church!’ The patriarch immediately wrote a letter and sent it to the king in Istanbul, saying, ‘I saw with my own eyes that Saltuk crossed the sea to this side and penetrated inland. Don’t be heedless; he’s after you. I [myself] escaped [from him] by a trick; you should take precautions.’

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19 Although he is referred as the patriarch (pap) in the text, this ‘Filyon’ appears to be a Frankish king.
When the letter reached the king, he became terribly frightened. He left Istanbul and went directly to the fortress of Endriyye. It is reported that close to Istanbul, in a distance of four-day travel, there was an old fortress built by Edrin son of Islam, son of the prophet Adam. His son Endriyye dug a moat around it. Surrounded by marshes, with a river on one side, and equipped with drawbridges, it was impenetrable. In it there was a mighty glass church built by the Roman emperor Cevher, which all infidels visited. Jesus had completed a 40-day retreat there. Infidels came to the church, made 40-day retreats, circumambulated the church and gave alms. They called this town Endriyye. It was located at the heart of Rumelia. The king entered the town without delay, closed its gates, and began to reside there.

Then the patriarch too came to the fortress of Endriyye from Migalkara with his Frankish Latin soldiers. The patriarch, accompanied by the Latin prince Mihal Miryanos, came to the fortress and joined the king. Together, they walked to that church. Şerif himself was among the Latin soldiers and arrived at the church dressed as a priest. He saw that the church was in the centre of the town, and infidels were rubbing their faces to its walls. Şerif thought [of a stratagem]. There was a renowned priest in Latin lands, and the name of this accursed cleric was Calut (Goliath). He flew in the sky by the use of magic, and all the infidels had faith in him. Şerif had heard of his renown. He stepped forward, kissed the hand of the king, and saying, 'My father Calut (Christ’s blessings on him) sends you his greetings.’ He took out a letter from his head[cover] and presented it to the king. The king opened the letter and read it. Şerif read and wrote in 12 languages. The patriarch, the Latin prince and all the accursed infidels uncovered their heads. Şerif ascended to the pulpit and recited from the Gospels in a full and beautiful voice. All the infidels wept and were beside themselves [with ecstasy].

When he descended from the pulpit, they brought delicious foods and wine at the king’s orders. Şerif did not eat the food, except for some olives, nor did he drink any wine. He said, ‘These are harmful for one who’s observing a diet.’ The patriarch glanced at Şerif and thought he looked familiar. He said to the military commanders, ‘I’m afraid that this man might be Şerif.’ The king said, ‘This is a man of religion, do not think of him otherwise.’ Then one of the commanders rose from his place, sat down beside Şerif and said, ‘There are Latins here who know you, and they say that you are not the son of Calut.’ Şerif got agitated by his words but remained silent. That Frankish commander got up from his place, came to the patriarch, the king and the lords and said, ‘I know for sure this person is Şerif. He is an enemy of our religion.’ Then,

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20 Present-day Edirne in Turkey.
21 Edirne was rebuilt by the Roman emperor Hadrian and renamed Hadrianapolis, or Adrianople.
22 The biblical Goliath appears as Jālūt (Turkish ‘Calut’) in the Qur’an.
23 Olives are mentioned in the Qur’an.
the patriarch said to the king, ‘Let’s capture him by trickery.’ They prepared a sweet drink, which they drugged and placed it in front of Şerif who was seated by the pulpit. Şerif took that drugged drink from their hands and drank it. After a while he lost consciousness. They immediately tied him up, took him to prison and incarcerated him.

When he came to his senses in the morning and saw himself in chains, he sighed but did not object to his fate. Just then, the executioners arrived and took Şerif to the king’s court. The king said, ‘O Şerif Saltuk the Magician, see how my fortune has brought you to my feet! What kind of a ruse will you perform [now] that what I will do to you will be a lesson to the whole world?’ Then he ordered firewood to be piled up in front of the town and Şerif to be burnt. They were in the habit of burning those with whom they were incensed. They kept Seyyid Saltuk Şerif imprisoned for 10 days while they built a mangonel with which to throw him into the fire. They started such a [an immense] fire with the pile of wood that no one could go near it. Then they brought out Şerif, placed him into the mangonel and threw him into the blaze.

Now, it is said that across from that town there was a hill, which Hızır visited, and some Sunni jinns also frequented that place. It so happened that Hızır was seated on the hill [that day] and Minuçîhr the Jinn of the Sunni jinns was on his way to pay a visit to Hızır. As he was making his way with his soldiers, he suddenly saw a human youth, all tied up, flying into a fire. He immediately swooped down, snatched him, and brought him to Hızır’s presence. He placed Şerif down in front of Hızır. When Hızır saw Şerif, he got up from his place, untied his hands and said, ‘Don’t worry, Oh Şerif, death is not decreed for you just yet. There will be no death for you so long as water doesn’t appear as fire to your eyes. This will be the sign [of your impending death], so don’t be startled [when you see it].’ Şerif, Hızır and Minuçîhr the Jinn all sat down. They watched the fire burn in front of the town.

Suddenly, the prophet İlyas also arrived.24 They stepped forward, greeted him and sat back down. İlyas asked Şerif how he was. Then, Şerif said, ‘What are you [all] doing among these infidels?’ Hızır said, ‘This location is the place of Şerif in Rumelia. This is Eden on earth. It will become the hearth of the warriors for the faith. From now on for forty years, we will pray the morning prayer in this place. Whoever prays and fasts for forty days and prays the morning prayers here will become righteous; we will appear to them and they will benefit from us.’ Nowadays, they call this location the station of Hızır-İlyas. Hızır and İlyas got up to leave. Hızır bade farewell to Şerif and said to him, ‘From now on, have no fear. Open your mouth.’ Şerif opened his mouth, and Hızır placed of his own saliva in it and said, ‘From now on have no fear, and march on!’ Şerif gained as much additional strength as he already had, and he entered into [the realm

of) sainthood and charismata. The veils were lifted from his eyes and his heart [and] all secrets became apparent. Afterwards, the prophet İlyas taught Şerif the prayer of spirits –which is the greatest name of God – and Hızır taught him the prayer of the angels. Then Hızır and İlyas departed. Minuçihr the Jinn told Şerif, ‘O Şerif, do not omit me from your prayers.’ The seyyid replied, ‘Be my sibling in this world and the next.’ Minuçihr the Jinn too taught Şerif a prayer and said, ‘Whenever you say this prayer, I will come to your presence with my soldiers.’ Minuçihr the Jinn too asked permission to leave and departed.

Şerif rose from his place and went down to the town. Just before [arriving at the] town, he came to a bridge, where an infidel looked at Şerif and said, ‘This youth really looks like Saltuk whom they threw into the fire today.’ One of his companions said, ‘These Turks know magic, and they don’t burn in fire. Didn’t you hear [told] in books how many times they burnt Seyyid Battal and he came back to life and how they threw him down a well and he came back up? Since this Saltuk is his son, it is not strange [that he didn’t burn]: Şerif stepped forward and said, ‘Young men, tell me what your conversation is about because I too would like to know.’ Those infidels said, ‘Where are you coming from?’ Şerif said, ‘I’m coming from Serbia; I’m travelling.’ They replied, ‘Young man, we were talking about how a Turkish youth named Şerif appeared around here and made much trouble for us. He spilled the blood of many Christians. It was the king’s fortune that he was captured when he came with his own feet, and today they burnt him, so he was destroyed. That’s what we were talking about.’ Şerif said, ‘May the fortune of the king increase – he has eliminated the enemies of religion.’

Then he headed towards town and directly entered the fortress. On the ramparts right above the gate they were playing drums and feasting. The news of Şerif’s burning spread everywhere. Muslims heard [the news] and grew dismayed. As Şerif entered the fort, on that side [of town] there was a church close to the gate of the fortress. Other than that large church, this was the second important church, and infidel travellers alighted there. Şerif went straight to the church and settled down. They asked him, ‘Where are you coming from?’ He said, ‘I’m Şem’un son of the priest Rahval. I came here to debate with the priests of this place who, they say, are unmatched in knowledge, so that it will be known who is truly qualified, and [thus] I will be honoured and respected by the king, the patriarch and the princes and will acquire some property and a few coins. The lords too might give me something.’ Those priests were pleased – they went to the king and conveyed his words. The king went to the patriarch and said, ‘O Filyon, what’s happening is that the son of a priest has arrived in the lower church, and he is engaged in debating.’ The patriarch, the king and the lords rode down to the church and sat down. Şerif stood up, honoured the lords, and said, ‘O community of Christ, whoever among you is superior in knowledge should come forward so that we [may] debate and converse.’ Three hundred monks and priests stepped forward and debated. Şerif bested them all. Afterwards, he climbed the pulpit and started to preach and interpret the
Religion and Religious Identity

This selection from the beginning of the Saltuk-name should be sufficient to evoke the tone of the narrative, and we can now move on to an analysis of the text for conceptions of religious identity and practice, with a particular focus on Islam and ‘Muslimness’. However, it will not be lost on any reader that in the narrative world of this hagiographical wonder-tale Muslim identity is inextricably interwoven with Christian identity, so much so that no analysis of the former will be complete without a simultaneous scrutiny of the latter. We will, therefore, start with a brief consideration of Christians and Christianity.

Christians fall under the general category of kafr (Ar. kāfr, literally ‘ingrate’) but normally used in the narrative to refer to all non-Muslims, thus meaning ‘infidel, unbeliever’), though they are normally identified specifically, either directly by the designation nasrani (Ar., naṣrāni) or inferentially by the use of other Christianity-specific cultural markers such as references to churches (deyr, kilise), clergy (ruhban, rahib, papaz, patrik, keşiş used interchangeably), the New Testament (İncil, Ar. Injīl), and Jesus Christ (İsa; Ar. ʿĪsā, and Mesih; Ar. Masih). The focus is squarely on prominent political rulers and military figures: governors (tekfur or tefür), lords and commanders (mihal, ban), kings (kiral), emperors (kaysar-i rum, padişah)]; and high-level clergy, such as bishop or archbishop (patrik, filyon), and pope (pap). Sarı Saltuk does have frequent encounters with Christian common folk, but these tend to be very brief transitional elements in the unfolding plot line, with no substantive verbal exchange between the two parties. The narrative’s unwavering concentration on holders of political and military power as well as clergy is quite telling about the assumed goal of Sarı Saltuk’s ceaseless heroic labour, which emerges unequivocally as the establishment of the political hegemony of Islam. The Muslim hero is as adept in converting people of power and authority to the ‘right religion’ by persuasion, ruse or force, as he is in dispensing with them by the sword or the dagger when they refuse to declare allegiance to Islam. By losing their political and religious leaders to Islam through either conversion or destruction at the hands of Sarı Saltuk, Christian communities emerge as the clear losers. According to this perspective, Christianity is less a web of religious belief and practice than it is a brand of communal political affiliation. The political supremacy of Islam, as rendered evident by the establishment of Muslim rule over particular areas, is the ultimate meaning of ‘true religion’, and Christianity simply happens to be a particularly persistent and widespread yet nevertheless utterly wrong form of political allegiance.

This narrowly political understanding of religion is evinced equally clearly by the narrative’s total lack of interest in matters of Christian belief and
practice. Christian doctrines of the Trinitarian or Christological variety that could be expected to generate Muslim ire and consternation are conspicuous by their absence, and Christian practice is brought into view only incidentally when Sari Saltuk impersonates clergy, and then identified only generically, and often inaccurately, by the use of explicitly Islamic terminology such as *erbain* (the 40-day retreat), *tavaf* (circumambulation), or *sadaka* (charity). The only exception to this rule is baptism, which is referred to by the expression *meftuz etmek* but never described in any detail. Indeed, to judge by the *Saltuk-name*, the quintessential Christian practices would appear to be recitation of the Gospels and consumption of wine in the church! Clearly, neither the narrator nor the audience of the wonder-tale had much interest in actual Christian belief or ritual.

It should be observed that this nakedly political perspective on religion is not particular to Christianity; it also extends to Islam itself, which is reduced to explicit allegiance to Sunni Islam of the Hanafi legal school (this emphasis on Hanafi Sunnism is probably the result of later Ottoman spin). The narrative is remarkably devoid of explicit references to Muslim ritual practice. Sari Saltuk prays only very rarely, and even though he does undertake the pilgrimage, his primary activity in the holy towns of Mecca and Medina is to cleanse them of their many heretics. And the Ramadan fast is nowhere in sight. nor is there much evidence of theological and legal doctrine, or, even more strikingly, of Muslim religious scholars or religious professionals themselves; indeed, the only such religious specialist to appear every now and then, and more often than not in a negative light, is the judge or qadi. Instead, much attention, once again of the narrowly political type, is paid to Shiʿite heretics (*rafizi*), who, much like the Christians, are subjected to the relentless salvational rigour of the energetic hero Sari Saltuk.

Significantly, since religion is reduced to communal political allegiance, individual human actors are not portrayed as inherently good or incorrigibly evil. Salvation is simply a matter of right belonging, and yesterday’s ‘cursed’ Christians suddenly become today’s ‘righteous’ believers simply by uttering the testimony of faith. The boundaries of the ‘right religion’ are infinitely porous, and numerous infidels cross over into Sunni Islam through these pores by the irresistible magnetic attraction generated by Sari Saltuk. Conversion, then, is a relatively painless and cost-free undertaking, and the only habitual behaviours that a Christian has to shed in this process are wine-drinking (which is always portrayed as a most unfortunate activity with dire consequences) and consumption of pork. Converting unbelievers to Islam, in other words, is an eminently feasible and realistic goal, and Sari Saltuk is not some misguided idealist swimming against the tide but a practical realist working towards an achievable goal.

If, according to the *Saltuk-name*, many Christians are thus excellent Muslims *in potentia*, surprisingly others who live as respectable Christians actually turn out to be Muslims *in esse*! During his ceaseless adventures in Christian territories disguised as a Christian, Sari Saltuk at times encounters clergy as well as political rulers who are crypto-Muslims. These figures reveal their true confessional identity to Sari Saltuk, and while a number of them proceed to facilitate the
hero’s achievements with, naturally, modest contributions, more commonly, they quickly ask for his help in an attempt to alleviate their own personal difficulties. The most spectacular, even shocking, instance of such encounters with crypto-Muslims takes place in Ezentimariyya, or Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, where the Pope takes Sarı Saltuk down into a hidden chamber under the church equipped with a mihrab indicating the sacred direction and furnished with a prayer-rug, and proceeds to reveal himself to be a Muslim! Oddly, Sarı Saltuk is not at all surprised by this revelation, but he does ask why the Pope does not ‘come out’ as a Muslim. In response, the Pope provides a full explanation for the phenomenon of crypto-Muslim clergy and political rulers, according to which this practice dates back to the conquest of Syria during the time of the second caliph ʿUmar, when Emperor Heraklios and an unnamed patriarch secretly convert to Islam after witnessing angels fighting alongside Muslims in battle. Since then, it becomes customary for there to be ‘40’ crypto-Muslims among eminent Christian figures at any given time, who all know one another and whose ranks are continually replenished as some members die. This most curious belief in the existence of a company of 40 Muslims hidden in Christian garb, which was most likely an adaptation of one specific aspect (‘the 40 abdal’) of the widespread Muslim belief in a hidden hierarchy of saints, further underscores the porous nature of the perceived boundary between the two religious traditions in the Saltuk-name. More significantly, it demonstrates in strikingly clear fashion that what differentiates Christian from Muslim was, in the eyes of the audience of this wonder-tale, not, so to speak, a constitutional difference in human nature but, rather, a mere question of ‘right’: communal allegiance coupled with only a few distinctively Christian and distinctively Muslim social habits.

Holy Wars

What does the Saltuk-name reveal about Muslim perspectives on religious militancy in general and jihad and the Crusades in particular? The epic figure Sarı Saltuk is a religious hero whose life activity is directed unambiguously to the establishment of the political hegemony of Islam over all religions, and it is the underlying assumption of the narrative that Christianity perfectly mirrors Islam in this respect. Christian leaders, just as much Muslim ones, are motivated by the desire to subdue their politico-religious adversaries, and this ambition finds explicit expression at several points in the tale in the form of dialogues, group conversations or written correspondence in which Christian figures urge one another to put up a united Christian front in order to attack and defeat the ‘Muhammadans’ or the ‘Turks’ (it is noteworthy that these terms, preferred by Christians, are never used by the narrator or the ‘Muslims’ themselves). When, for instance, Sarı Saltuk falls ill with a high fever and he is temporarily rendered insane because of a drink that a Jewish physician administers to him, the ruler in Constantinople wastes no time in dispatching a letter to the pope, in which he writes, ‘Şerif has gone mad. Let us get together and attack the Turks!’ Unfortunately for the ‘Tekvur’ of Constantinople, the pope’s response to this
letter is most disconcerting. He informs the Tekvur that even though he, the pope, obviously cherishes the goal of defeating the ‘Turks’, he was told in a dream by Christ himself that the Christians will not be able to realise this goal until the appearance of a blond warrior with green eyes from beyond Russia who will inflict a crushing defeat on the Turks. This interesting episode, complete with its curious Turkish refraction of a version of the Prester John legend, certainly suggests that the narrator(s) and the audience of the Saltuk-name were only too familiar with Christian ambitions of mounting united campaigns against the Muslims; indeed, in their eyes, the only true barrier against the realisation of the ultimate goal of Christian militancy was the presence of the Muslim super hero Sari Saltuk!

Such echoes of the Crusades and Crusades-related ideas are found elsewhere in the narrative, as when, at the very beginning of the Saltuk-name, seven Frankish kings collaborate with nine of their Rūmī or Anatolian counterparts to mount an offensive against the ‘Muhammadans’ with the goal of destroying them and ‘re-stuffing their Mecca with idols’. Remarkably, here and elsewhere, when such echoes are heard, they are totally devoid of any references or allusions to Jerusalem; instead, the Christian goal steadfastly remains the mirror image of its Muslim counterpart, which is, as we have seen, the establishment of political hegemony over the rival religious community.

On a related note, it could be added that the Saltuk-name evinces at least superficial familiarity with a dizzying array of European Christian ethno-political identities, ranging from Venetian, Genoese, French and German to Bosnian, Serbian, Hungarian, Wallachian, Moldavian, Czech and Russian. It is possible that a careful analysis of the way in which these Christian communal identities are depicted would yield some ‘traces’ of specific instances of Christian and Muslim militancy in the regions covered by the narrative during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Nevertheless, the use of such forms of cultural identification in the narrative appears to be highly generic and at best evocative in nature rather than descriptive, and at this stage this line of inquiry does not appear very promising.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is appropriate to address the thorny question of audience, circulation and reception of the Saltuk-name. Who was the audience of this late example of medieval Turkish religious-heroic epic, how and in what circles did it circulate, and do we know anything about its reception? To put it in other words, whose views about religion and religious identity have we just distilled from this narrative?

For the modern historian, the historical Sari Saltuk remains a most elusive figure. He did, however, have a lively and most colourful afterlife, which comes into view from the first few decades of the fourteenth century and is traceable in narrative and documentary sources as well as material culture well into late Ottoman times. This Sari Saltuk of historical memory, equally elusive, is a
multifarious figure that appears with the faces of the saint, warrior, cultural chameleon and trickster, either singly or in many combinations. The Saltuk-name is a particular distillation of this potent mythic brew effected by the late-fifteenth century Ottoman compiler Ebu’l-Hayr-i Rumi at the urging of a very young Ottoman prince Cem who was born in Edirne where the memory of Sarı Saltuk was very much alive. We have no information on how this particular compilation may have been used or whether it was even presented to Cem, even though the thought that this Ottoman prince who spent more than a decade in European exile in France and Rome until his death in 1495 may have had a copy of the adventures of Sarı Saltuk with him is rather appealing. However, the first extant manuscript of the work, clearly touched-up in certain places, surfaces only in 1591. What, then, can we say about the social and cultural milieu within which the stories of Sarı Saltuk collected by Ebu’l-Hayr-i Rumi circulated?

The first step of this exercise, namely peeling off the editorial work of the late sixteenth-century copyist, is perhaps also the easiest. Ottoman Turkish prose styles, not to mention the language itself, underwent considerable change between the late fifteenth and late sixteenth century, and a literary analysis of the text suggests that the copyist had made little to minimal literary intervention in the text. On the other hand, there are strong overtones of Ottoman-Safavi rivalries during the sixteenth century in the 1591 copy, and it is highly probable (at times certain) that Sarı Saltuk’s Sunni Hanafi credentials and his zeal against the heretical Shi’a were either added or, more likely, significantly played up by the copyist. Indeed, the testimony of the narrative itself suggests not only that Sarı Saltuk harboured clear Shi’ite allegiances (he is depicted as staying in mourning for three days in the month of Muharram and conversing with the spirit of ʿAli in the well in which ʿAli is said to be buried), but also that he entered into very close spiritual associations with dervishes who could hardly be described as respectable urban Sunni Sufis (he becomes brothers with the famous qalandar Jamāl al-Dīn al-Sāwī [d. c.630/1232], at whose zāwiya, or dervish lodge, he stays for 70 days, and he is said to be a disciple of Maḥmūd-i Ḥayrānī).

Unfortunately, all of the remaining steps in our exercise in the reception history of the text are more complicated and laborious. The compiler Ebu’l-Hayr-i Rumi clearly worked with existing epic and hagiographical materials, including most notably the Battal-name and the Danişmend-name as well as a series of fifteenth-century hagiographical narratives, all of which pose their own distinct challenges to the historian. Yet, there is no detour around a detailed and careful comparative analysis of all these late medieval Turkish texts. Progress on this front has been at best modest, and much remains to be done. The relevant corpus of late medieval Turkish prose works is quite large, and the analysis of these epic/hagiographical tales poses unique challenges to cultural historians ranging from palaeographical and linguistic difficulties to thematic and stylistic considerations.

There are also historiographical hurdles along the way. It is noteworthy, for instance, that over the past two decades, the question of the audience for medieval Anatolian Turkish religious-heroic epic and hagiography has been addressed, if at all, almost exclusively by historians of the Ottoman empire in the context
of a particular historiographical debate about the role of ghazā (Turk. gaza), or holy war in origins of Ottoman political power. In this debate, there emerged a notable tendency to view the religious-heroic epics as ‘frontier narratives’. In a nutshell, the working assumption behind the use of this designation appears to be that the heroic epics in question were clearly linked with the distinctive frontier ethos present in Anatolia and the Balkans from the battle of Manzikert in 1071 to the definitive establishment of a centralised Ottoman imperial tradition around the turn of the fifteenth century. The epics, in other words, somehow reflect the attitudes and views of Turkish-speaking ghāzīs (Turk. gazis), ‘warriors for the faith’, who were ubiquitous in this environment during this time span. This presumed ‘association’ between heroic epics and Turkish ghāzīs may indeed represent some progress in the attempt to answer the question of audience, yet because the exact social and cultural referents of the designation ghāzī are not easy to determine (especially since the meaning of the terms ghāzī and ghazā continuously evolved and shifted during this period), we may actually still be at square one, not able to make more than the bare assertion that such epics were popular among speakers of the Turkish vernacular!

The situation with respect other historical evidence on the topic is not much better. While there is a slowly growing body of art historical, architectural and, very rarely, archaeological evidence that can and should be brought to bear upon our understanding of the textual sources for the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, disciplinary and area boundaries have proven difficult to cross for individual researchers from both sides of the divide. The same applies to the documentary record for this period, which, in any case, is thin in comparison to the incomparable treasures that are found in archival collections for later Ottoman history. Under these circumstances, it seems prudent to acknowledge the difficult challenges ahead and tackle them head-on while refraining from tempting generalisations about ‘the frontier ethos’ that remains impervious to social and cultural historical scrutiny. The question of audience for the Saltuk-name, in other words, still remains unanswered.

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25 For the most recent publication on this debate, with copious citations, see Linda Darling, ‘Reformulating the Gazi Narrative: When was the Ottoman State a Gazi State?’ Turcica 43 (2011): 13–53.